Research Report
No. 267

Social Class and Higher Education:

Issues Affecting Decisions on Participation by Lower Social Class Groups

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Executive Summary

Background

Despite a major expansion in student numbers, which has enabled more people from wider backgrounds to take higher education (HE) qualifications, students from lower social class backgrounds continue to be under represented. Fewer than one in five young people from the lower social class groups (IIIm, IV and V) participate in HE, and although this proportion has been increasing, it remains well below the 45 per cent who participate from the higher social class groups (IIIn, II and I), a figure which has also been increasing rapidly over the years. Lower social class groups represent 28 per cent of the total entrants to full-time undergraduate study, a lower share than their 39 per cent in the UK population as a whole. In particular institutions and subjects, the proportion of HE students from lower social class groups can range from as low as 10 per cent to above 40 per cent.

The main reasons for the differences in participation rates by social class groups have been shown by previous research to relate to educational factors and family backgrounds, and also perceptions about costs involved and benefits of HE study. In late 1999, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) commissioned a research study at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to explore in more detail factors influencing decisions about participation in undergraduate study by people from lower social class backgrounds. This focused on groups of people who were taking, or had recently taken, decisions about whether or not to go to university, thus providing an up-to-date perspective on participation issues.

Key Findings

The research has shown how a great many issues can affect decisions to go on to HE study, and that there is no one overriding factor of influence for students from lower social class backgrounds (IIIm-V). However, they tend to take account of a wider range of issues than their higher social class counterparts (I-IIIn). These are:

Encouraging factors

The main encouraging factor is a belief that a higher qualification will bring improved job and career prospects, and also improved earnings and job security. But only a minority of the research respondents had a particular job or career goal in mind when deciding about HE entry, mostly seeing it as helping them to get a better job — 'a means to an end rather than the end itself'.

Students from lower social class backgrounds tend to put more emphasis on expected beneficial outcomes of HE than do students from higher social class groups. They are also of more importance to certain groups, including those with vocational entry qualifications, some minority ethnic groups and older students.

Other factors encouraging entry to HE are a desire for self-improvement in general, and personal interest in a subject of study.

Discouraging factors

The main discouraging factors focus also on employment and financial issues. The main reasons why people from lower social class groups interviewed in the research had decided against going on to HE study, though qualified to get a place, were twofold. They either wanted to start employment, earn money and be independent at an earlier age, or they had a career or job goal in mind which did not require a degree qualification.

Affording the cost of studying and being in debt were also key reasons for not going to university. There were concerns, too, of current students and likely entrants (though the majority of them felt that the investment was worthwhile in the long run). Concerns about costs were wider and more complex than simply about paying fees. They were linked in to other financial concerns about borrowing and future debt, working to earn income during term-time, and not knowing enough about likely costs and income sources, but also about likely future financial outcomes of HE study.

Working during term time was seen as necessary but not welcomed, because of its likely detrimental effect on their studies. Around half of full-time students from lower social class backgrounds in the survey were currently working in term time, and this was only slightly higher than their higher social class counterparts. On average, students were working 13 to 14 hours per week.

Finance is one of a number of concerns when deciding about going to university. Others include being able to cope with academic pressures and workload; gaining the entry qualifications; the application process itself; and, for some students, personal issues

such as arranging childcare. On the whole, students from lower social class groups in the survey appeared to have lower levels of confidence about their ability to succeed in HE and in taking career decisions, than did those from higher social class groups.

Influencers

Prior education and family background can influence decisions about HE entry in numerous ways. Various people have important roles to play in the decision process. In particular for lower social class potential entrants, FE college tutors could be a key group of positive 'influencers' on potential students, as were friends and family members with current/recent HE experience.

Information

Although plenty of information about HE seems to be available to potential entrants who are on HE qualifying courses, it is often seen as being too general and overly complex. The main gaps in information content are on the financial aspects of HE study (see below) and its likely benefits in terms of employment and financial returns.

There is a wide variation in the amount and detail of information on HE costs and funding/support that is received by potential students prior to entry. Three-quarters of the full-time students in the survey, and slightly more from lower social class backgrounds, did not feel that they had sufficient information (when deciding about going to university) about how much it was likely to cost to be a student.

Choice of institution and course

Institutions are chosen by lower social class students mainly for reasons related to both cost (mostly to do with living away/staying close to home) and personal interest in specific subjects or courses offered by them. HND and part-time courses were seen as less attractive options than degrees and full-time study.

Part-time students

Part-time students differed in many respects from their full-time counterparts in the survey, being considerably older on average, more likely to have entered with vocational or non-'A' level qualifications, and more likely to be taking HND than degree courses. The survey showed that:

Future employment and career related reasons were of more importance to part-time than full-time students as factors

encouraging HE entry, as were the perceived overall benefits from their investment in education.

Part-time students were more concerned about academic and financial issues, had less parental support and had more family commitments (mainly because they were older). They were more likely to rely on personal savings and earnings while studying than full-time students.

On the whole, part-time students had even less information pre-entry on the financial aspects of HE than did full-time students.

Policy implications

The research findings suggest a number of policy implications:

The benefits of HE study should be better and more widely communicated. In particular, outcomes associated with improved employability and finance need to be given more prominence, though it is recognised that this is an area of variability across the student body, especially in the first years after graduation. For example, colleges and schools could make better use of past students' achievements and progress through HE. This is relevant for young students, especially in pre-16 education, and also for mature students.

Mentors or 'HE champions' should be more widely used to help those potential students who have little contact with people who have recent HE experience. These could be former school/college students, recent graduates, or teaching/ careers staff. Current students from a wide range of backgrounds could be encouraged to visit schools and colleges in low participation neighbourhoods to discuss with potential students their hopes and fears, and explore how they can be addressed. Examples of current good practice of the use of mentors or 'champions' should be more widely disseminated.

More relevant and timely information on student finance is needed, as well as greater financial assistance made more accessible to those students in greatest need. Affording the costs of HE, while not by itself the single prohibitive factor, is a discouragement. The research clearly shows that more needs to be done to support potential students from low income families. In particular, they could be helped by better guidance on the financial support available and the likely net costs of different options for them, according to their different circumstances. This information should be presented in a more user-friendly way and available earlier in the decision-making process.

Research methodology

The research was not intended to be a comprehensive survey of barriers and motivations to enter higher education, but was focused on three target groups of respondents:

Potential entrants from lower social class backgrounds, currently taking qualifications that would give them entry to an undergraduate course in 2000 or 2001. A sample of 223 students took part in focus groups at 20 colleges and schools.

Current students from lower social class backgrounds, plus a sample from higher social classes (for comparative purposes). A sample of just over 1,600 students at 14 institutions in England and Wales, who were entrants to undergraduate courses in 1999/2000, responded to a postal questionnaire survey (41 per cent response rate), and a further 20 of them took part in follow-up interviews.

Non-HE entrants from lower social class groups, aged 20/21 years. These were identified as being qualified to enter HE but had decided not to do so, and interviewed by telephone (112 in sample).

The survey analysis used a social class measure based on parental occupation of individuals (or their own if over 25 years old). These were grouped into the standard five classifications. The term 'lower social class groups' was used for Groups IIIm, IV and V — covering skilled manual, partly skilled and unskilled occupations. 'Higher social class groups' referred to Groups I, II and IIIn — professional, intermediate and skilled manual.

The study covered England and Wales, and included full-time and part-time study at undergraduate level in HE (degree, HND and DipHE courses). The fieldwork took place between March and June 2000.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The expansion in higher education in the UK, together with policies to widen access to under-represented groups, has enabled more people from a broad range of backgrounds to benefit from the opportunities that higher education study can bring. But, although there have been improvements in some areas, especially by gender and ethnic minority representation, there is still significant under-representation in higher education by people from lower social class groups.

This report focuses on this aspect of social inequality in higher education. It presents the findings of research commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), at the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), which explored the main issues that affect decisions by people from lower social class groups to enter undergraduate study in England and Wales.

1.2 The research study

The main aims of the study were to:

- explore factors that encourage or inhibit participation in higher education by students from lower social class groups
- assess the relative importance of these factors for different sub-groups of students (*eg* ethnic minority groups, mature students, with different entry qualifications, studying different subjects or types of courses), and
- draw out appropriate policy recommendations.

The research focused on groups of people who were either already qualified or on qualifying routes to enter higher education. This enabled it to focus on influences on decisions taken near the point of entry to higher education and, in particular, the impact of the recent changes in student finance. The research was not intended to be a comprehensive survey of barriers and motivations to enter higher education by people from lower social class groups. To do so would have been far beyond the resources available. Instead, within the budget and timescale

proposed, the research was focused on three groups of respondents:

- **potential entrants,** who were all from lower social class backgrounds, currently taking qualifications which would give them entry to an undergraduate course. A total of 223 students, on 'A' level, BTEC, GNVQ and Access courses, took part in focus groups at 20 colleges and schools, spread across five regions.
- **current students,** who were entrants to undergraduate courses in 1999/2000 (*ie* first year students). A total of over 1,600 students at 14 institutions in England and Wales responded to a postal questionnaire survey (41 per cent response rate), and a further 20 students took part in follow-up interviews. This current student sample included students from higher as well as lower social class backgrounds for comparative purposes. Compared to the population of home entrants to first degree and HND courses in UK higher education institutions in 1990/2000, the sample comprised a slightly higher proportion of female students and younger students.(see Appendix Table A.2). This is a factor of the sample selection methodology which was designed, in part, with the purpose of ensuring that the achieved student sample comprised sufficient numbers from low social class groups to enable analysis of sub-groups of students to be undertaken. The achieved sample comprised 625 students (37 per cent of the sample) from lower social class groups (IIIm, IV and V), which compares with just 24 per cent in the population.
- **non-HE entrants,** who were young people from lower social class groups, qualified to enter higher education at age 18/19 years but had decided not to do so. These were identified from respondents in the 1998 Youth Cohort Study (Sweep 2), and 176 were interviewed by telephone.

Full details on how these groups were identified, sampled, response achieved and sample characteristics are given in the Appendix (Methodology). The results presented in this study do not reflect the opinions of all potential, current and non-HE entrants from lower social class groups, but they do provide a wealth of evidence which will help inform the on-going debate over widening participation in higher education Social class

1.3 Social Class

Throughout the report, we use the terms lower and higher social class groups. These are taken from the government's social class scheme, based on parental occupation (father's, or if no father, then mother's), or their own occupation if over 25 years. The occupations have been grouped into the 'standard' five individual social class groups according to the 1992 Standard Occupational Coding (SOC) coding system. In much of the analysis of the

student survey, the five groups have been combined into two main categories:

- *I, II and IIIn* – professional, intermediate and skilled non-manual, referred to in the report as the 'higher social class group', and
- *IIIm, IV and V* – skilled manual, partly skilled and unskilled, referred to as the 'lower social class group'.

Where sample numbers allow, and to highlight specific points, though, the individual social class groups are also discussed.

This social class scheme is used in most government research, and importantly, relates to a series of data available on admissions to higher education (UCAS, 1999; also UCAS Annual reports). Whilst social class based on parental or own occupation is not a perfect measure, and there is debate amongst sociologists about the 'best' measure to use (see for example Marsh and Blackburn, 1992), it was felt to be the most appropriate to use in these circumstances. We looked at various other measures found in the research literature, which relate social class to family income levels, parental education, type of school attended (private/state), eligibility for free school meals *etc.*, and use a range of descriptors (*eg* middle class/working class; high/low income families, ABC1/C2DE) which can be confusing. Geographic information systems (known as geodemographics) are being used increasingly to identify location characteristics of neighbourhoods. These are based on a range of social variables, rather than the single occupation variable, and provide a social class measure at quite a detailed level (*eg* postcodes). Their use has been seen recently in the allocation of public funds to individual institutions to encourage student recruitment from under-represented areas, and also in profiling participation trends in higher education (*eg* Tonks, 1999). However, the geodemographics approach is still in its infancy in carrying out social research surveys, and was rejected here in the sampling and analysis of the student survey for several technical reasons (see Appendix for further discussion of methodological approach).

1.4 Report structure and content

This report presents the main findings from the research. In Chapter 2, it first presents some background and contextual information and discusses the key research issues which were investigated. The remaining chapters are as follows:

- Chapter 3 shows how a number of issues influenced decisions relating to higher education entry by our target groups, and Chapters 4 to 7 then discuss some of these issues in more depth, focusing on full-time study: pre-entry experiences, information, finance and career plans.

- Chapter 8 focuses on influences on choice of course, subject and institution within higher education.
- Chapter 9 presents results and discusses issues for students in part-time study.
- Finally, Chapter 10 presents the summary and conclusions, from the research and suggested policy implications.

This report is primarily about students from lower social class groups and how various issues can affect their decisions about entering higher education. In places, comparisons are made between social class groups, but only in respect of the current students where it was possible to include a sample from lower social class groups plus a 'control group' from higher social class backgrounds (see Section 1.2 and Appendix). To do this adequately for the other target groups (potential and non-entrants) was beyond the scope of this study.

2. Research Context and Background

Key points of this chapter

- Lower social class groups continue to be under-represented in higher education
- There is uneven social class distribution across the sector, in particular by institution and also by subject, where markedly different social class profiles are apparent.
- Previous research suggests low rates of participation are due to a combination of factors, in particular: educational background and achieving entry qualifications; family background and home location; expected benefits to be gained in employment, especially higher earnings and self-improvement; and affording the costs involved in studying.
- Little of the existing research evidence specifically focuses on issues for lower social class groups, or takes account of the recent changes to student finance arrangements on HE entry decisions.

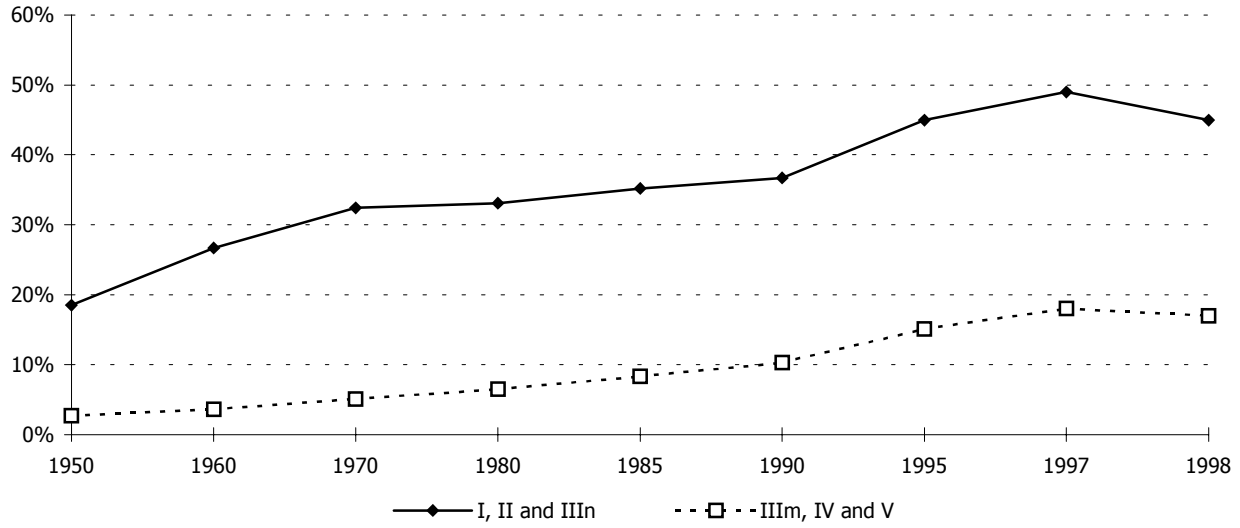
Before moving into the main body of the report which presents the research findings, we first provide some context and background. This includes statistics on participation trends and a discussion of issues affecting these trends, identified from the research literature. It provides a framework for the study and identifies key issues for investigation relating to lower social class groups.

2.1 Higher education participation

2.1.1 HE participation rates

Low levels of participation in higher education by people from lower social class groups have a long history. In 1950, only three per cent of young people from the three lowest social class groups (IIIm, IV and V, see 1.4 above for definitions) participated in higher education. While this proportion has grown over the years, to reach 17 per cent by 1998, it remains well below the equivalent figure for the higher social class groups (I, II and IIIn), at 45 per cent, a figure which has also been increasing, especially in the 1990s. As can be seen from Figure 2.1, the 'social gap' *ie* the distance between the two lines on the graph has in fact hardly narrowed at all over the years.

Figure 2.1: Age participation index[1] (API) by social class: percentage of young people entering higher education



Source: House of Commons Education and Employment Committee 8th Report, November 1, 1999 (plus DfEE data, 1998)

At the two ends of the social spectrum, there remains a huge divide between the 72 per cent participation from Group I and the meagre 13 per cent participation from Group V (1998 figures).

These participation figures are based on a growing student population, which grew particularly fast during the first half of the 1990s when HE participation rates grew at a faster rate. The total number of students in UK higher education (HE) increased from 855,000 in 1981/82 to 1.3 million in 1991/92, and then to 1.94 million by 1997/98, an overall increase of almost 50 per cent between 1991/92 and 1997/98 (ONS, 2000). This includes students in part-time study, and also those studying higher education in FE colleges. In the last few years, growth in the HE sector has slowed considerably. Provisional figures for 1999/2000 show total enrolments in HE institutions only at 1.76 million, an increase of one per cent on the previous year for the sector.

2.1.2 Social class of HE entrants

Despite these rising numbers, the UCAS data on HE entrants over the period 1994-99 suggest little change in the proportion of the total that come from low social class backgrounds (UCAS, 1999). Though numbers of entrants from the low social class groups have been growing steadily — by around 15 per cent for the lower social class group (Groups IIIm, IV and V in aggregate) — they still represent a minority, at just over one in four (28 per cent), of all accepted UCAS applicants to full-time courses (UK domiciled),

[1] The API — Age Participation Index. Figures are home domiciled young (under 21) initial entrants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate study in Great Britain expressed as a proportion of the average of the 18 and 19 year old population (entry data from UCAS).

Table 2.1: UK applicants accepted to higher education, by social class, 1994-99

Social class	1994 Numbers	1999 Numbers	% change 94-99	% of total HE applicants accepted (of known total, 1999)	% of total UK working age population (2000)
I Professional	37,613	38,864	3	15	7
II Intermediate	101,087	115,667	14	44	31
IIIn Skilled Non-manual	29,702	36,286	22	14	23
IIIm Skilled Manual	40,360	44,474	10	17	19
IV Partly Skilled	18,571	23,097	24	9	15
V Unskilled	4,541	5,538	22	2	5
Unknown	19,418	39,139	102		
Total	*251,293*	*303,065*	*21*	*100*	*100*

Source: UCAS, 1999 (and population figures from Labour Force Survey, 2000)

and this proportion has not improved in the five year period. The lowest individual social class group (V) made up just two per cent of the 1999 total (just 5,500 students) although it represents five per cent of the UK working age population. By contrast, the top two social class groups (I and II) made up the largest proportion of 1999 accepted applicants, at 59 per cent (155,000 students) but represent a much smaller proportion of the UK working age population, 38 per cent (Table 2.1). Although there has been a slight upward drift in the social class profile of the population as a whole during the 1990s, it only represents a decrease in the proportion in lower social class groups (IIIm-V) of a percentage point or two, and so is unlikely to have had much impact on these HE participation trend figures.

Improvements over time in participation in HE full-time study by low social class groups have been less than those seen for other traditionally under-represented HE student groups. In particular, there has been a three-fold increase in enrolments by women since 1980/81, and women now outnumber men on undergraduate courses overall. Also, over the last five years, the rates of participation for mature entrants, ethnic minorities and those with non-traditional entry qualifications have increased more than for low social class groups (UCAS, 1999).

The UCAS statistics represent entrants to full-time higher education undergraduate courses. (*nb* A small number, around seven per cent of the total, apply for places direct to an individual university or college, *ie* not initially on UCAS forms, but most of them are 'captured' by the UCAS data as they are included subsequently as 'late entrants'. Often, though, they are mature students and data are frequently missing about social class and qualification background.) UCAS data, however, exclude part-time students, representing about one-third of all students in

higher education. There are no breakdowns of social class available for the part-time entrant population on the same basis as for the full-time entrants shown above, though some data of a social nature have recently been produced for part-time entrants at an institutional level (see below in section 2.2).

2.2 Social diversity across higher education

As well as a low overall proportion of HE students coming from the lower social class group, there is a marked uneven social class distribution across the HE sector. Differences are particularly evident between institutions but they can be seen also between subjects, qualifications and entry routes.

2.2.1 Institutional differences

Data from HESA at an institutional level (published as part of the government's HE Performance Indicators) show clearly the marked differences between institutions in their social class profiles. The percentage of young entrants on full-time undergraduate courses from the lower social class group (IIIm, IV and V, *ie* based on the same occupational measures of social class as UCAS uses) ranges from below ten per cent at Oxford and Cambridge to around 15 to 20 per cent at many of the traditional (pre-1992) universities, to over 30 per cent at other, mostly new (*ie* post-1992) universities and HE colleges. The social class data for mature entrants also show institutional differences, though they are based on a different measure of low social class — '*the percentage who come from 'low participation neighbourhoods' and have no previous experience of HE*'. For both full-time and part-time study, this ranges from below ten to over 25 per cent at individual institutions. The part-time figures are generally lower than the full-time ones. For mature entrants, there is a less noticeable split between the pre- and post-1992 universities in their social class profiles than for the young entrants. This is likely to be due mainly to geographical factors (*ie* mature students are more likely to go to their local universities than younger students on the whole). However, institutional differences by social class relate to a number of factors including, for example, differences between institutions in their missions, range of subject/course provision, geographical location, and attitudes towards widening participation (see for example Woodrow, 1998; Connor *et al.*, 1999a).

2.2.2 Qualification and subject differences

At HND level, the social imbalance is less marked than at degree level, though it still exists: 37 per cent of applicants accepted via UCAS to HND courses come from the lower social class group (IIIm-V), compared with 27 per cent to degree courses (*nb* these percentages, as with others in this section, exclude 'social class unknown' from the total).

There are also variations by subject. For example, in medicine and dentistry, only 13 per cent of entrants come from the lower social class group (IIIm-V), considerably below the average for all subjects, while in business and administrative studies and engineering and technology, the figure is 30 per cent (UCAS,1999).

2.2.3 Different entry qualifications and routes

Students entering higher education with vocational or Access qualifications, and students applying from college rather than school, are more likely to come from lower social class groups. Thirty five per cent of UCAS-accepted applicants whose main qualification is a GNVQ, and 39 per cent whose main qualification is BTEC/SCOTVEC or have Access qualifications, come from social class groups IIIm-V, compared with 23 per cent who have two or more 'A' level passes.

There are also differences in the social class of entrants by type of school or college last attended: just nine per cent of UCAS-accepted applicants from independent schools, compared with 28 per cent of those from comprehensive schools and 37 per cent from further education (FE) colleges, come from the lower social class group (IIIm-V). Student entry patterns vary considerably by institution, as recent reports have shown. An analysis of the types of school intake to the top 13 universities (based on national newspaper league tables) has shown that, while approximately seven per cent of young people attend private schools, over five times as many, 39 per cent of intakes to these top 13 universities, come from private schools (Sutton Trust, 2000).

2.2.4 Differences in personal characteristics

There are also social class differences between higher education applicants linked to other personal characteristics, including:

- **Age:** mature entrants to higher education are more likely to come from low social class groups. According to UCAS data, 26 per cent of 18 and 19 year old entrants are from social class groups IIIm-V, compared with 32 per cent of 20 year olds and 35 per cent of 21-24 year olds. This is linked with the lower social class profile of applicants coming from FE colleges and with vocational or Access entry qualifications, who tend to be older (shown above).
- **Gender:** There is surprisingly little difference by gender overall, with male and female entrants having broadly similar social class profiles. However, within degree subjects, some differences by gender are evident, albeit small ones For example: both in engineering and mathematical sciences/ informatics, where women represent a minority of entrants to full-time degree courses, slightly more men than women are from the lower social class group (IIIm-V). By contrast, in social

studies and business/admin, subjects where women are much better represented, the percentage of female entrants from the lower social class group is slightly higher than for men.

- **Ethnicity**: Social class differences by ethnic group reflect both the different social class profiles of ethnic groups in this country and also differences between ethnic groups in their age and gender profiles and subject choices. Other variables, including institutional preferences, post-16 routes and entry patterns contribute to a fairly complex picture (see for example Modood and Shiner, 1994; Connor *et al.*, 1996). At a broad level, despite having a slightly lower social class profile in the UK population, a much higher proportion of Asian UCAS-accepted applicants (43 per cent) come from the lower social class group (IIIm-V), compared with either of the other two broad ethnic groupings: 28 per cent of black and 26 per cent of white applicants (UCAS, 1999).

As already highlighted, many of these variables are inter-related, for example: more mature than younger students come to HE via vocational routes; more 'A' level students straight from school enter pre-1992 than post-1992 universities; HNDs are more focused on engineering, technology and business studies subjects, which are more likely to be offered in new (*ie* post-92) universities and colleges, and so on.

2.3 Higher education policy

The statistical analysis shows some improvements in participation by lower social classes which have come about, in part at least, as a result of specific policy initiatives, locally and nationally, to widen access to under-represented groups in particular (people without traditional 'A' level or higher qualifications) to enter higher education. The government has also, through the Funding Councils, given resources to HE institutions specifically for widening participation, to help them, for example, to develop partnership programmes with local schools and colleges, support the study needs of more disadvantaged students and give financial assistance to students experiencing hardship. Funding has also been allocated to encourage universities to recruit more students from areas with historically low participation rates through the payment of premiums (*nb* these apply to England and Wales. In Scotland, separate specific measures have been introduced relating to higher education). A number of other government policies to help raise standards of achievement in schools and colleges are also aimed at encouraging wider participation in HE (see for example White Paper *Learning to Succeed,* 1999).

For some learners, one of the barriers to encouraging greater participation in HE study is the cost of studying. This was cited by many witnesses giving evidence to a 1999 House of Commons

Education and Employment Committee of Inquiry on widening access to learning, and to the Independent Inquiry into Student Finance in Scotland (Cubie, 1999). Both inquiry reports comment on the diversity of students in higher education and their differing financial circumstances, and thus also the differential impact that finance will have on their decision making about higher education study.

Recent changes to student financial arrangements, which apply mainly to full-time study, came into place at the start of the 1998/99 and 1999/2000 academic years, and included:

- the replacement of the maintenance grant with an income contingent Student Loan for new entrants in 1999/00. Student loans had existed through the 1990s alongside maintenance grants but the value of the maintenance grant had been declining. In 1998/99, the value of the grant for existing students was reduced to a quarter of the total maintenance support available (grant plus loan).
- for new entrants in 1998/99, repayment of Student Loans entirely on the basis of income after they graduate (but not until gross annual income reached £10,000).
- a fee contribution for new entrants in 1998/99 of up to a quarter of the total costs of tuition, depending on their own/family financial situation. This is reviewed each year, and the maximum fee contribution is currently set at £1,050.

For part-time students, a fee waiver was subsequently introduced to bring parity with the situation for full-time students. There are also extra allowances available in certain circumstances, for example for disabled students or students with dependants.

Earlier changes include those made to the benefit system in the mid-1990s, which affected unemployed people coming off benefit to start courses and students claiming housing and other social benefits.

Much of the recent debate about participation in higher education has centred on these changes to student finance, especially the introduction of tuition fees and its negative impact. But, as discussed further below, the issues are more complex and much wider.

2.4 Issues affecting participation by lower social class groups

The issues surrounding participation in higher education by lower social groups are recognised in the research literature as being complex, inter-related and many are deep-seated, relating to wider inequalities in society. As Marsh and Blackburn (1992), point out, a number of inequalities in society, both structured

social inequalities, which relate to occupational stratification, and social inequalities relating to consumption, affect HE participation and these are impossible to separate. Higher qualifications generally lead to higher status jobs and also, those with parents who have been to university themselves are likely to be more supportive towards their children in this respect (Foskett and Hesketh, 1996). The element of 'choice' involved in decisions to progress on to higher education means that a range of factors, both positive and negative, can be influential, and over a number of years prior to entry (Connor *et al.*, 1999a; Payne, 1998).

Previous research has explored these issues, and the key points arising are summarised below.

2.4.1 Educational and family background

Much of the previous research on participation in higher education by lower social class groups points to educational background as being a key set of variables, and also linked to it, family background/support (Robertson and Hillman, 1997). A number of specific inter-linked issues relating to post-16 choices, qualification routes, type of school, family income and neighbourhood are identified in the research literature:

- **Entry qualification.** Achieving entry level qualifications has been identified in previous research studies as the single most important factor influencing participation in higher education, (see for example Gemmel, Pollard and Thorpe, 1993). In particular, attainment of traditional entry qualifications (*ie* 'A' levels/Highers) is highly likely to lead to higher education participation among non-traditional students (Hogarth *et al.*, 1997). But, as Metcalf (1997) shows, lower social class groups (IV and V) are much less likely to obtain two 'A' levels or equivalent than higher social class groups (I and II). Other research shows the continuing relatively low status of post-16 vocational qualifications generally compared to traditional academic qualifications (Bamford and Schuller, 1999). As vocational qualifications are more popular with students from lower social class groups applying to HE, Metcalf's research suggests this further disadvantages their HE entry.
- **Staying on at school beyond 16 (Y11/S4).** This was another factor found to be influential by Gemmel, Pollard and Thorpe, (1993), and linked to socio-economic status of parents, but other research (discussed below) puts less emphasis on this than post-16 qualifications/course options, and also earlier education experiences.
- **Early stages of education.** A number of studies have highlighted how decisions taken earlier on in the process can impact on decisions about higher education. Metcalf (1997), suggested that the influence of social class may be stronger earlier on than at the point of entry; and Connor *et al.* (1999a)

and Roberts and Allen (1997) have shown how information to help decisions about higher education is needed pre-16 years. As young people from lower social class groups are more likely to have an instrumental approach to education and lack knowledge about higher education, they need information about employment outcomes and benefits of higher education at an early age to help with career decision-making (Metcalf, 1997).

- **Family background.** Parental education, parental occupation and family income have all been shown to have influence on decisions about HE, and especially at an earlier stage of education. Metcalf (1997) suggests parental education is a stronger influence in the earlier stages than parental occupation. Blundell and Deardon (1997) found that having more educated or more affluent parents was a main determinant of entry to higher education, and of achieving 'A' levels. Parental support was also identified as an important factor in encouraging higher education entry in research undertaken as part of the Cubie Inquiry into Student Finance in Scotland (1999).
- **Influence of schools and choice of schools.** A number of studies have pointed to educational opportunities at school and the influence of 'educators' (see for example NCE, 1993 on unfavourable social factors affecting educational attainment). Type of school attended, which in turn can relate to where you live (see below) and your family income, is felt to be of particular significance by Lampl (1999), who discusses the advantages of private schools, with their greater resources, in giving greater access to higher education. Knowles (1999) points to different 'educational eco-systems' which encourage children to flourish or militate against their full development. He relates this to parental influence on choice of schools: parents with a better awareness and understanding of the education system are more likely to seek out 'successful' comprehensive schools than parents who are disengaged from education themselves. Sawyer and Carroll, 2000 in research in Scotland among potential students (part of the Cubie Inquiry on student finance) showed that one of the main discouragements to going on to higher education arose from an uncertainty at school as to what they wanted to do. In the same study, some students on FE courses from low income backgrounds had been dissuaded by their schools from considering college or university, directing them instead into more traditional types of employment.
- **Affluence of neighbourhood.** This has been shown by Brown and Batey (HEFC, 1997) to be an important predictor of participation in higher education, and it links with points made above relating to school attended and family background. Their research found that the 25 per cent of the population living in the most affluent neighbourhoods (as measured by average family income) had a 50 per cent

likelihood of participation in higher education, but for the 25 per cent living in the least affluent neighbourhoods in the country, their likelihood of HE participation was just ten per cent. Since an increasing number of students are staying at or close to home to study (HESA, 1998), the locality of an institution has an increasing influence on its social mix.

2.4.2 Financial influences

In contrast to the above, little empirical research has been undertaken specifically on the impact of financial aspects of higher education study for people from low social class or low income groups who are considering entering higher education. In particular, there is little evidence of the impact on participation of the recent changes to student financial support (though there are studies currently in progress and a considerable amount of debate and discussion).

- **Benefits and financial returns.** A number of wider studies have investigated perceived benefits and financial returns from higher education. Callender (1997) showed that full-time and part-time students have similar motivations for entry to HE — they both wanted the benefits of a university education, in terms of improving career progress and position in the labour market, though the younger ones tended also to value the experience of a university or college education. Connor *et al.*, (1999c) in a survey of Year 11 school students also identified employment and expected career improvement as the main reasons for going on to higher education though equally important was the desire to study a subject that interested them. There was little difference apparent in this respect by social class background. The Sawyer and Carroll, 2000, study (cited above) on attitudes to student finance emphasised the value attached to education by potential and current students and their parents. Potential students from low income groups were more likely to give employability and self-improvement as the main motivations for entering further or higher education than those from more affluent backgrounds who viewed the progression as more of a 'next life-stage' expectation. For those already studying, relinquishing earnings and acquiring debt was balanced against the assumption of greater potential earnings in the future. Parents of students were generally supportive of their children's educational ambitions despite the financial burden they carried.
- **Student finance.** Alongside this strong positive view about the value of education in its own right, the Scottish study also highlighted high levels of dissatisfaction with the current student support system. There was a strongly held view that it failed to encourage those from low income backgrounds to enter HE. A number of other small scale studies support this. For example Smith and Taylor (1999) drew attention to

difficulties caused by changes in the benefits entitlement system on potential students in Glasgow from low income families with little money spare for housing and maintenance (even if no fees were being paid). Knowles (1999) in a small survey (160 Year 12 pupils in Humberside) found that when pupils were asked to consider the impact of fees and loans on their application to HE, just over half of those in the lower social class group (IIIm-V) said they were now less likely to apply than they were at the start of the year. Furthermore, almost all of them felt their choice of institution would be constrained in some way. Furlong and Biggart (1999) report also on choice being restricted to local institutions for those from low income families who do not have the resources to live away from home. Connor *et al.* (1999a) found perceived costs involved in studying influenced choice of institution among applicants. A review of research on student financial issues by Watt (2000) suggests that pre-entry financial hurdles (real and those perceived for the future) are having a detrimental effect on students being targeted for widening access programmes.

- **Information and guidance on finance.** Several studies highlight problems with getting information about student finance. Woodrow (1998) reported that actual and perceived financial difficulties were being exacerbated by a lack of information or difficulty finding the right, most up-to-date information. Furlong and Biggart (1999) found that Year S6 pupils in Glasgow, drawn from low income groups, were relatively uninformed about student finance, especially tuition fees. This was also reflected in the wide range of estimates of likely costs of university study given by 1998 applicants in the Student Choice study (*op. cit.*).

- **Attitudes to debt.** The research literature alludes to the issue of getting into debt as a negative factor on HE participation, but there is little empirical research that is up-to-date or specifically relates to lower social class groups. In the Knowles 1999 study (*op. cit.*), debt was a negative factor when considering higher education for 60 per cent of the sixth form college sample, compared to 30 per cent of the state school sample. The Scottish students in the Sawyer and Carroll (1999) study (*op. cit.*) were anxious about debts being accrued, but on the whole accepted that it was necessary, though some mature students and those entering with pre-existing responsibilities were most concerned about the level of debt. Also, potential students and those who had rejected HE entry, were more concerned about debt than were current students. Parents appeared to find the notion of debt more difficult to accept than their children did.

- **Working while studying**. This has been increasing in recent years to help students meet their financial needs. A recent student survey in the Newcastle area (Barke *et al.*, 2000) found that 37 per cent of students had term-time jobs but 54 per cent

had worked at some earlier time in the academic year. Almost two-thirds were working to achieve a desired standard of living and half as an alternative to borrowing. Furlong and Biggart (*op. cit.*) found that over 90 per cent of their sample of Year S6 pupils believed a job was necessary if they progressed to higher or further education.

2.4.3 Institutional effect

Higher education institutions (HEIs) can have a considerable influence on encouraging entry by non-traditional students. Many have had widening access policies in place for some time, and a variety of 'partnership' and other types of activities are undertaken. These vary considerably between institutions in scale and nature, and also in their effectiveness in actually increasing student intakes from under-represented groups (see for example: Connor *et al.*, 1996; Woodrow, 1998). Successful strategies for increasing participation specifically among lower social class groups are actually quite rare and much of current activity by HEIs is not seen to be sufficiently targeted on lower social class groups, or undertaken early enough in the education process, to be as effective as it could be (Woodrow, 1998). Weaknesses have been identified in monitoring systems, and very little research has been undertaken on the admissions process itself and its effect on participation by lower social class groups, though it is acknowledged as a critical area by staff managing access strategies.

2.5 Conclusions

This background chapter has highlighted the current situation in respect of participation by low social groups in higher education and some of the possible factors influencing it. Only a limited amount of previous research, however, has focused specifically on students from lower social class groups and the ways their attitudes and behaviour might differ from the student population as a whole. This was the focus of the research study. In the following chapters, these and other issues affecting participation by students from the lower social class group are explored. The next chapter identifies the main encouraging and discouraging factors influencing decisions made by the research subject groups about participating in higher education. The chapters that follow focus in more detail on the main factors identified.

3. Factors of Influence on HE Entry Decisions

Key points of this chapter

- There appears to be no single overriding factor of importance that encourages or discourages HE entry by lower social class groups, but several are taken into consideration in reaching decisions. The key factors identified are similar to those shown by previous research on the wider student population.
- The main encouraging factors among potential entrants from lower social class backgrounds are the beliefs that HE will improve their employability, earnings and also bring about self-improvement. The main negative perception of HE is cost.
- The two most positive influences on HE entry for current students are an interest in the subject they want to study in HE, and the gaining of a higher qualification for a specific job or career.
- The main reasons for rejecting higher education (despite having the entry qualifications) are employment/career related: either an alternative specific career goal which did not require HE qualifications was chosen, or they wanted to gain financial and other independence through working at an earlier stage. The cost of HE study is another reason for not entering HE.
- Student finance clearly influences decisions about HE entry, and this was evident among all groups of respondents. Concerns are not simply about paying fees or taking Student Loans but include: likely debts accruing, the need to work in order to earn while studying, and not knowing enough about the likely costs and support/financial help available and the likely financial benefits from HE participation.
- Other inhibiting factors for low social class groups include: uncertainty about their ability to succeed or about what to study; the application process, and problems of an individual nature relating to domestic circumstances, such as childcare.

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has done some scene-setting by outlining what is currently known about student participation patterns and explanatory factors identified from the research literature. We now turn to present the findings of the current research to assess the importance of these factors to the three target groups. By way of reminder, the main groups in the research were (see Section 1.2 and Appendix):

- **potential entrants,** who were students from lower social class groups taking qualifications which would give them entry to an undergraduate course

- **current students** from both lower and higher social class groups, who were entrants to undergraduate courses in 1999/2000
- **non-HE entrants,** who were young people from lower social class groups, qualified to enter higher education at age 18/19 years but had decided not to do so.

In this chapter, the relative importance of the various factors influencing decisions to go on to higher education are discussed for the three target groups of respondents, and key themes identified. The chapters which then follow discuss the main factors in more detail, including their influence on particular sub-groups of students.

Note that the discussion is mainly about full-time study. Issues around part-time study are discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

3.2 Potential entrants

The potential entrants were taking a range of qualifications including 'A' levels, GNVQs, BTEC and Access qualifications. They were studying at a sample of 20 schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges in low 'HE participation neighbourhoods' in five regions. Three-quarters of them were planning to progress to HE courses, mostly to take degrees, but a small number (18 per cent) were still undecided and a few (nine per cent) had decided against going. Just under half of them had already applied for a place on an HE course for entry in Autumn 2000.

3.2.1 Reasons for going to university or college

For those who had already applied or might consider doing so, the most often mentioned reason for going on to higher education, in all the groups, was that they wanted to gain a qualification which would assist their career prospects and enable them to secure more highly paid employment. There was a strong belief that a higher education qualification would lead to a better job, a better paid job and a better choice of job. As two students commented:

> *'Better opportunity for jobs … because most jobs they tend to want graduates, you know like the more management positions and it's more money and I think you're just better off, more opportunities to do what you want … you're trying to better yourself, to better your chances.'* (student taking 'A' levels and an Access qualification, FE college, North West)

> *'The careers advisers tell us we'll get a better job with higher salary.'* (female FE college student, taking GNVQ, Wales)

A second group of positive influences was the broad experiential and social aspects of attending a university. These included

increased independence, autonomy from their family, meeting new people, improving confidence, better social life, getting away from home, and so on. For example:

> *'It's another experience, to look back on when you're older and say well at least I gave it a go, whether you pass or fail, it's an experience for everyone, it broadens your horizons, opens new doors to you.'* (FE college student, taking GNVQ, North West)

> *'Coming on the Access course has made us aware that we can, even as a mature student, get in with the league you know, it's boosted my confidence and realised I can go on to higher education and I can go there and do it.'* (female mature Access student, FE college, East Midlands)

> '*Social life, the whole experience of meeting new people is the best thing about it, and getting the qualification in the end.'* ('A' level, female school student, London)

However, these were, on the whole, secondary to the perceived educational/labour market advantages of higher education discussed above.

There were no discernible differences between potential HE entrants studying academic qualifications and those taking vocational qualifications, in the relative importance given to these positive perceptions of university. Mature students tended to put more emphasis on the expected 'life-changing' aspects of going to university and took a more holistic view of the educational experience than younger ones. For many older students who were returning to education after a gap of some years, they expected it to bring improvements to the quality of their lives, and also for some, to their children's lives and their attitude to education. One participant described going on to higher education as an advancement in '*mental wealth*'.

3.2.2 Issues affecting decisions about HE participation

The overriding negative perception of going to university, for all of the potential entrants, was its cost. A range of financial issues were raised (which are discussed more fully later in Chapter 6) including living costs (*eg* accommodation and travel), the lack of a maintenance grant, and negative comparisons with 'working friends' who would be in a much better financial position. For example:

> *'It's like you have to pay back everything … all your courses, books, if you live away from home, your accommodation, it's like finding the money for it.'* (young 'A' level student, FE college, East Midlands)

Potential students' views on specific financial difficulties differed. Mature students tended to focus more on likely financial

problems than did younger students, while single parents were worried about losing benefits on entering full-time education.

> *'It would be the cost 'cos I've got a mortgage and everything and I'd have to pay for childcare so in some ways it would seem more sensible to get a job … and also a lot of people who've come from university can't get a job or they end up with jobs they might have got without going to university.'* ('A' level student, aged over 21, FE college, East Midlands)

Those who had been working prior to their entry to higher education were likely to feel the greatest financial wrench, *eg*: '*I've been working for four years and got used to the wage*'. They tended to give more emphasis to financial issues than others did when talking about deciding to apply for a higher education place. However, there were also views from some that higher education may in fact relieve some of the financial pressure they were currently under in FE college, as they expected to have to spend less time in lectures and therefore have more time to work and earn while studying.

Despite the importance placed on cost by potential entrants, for most of those who had decided against going on to study in higher education, this was not the principal reason given. Reasons for non-participation included the following:

- they had chosen a career which did not require a higher education qualification (*eg* joining the police or the army or starting their own business). For example, one male student doing a GNVQ leisure and tourism studies course (Wales) said: '*A degree is not relevant to tourism, experience is more important; I've been offered a trainee management job.*'
- they had found an alternative route to their chosen career which did not involve going to university. For example, a female, 'A' level FE college student (North West) had decided to take a different training route to be a solicitor by combining working in a legal office with part-time study at college: *'I don't have all that cost and it just seems better for me, better suited to what I want to do. It's just one year longer than it would be at university.'*
- they wanted to start earning as soon as they could to gain financial independence, not rely so much on their parents or be like their friends, *eg:* '*it's money straight away, I'm fed up with studying to be honest*' and: *'friends want me to get a job and have some money to start going out with them.'* (both 'A' level, young male FE college students, East Midlands)
- they did not see any benefit or were uncertain about outcomes, *eg*: '*I don't see the point in going, studying hard for three years, slogging your guts out, and there's no absolute guarantee that you're gonna come out and get a job, whereas I believe these next three years I will have started and worked a lot higher than he will be if he comes out of university and goes straight in there so…*' (GNVQ young male sports science student, Wales)

- that university was simply 'not for them' and that they would not fit in or would find it too hard work, *eg*: '*I wouldn't go even if I had the money – it just isn't me*' (female young GNVQ student, East Midlands)
- they were unsure about what to do (not going now but may go later) *eg*: *'I don't know if I am going to finish this course 'cos I'm not coping very well with it at the moment'* (young female GNVQ Business Studies, FE college, East Midlands) and '*I don't know whether to stay on and do some 'A' levels in different subjects or to go to university. I don't know what I want to do when I'm older.'* (young, male 'A' level student, East Midlands).

Many of those who had definitely decided to go or were still considering higher education entry, also thought it would be hard work and had concerns and even doubts about being able to cope with it. The need to work to finance themselves whilst at university only added to this concern (an almost universal assumption, see Chapter 6). One student, who felt he was unlikely to go on to higher education, commented:

> *'My sister is at university and she's got a huge overdraft and three jobs and no time at all for herself, she's always studying or working.'* (GNVQ student from Wales)

Other concerns included some nervousness about 'having to fend for yourself', and going away from home and missing friends and family, despite looking forward to the independence that university could bring, as shown by this comment from a young female 'A' level student:

> *'…. Quite a scary thing moving away. I don't have any family outside London if things go wrong … will probably stay in London. I can come home if things go wrong.'*

The application process itself was also seen as off-putting. Several potential entrants found it unduly confusing and time-consuming, and the majority found difficulties in getting what they perceived to be appropriate information and guidance to aid their decision making. This was particularly marked in respect of Student Loans. More detail on this issue is provided in Chapter 6.

3.2.3 Influencers on decisions about HE

Various people proved to have been an influence on many potential entrants, and usually in a positive way. FE college tutors in particular had influenced their students, particularly mature students, and in some cases had clearly been inspirational. This included guiding them through the application process and 'choice maze', helping them to see their potential and boosting their confidence.

> *'You get it drummed into you by the tutors, they make you think you're going to be a better person, they're always feeding you*

information that you need … a lot of people just turn up for a laugh – they notice that a few of us really want to do and give you any help you could possibly ask for … they're like the best.' (male, BTEC FE college student, North West)

Careers advisers (post-16) had less of a positive role in general than teaching staff in FE colleges in decisions about HE participation, as did teachers and careers advisers at an earlier stage in their education (*ie* pre-16). Few of the respondents commented about any specific help or encouragement that had been given by school teachers pre-16 regarding higher education aspirations. Similarly, few suggested that they had been discouraged in any way. This is likely to be because their experiences post-16 were more recent and therefore easier to recall. Also, any encouragement given by teachers pre-16 to stay on at school after GCSEs may not have been recognised as directly impacting on subsequent HE entry decisions by the respondents.

The influence of family and friends on potential entrants to higher education was mixed, though it was generally positive rather than negative. Parents were generally supportive of their child's decision to progress to higher education, though there were some exceptions, for example among some mature students and women from ethnic minorities (discussed further in Chapter 4). Parents were more likely to discourage them from taking a particular subject, or going far away from home, than discourage them from going at all. However, for some this 'pressure' was off-putting, for example:

'My family really want me to go to university but they want me to do medicine … and I would rather do biomedical sciences, so I'm not sure now. I don't want to be a doctor.' (young, 'A' level, sixth form college student, London)

'I wanted to do pharmacy in London but my parents put me off, they were afraid that it was dangerous and expensive for a girl. They said if I didn't get the grades to get into Cardiff then I couldn't go anywhere else.' (young, 'A' level, sixth form college student, Wales)

Whilst the majority of potential entrants had parents who had not experienced higher education, a large number had siblings, cousins and other family members who had been, or were currently, in higher education. On the whole these were a positive influence. This was also the case for those with friends who were already studying at higher education, who could give first hand information. Those who had friends who were not students had sometimes experienced negative opinions and some discouragement from them, but there was no evidence that anyone had actually been dissuaded from applying to higher education by friends. Having role models in friends or family members or 'footsteps to follow' was clearly a distinct advantage. This is discussed further in section 4, below.

'People from here get laughed at if they talk about going to college; their friends say you shouldn't be doing that.' (young, male, BTEC student, North West)

'Hear from friends that have first-hand experience – they tell you more about courses. If it's not what you want to do and you're not sure, they say it's not worth going because it's a lot of commitment.' (young female, 'A' level student, East Midlands)

3.3 Current students

We now turn to the views of current students, mainly from the survey of recent (*ie* 1999) HE entrants. The student sample was drawn from different types of institution, both pre- and post-1992 universities and also HE and FE colleges, in five geographical regions (see Section 1.2 and Appendix). These views reported here are those of the 1,481 full-time students in the sample, from different social class groups (see Chapter 9 for discussion of part-time students).

Two questions in the student survey were about issues affecting their decisions to come to university or college:

- One question asked them to rate the importance or influence of a number of positive factors in their decision to come to university or college. These were all possible reasons for going on to higher education, identified from the research literature.
- The second question comprised an attitude scale where they were asked to consider a number of issues, positive and negative ones, that may have affected their decision to come into higher education. Again, these were issues identified from the research literature.

3.3.1 Reasons for going to university or college

For full-time students in the lower social class group (IIIm-V), the most influential positive factor (or reason) for going to university or college was to study a subject that really interested them. However, the mean score given (in terms of importance) for this reason was only slightly higher (at 2.8) than those of a cluster of other, mainly labour market, ones – gaining a higher qualification for a specific job/career, gaining greater security, earnings, increasing earning potential and getting a higher status job (all around 2.6 to 2.7). Breaking down the full-time student data further by social class groups (I and II, IIIn, IIIm and IV and V) showed there to be no significant differences in scores between the groups for these reasons.

This is a very similar outcome to the results of a similar question given to Year 11/S4 school pupils in a survey on student choices in 1998 (Connor *et al.*, 1999c). The most important reasons for going to university, each given by around 80 per cent of the pupils

at that time, were to study a subject that really interested them, to improve job prospects and to have a professional career.

When the students in the current study were then asked to select the main reason, the results were clearer, with very few students choosing some of the reasons listed (Table 3.1). Indeed, only two were of any significance:

- to study a subject that really interests me (by 37 per cent), and
- to gain a higher qualification (31 per cent)

and, as can be seen from Table 3.1, these percentages were similar for the different social class groups. Groups I and II were slightly more likely to choose subject interest as their main reason while the lowest group, IV and V, gave slightly more support to improved earnings, job status and security.

Male and female students also had similar views, but further disaggregation of the data in respect of ethnicity and age produced more differences:

- Asian students from both higher and lower social class groups were more likely to rate 'gaining a higher qualification for a specific job/career' as the most influential reason (38 and 36 per cent respectively for higher and lower social class groups). For black students from lower social class groups, this was also the more important reason (47 per cent) but black students in the higher social class group rated it as equally important as 'studying a subject that interests me'. By contrast, a lower proportion of both higher and lower social class groups (31 and 28 per cent respectively) among white students rated 'gaining a qualification, *etc.*' as the most influential reason, and put it second to 'studying a subject that interests me'.

Table 3.1: Main reasons for going to university or college: percentage of full-time students, by social class group

	Social class group			
Reasons*	**I, II**	**IIIn**	**IIIm**	**IV,V**
To study a subject that really interests me	38	35	38	32
Gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	31	34	30	31
To gain greater security in employment	7	6	7	8
To increase earning potential	9	9	11	11
To get a higher status job	5	6	3	7
To keep options open	5	5	5	6
Number of students (N)	*554*	*198*	*347*	*200*

* other reasons listed were selected by two per cent or less of current students and so not shown

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

- A higher percentage of the 21 to 24 age group from both higher and lower social class groups identified 'gaining a qualification for a specific job/career' as the most influential factor (45 and 41 per cent respectively). The results from the other age groups were similar to those for the sample as a whole.

These survey findings were reflected in the follow-up interviews with a sample of 20 survey respondents selected to explore issues for particular student sub-groups. Many had been motivated to enter higher education by the subject of their course, while others were seeking a specific qualification in order to gain entry to their chosen career, for example:

> *'I was working as a classroom assistant … but without a teacher's qualification I couldn't get paid a teacher's wage.'* (female, mature student)

Others had reasons of a more personal nature, such as improving the financial situation for their children, or just generally 'bettering' or 'proving something to' themselves.

In the HE-non entrant survey (see Section 3.4), a sub-sample of 59 interviewees had gone on to study in higher education in the last two years (though they had been identified for sampling purposes as non-HE entrants, see Appendix). Their views were similar to the students in the main student survey. They were mainly of the opinion that investment in education was necessary and that they would get a better job at the end of their studies.

3.3.2 Issues affecting decisions about HE participation

As mentioned above, attitudes to HE participation were also explored in the student survey by seeking their views on a list of 32 statements. These were drawn from the research literature as likely to have an influence on decisions about HE entry (see Chapter 2). The current students were asked to give each a score, ranging from five (applies strongly) to one (does not apply at all). The average scores for each statement for the two broad social class groups are shown in Table 3.2.

The statements which had the strongest support are identified and discussed here in this section. In subsequent chapters the statements have been grouped together under themes (*eg* financial aspects, family and home, expectations and worries), and discussed in more detail.

For students in the lower social class group (IIIm-V), the statement which applied to them most strongly was:

- *The investment in my education is a necessary one* (average score 4.0)

Table 3.2: Views of current students: mean scores to attitude statements, differences between social class groups (full-time students)

	I,II & IIIn	IIIm-V
The investment in my education is a necessary one	3.9	4.0
I wanted to continue studying	3.7	3.7
I knew that I would have to work my way through	3.5	3.7
I was looking forward to a new way of life	3.5	3.7
I felt sure the financial benefits would outweigh the costs	3.4	3.6
My parents encouraged me to go	3.8	3.5
I got all the information I needed to go to university	3.4	3.4
I was worried about the cost of study materials	3.1	3.4
Access to Student Loans made it possible for me to go	3.0	3.4
I didn't know what would be expected of me academically	3.1	3.3
I found the available info. about universities easy to take in and understand	3.3	3.2
I wasn't sure I would get enough qualifications to get a place	2.9	3.1
I was afraid of getting into debt	2.9	3.1
I didn't know what to expect from university or college	2.9	3.0
I was worried about the cost of travelling to and from university	2.6	2.9
I was able to ask my teachers and/or university staff questions to help me decide	3.0	2.8
I wasn't sure I had the ability to succeed	2.5	2.7
I found the application procedure very off-putting	2.5	2.6
I had sufficient information about what it would cost	2.8	2.6
I was worried about juggling studying with a job	2.2	2.5
I didn't know if I could find the money to pay the fees	2.2	2.5

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly); only those statements where mean scores above mid point (2.5) for lower social class group are shown here.

Source: IES Survey, 2000

Others relating to a like of studying and a 'life-stage change' also applied strongly:

- *I wanted to continue studying* (3.7)
- *I was looking forward to a new way of life* (3.7)

A third group where average scores were high for the lower social class group related to financial aspects:

- *I knew I would have to work my way through university/college* (3.7)
- *I felt sure the financial benefits (after completing) would outweigh the costs* (3.6)
- *Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to university/ college* (3.4)

And there was also evidence of support from parents:

- *My parents encouraged me to go to university/college* (3.5)

Statements which applied more strongly to the lower than higher social class group (IIIm-V) covered issues relating to:

- **finance**: worries about costs (of study materials, travelling to and from university), access to Student Loans, fears of getting into debt, unsure about finding the money to pay fees.
- **confidence**: not knowing what to expect, not being sure about getting enough qualifications to get a place, not being sure if they had the ability to succeed.
- **beneficial outcomes of HE**: believing that the investment was a worthwhile one, and that the financial benefits would outweigh the costs.
- **a pragmatic approach** — knowing that they would have to work while studying, worries about juggling study with a job.

By contrast, statements referring to parental support applied less strongly to the lower social class group, and also getting information about HE.

3.4 Non-HE entrants

The third group of respondents in the study were those we called the 'non-HE entrants', the group who were qualified but had not gone to HE. In total, 176 non-HE entrants were interviewed in a telephone survey (see Section 1.2 and Appendix). They were identified as having *not* gone to higher education at aged 18/19 years (in 1998) but had achieved NVQ level 3 qualifications or higher and were from the lower social class group (IIIm-V) at that time. In the event, 59 of them had, by the time of the interviews in May/June 2000, decided to start an HE course. The views of the remainder are discussed here (*nb* information from the 59 who had gone on to HE, known as the 'HE delayers' has been included in the previous section on current students (end of Section 3.3.1).

The non-HE entrants sample were aged 20/21 years at the time of the survey. The vast majority (89 per cent) were in jobs of varying kinds, including sales, clerical, IT and retail jobs, and a few were in the Armed Forces. The remaining 11 per cent were either in work-based training (*eg* Modern Apprenticeship), unemployed, or at home looking after children. They had mostly continued in education post-16, at school (18 per cent), sixth form college (28 per cent) and FE college (42 per cent). Sixty per cent had gained 'A' levels, 17 per cent GNVQs and 15 per cent BTEC qualifications.

3.4.1 Reasons for not entering HE

When the non-HE entrant sample were asked in an open question why they had not gone to university (despite having entry qualifications to get a place), the main reasons given were about:

- wanting to get a job and earn some money (39 per cent)
- cost issues (28 per cent)
- wishing to take a break from study (16 per cent)
- uncertainties about their ability or commitment to complete a degree course (13 per cent).

When they were then asked specifically about a number of possible reasons (identified from the research literature), a similar pattern of responses emerged, as shown by Figure 3.1. The main reasons were labour market and financial considerations. In particular, wanting to work and undertake training at the same time, not seeing any guarantee of a job at the end of university, wanting to start a career, and getting a job and earning as soon as possible, all featured highly in reasons given for not going into or applying for an HE place. Of slightly lesser importance, but still applying strongly to over one-third of the respondents were having enough information about costs and feeling that they could afford to go to university.

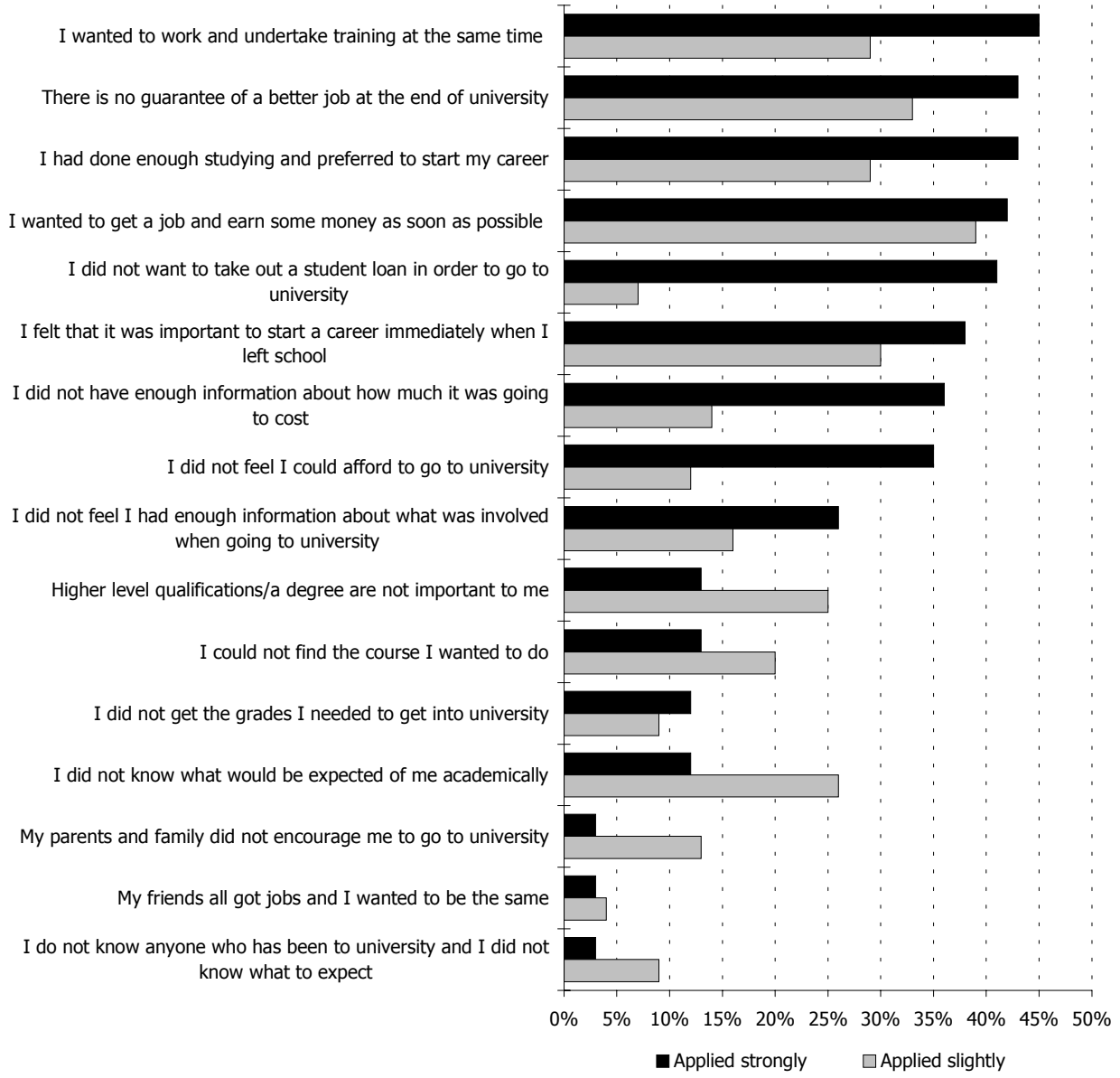
3.4.2 Conclusions

This chapter has identified the key issues influencing decisions about going on to higher education. These relate to positive factors, mainly expected improvements to employability and earnings, and to negative factors, mainly the financial implications of studying and choosing to enter the labour market early. It is clear that going on to higher education is a complex decision for some people to take, and a number of issues are taken into consideration. It is important to note that the significance of these issues appears to vary between sub-groups within the lower social class group, in particular by background, age and ethnic group.

In the chapters which follow, the main themes are looked at more closely and the significance of the various issues for different groups of students explored. These have been grouped together as:

- pre-entry experiences and influencers — mainly educational and family background
- information needs and what is available/missing
- issues associated with student finance, and
- the significance of higher education to career/job plans.

Figure 3.1: Reasons given by non HE-entrants for not considering, not applying or not going into HE



Source: IES Telephone Survey of non-HE entrants, 2000

4. Pre-Entry Experiences and Influencers

Key points of this chapter

- Prior education and family and home backgrounds are factors which affect decisions on HE entry in various ways.
- On the whole, post-16 education experiences appeared to be stronger as a positive influence on HE decisions than earlier education experiences, and stronger than family influences in general.
- However, where family support for participating in HE was relatively strong, the post-16 education experience was less important. The latter was especially so for young entrants.
- Individual members of staff in post-16 education, especially in FE colleges, could have a very strong positive influence on potential entrants, as could friends and family members with recent HE experience. Both acted as 'mentors' or 'champions'. This was especially so for mature entrants.
- For current students, motivations for entering higher education varied slightly by type of school or college last attended and entry qualification.
- Potential students on vocational routes were more likely to be entering higher education for instrumental reasons, to achieve a qualification that would lead to better career prospects, than those on academic entry routes.
- FE College potential entrants had more concerns about the financial implications of HE than did school entrants.

4.1 Introduction

In this and the three chapters which follow, the focus moves to specific issues highlighted in the previous chapter as having an important influence on decisions to study in higher education. This chapter discusses the evidence on the influences of individuals' pre-entry experiences or their 'environment', in particular their educational and family backgrounds.

Qualifying entry route and earlier school experiences have been identified in several previous studies (see Section 2.5.1) as criteria for successful entry to higher education. Linked closely to these is family background, particularly parental education and familial experience of higher education. The research evidence provides more insight into what kind of influence these had and especially the role of various 'influencers', *eg* teachers at school and tutors at colleges, careers teachers and careers advisers, parents and family members, friends and peers, and sometimes also local communities.

4.2 Educational background

4.2.1 Potential entrants

As outlined in the previous chapter, educational background, especially post-16 experiences, had been an important influence on the decisions taken by many of the potential entrants in the focus groups, to go on to HE study. Some individuals had clearly been inspired by the attitude of the college or school they attended, and especially the support from individual members of staff. Those at FE or sixth form colleges were often more vague about school experiences, rather than being negative about them, though a few felt that school had not encouraged them to consider HE. But generally, there was a reluctance to talk much about earlier education experiences in all of the focus groups, as it was felt to be not particularly relevant to the discussion, *ie* their plans for HE study.

> *'College has been very encouraging, it's not like at school, you are treated like an adult.'* (female Access student)

> *'It's different here in college. When you're in school it's a totally different set up, but you come here and you choose what you want to do and they know straight away that you are interested so they just push you and help you … finally saw that I would like to go on to university, whereas in school the teachers had no idea, and they weren't bothered.'* (male Access student)

The majority of young people said that they had taken the decision to apply to university fairly recently, while at college, after they had taken their GCSEs or during their second year of 'A' level study, but there were others who had been thinking about university from quite an early age. The majority of Access students, who were older, had been considering it for some time. The following shows the range of responses:

> *'I was working and offered promotion. Realised that I didn't want to do this for ever and so decided to go back to education.'* (female, mature, Access course student)

> *'My friends were all talking about it a lot, and about Christmas time I decided that like 90 per cent sure I wanna go'*, and: *'When I got the UCAS form – that's when it's all clicked – I was going to go.'* (two young, 'A' level students at FE college)

> *'… From sort of family it's been expected that I would go to university, can't say when, I think it's been there, always, they hoped I would go.'* (young, 'A' level school student)

By contrast, most of those who had decided against going, had done so before the age of 16.

It was noticeable how confident and motivated most of the potential entrants were, especially those in Year 13 who, by this stage, had applied to HE and had offers of places. Although they

had concerns and doubts about coping with study and university life, they conveyed the impression of being ambitious and really wanting to get a degree qualification. Some (FE college students) appeared to be wanting to prove something by going, to show their friends and family the seriousness of their ambitions. However, some felt that their university aspirations were not taken seriously outside of the college (who were very supportive). For example, as one student put it:

> *'… They see your address as xxx on the application form (for a job) and they associate with areas of crime so they think you are a deviant or something ….'* (a BTEC/GNVQ student in the North West)

4.2.2 Current students

The two social class groups in the survey of current students had similar entry qualifications: approximately two-thirds of both groups had entered with 'A' levels, one-quarter with vocational qualifications and just under ten per cent with Access/foundation qualifications; and just over half had entered via school or sixth form college (see Appendix for further details). However, students from the lower social class group (IIIm-V) had achieved higher 'A' level points on average – 38 per cent of the lower social class group had 16+ points, compared with 27 per cent of the higher social class group. The lower social class group were more likely to have been previously at an FE college than a school or sixth form college, which is consistent with general participation patterns (see Section 2.2).

The survey data were explored to see if there were any differences by educational background in students' reasons for entering HE study (Table 4.1) and also in their attitudes to the issues which influence participation (identified earlier in Section 3.3).

Table 4.1: Main reasons for entering higher education given by current students from different education backgrounds (types of institution last attended): percentage giving each reason* as the most influential factor (full-time students)

	Comprehensive school	Sixth form college	Private/ Ind school	FE/tertiary college
To study a subject that really interests me	36	37	41	34
Gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	29	30	20	35
To gain greater security in employment	7	8	8	6
To increase earning potential	9	9	11	9
To get a higher status job	7	4	7	4
To keep options open	5	6	8	3
Number of students	*354*	*418*	*142*	*478*

* only main reasons shown (others given by under three per cent of sample)

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Looking first at reasons for entry, the overall pattern of response was similar regardless of education background, with 'to study a subject that really interests me' slightly ahead in its strength of influence than the group of reasons relating to improved job prospects/earnings. Looking more closely at some of the other, lower ranked, reasons, students who had been at FE colleges and Access students were more likely to be entering higher education because they enjoy studying, and less for the student social life, than those who had entered from schools. Students from private or independent schools and those with academic entry qualifications (especially those with higher 'A' level points) were more likely to have always assumed they would be going.

When asked to identify the main reason for entering HE, from the given list, 35 per cent of students from FE or other tertiary colleges chose 'to get a qualification for a specific job/career', a higher proportion than the 29 per cent of school and 30 per cent of sixth form college students. The latter two groups were more likely to choose as the main reason 'to study a subject that really interests me' (36 and 37 per cent respectively). Students who had attended grammar or independent schools were even more likely than others to say they had gone to university because of subject interest reasons, and less because they wanted a higher qualification for a specific job.

Turning to the issues of relevance in decision-making about higher education (the large attitude question with a number of statements about higher education, see Chapter 3), differences were evident by educational background (Table 4.2). In some cases, the differences were a function of age and the older profile of FE college entrants, such as those about moving away from home, childcare and changes to their way of life. In general, the financial aspects of HE study were of more concern to FE college entrants than others, especially those from private/independent schools (discussed further in Chapter 6). The latter also had less worries/more confidence than others and were more likely to have teachers that expected them to go to university (*nb* the sub-sample of private/independent school entrants was quite small (N=67) so these findings should be treated with caution).

A more negative view of school rather than subsequent educational experiences was highlighted in the views of students from the lower social class group in the follow-up interviews. For example, a grammar school pupil said:

> '*I had been told by my teachers that I was useless, and constantly told that I shouldn't be there.*' (female, mature entrant from Access course)

Another, a male mature student who had come into HE after an accident at work, commented:

Table 4.2: Issues for current students relating to higher education: differences, by previous type of school colleges attended, in the support given by current students to the following statements (mean scores, only those statements with noticeable differences in mean scores shown)

	Comp/grammar school/sixth form college	Private/Ind school	FE/Tertiary college
I wanted to get away from home	2.1	2.4	1.7
I was concerned about moving to a new area	2.2	2.3	1.7
I was looking forward to a new way of life	3.8	4.1	3.7
My parents encouraged me to go to university	3.9	3.8	3.3
None of my family or friends had been to university	2.0	1.6	1.9
I was afraid of getting into debt	3.0	2.6	3.1
I was worried about the cost of study materials	3.2	2.8	3.3
I didn't know if I could find the money to pay the fees	2.2	1.8	2.5
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to uni/college	3.1	2.6	3.4
I was not concerned about the cost because my parents would foot the bill	2.1	2.6	1.7
I knew I would have to work my way through college	3.6	3.3	3.6
I was worried about juggling study with a job	2.2	1.7	2.6
I was worried about the cost of travelling to and from university	2.6	2.4	3.0
I wasn't sure I had the ability to succeed	2.6	2.1	2.7
I wasn't sure I would get enough qualifications to get a place	3.1	3.0	2.8

note:scores could range from 1= does not apply at all to 5=applies strongly

Source: IES Student survey, 2000

> *'I didn't do well at school, I was too busy messing about. There seemed no reason to get an education at that point in my life.'* (male, mature entrant, from Access course)

4.2.3 Non-HE entrants

As already shown (see Section 3.4) the non-HE entrants in the study were a relatively homogeneous group educationally. Most had gone to a comprehensive school (86 per cent) and then continued in education beyond 16, but mainly at a FE or sixth form college rather than at school, to gain 'A' levels or other vocational qualifications. The main reasons they gave for staying on in education at that time were to get more or better qualifications and to get a better job or career.

There was little in the survey findings to suggest that school or college experiences had had a direct impact on decisions not to go on to higher education. On the whole, the non-entrant group came over as being fairly independent in their career decision-making, with most saying they had made the decision about what to do on leaving school single-handedly. It was also apparent though that many did not have much in the way of definite career plans at the time of leaving school and had left the decision about leaving school until late in the school year.

4.3 Family background

4.3.1 Potential entrants

Most of the potential entrants had (some) family or friends with experience of higher education although, with regard to family, this tended to be siblings and cousins, rather than parents. Some first generation HE applicants said that their families did not understand why they wanted to go to university, and did not generally encourage them.

> *'My friends were encouraging but my family weren't – they kept saying "are you sure you can afford not to work?"'* (female Access student)

> *'My mother says that I should have gone to university at 17 if I was going at all.'* (female, Access student)

Those with familial HE experience found their family were mostly very encouraging. However, in most cases, including many potential entrants without a familial history of higher education, their families seemed generally supportive of them in their decision to enter higher education.

4.3.2 Current students

Just over one in ten current students from the lower social class group had parents with degree qualifications, compared to almost four out of ten current students from the higher social class group. By contrast, the proportion who had siblings with current or past experience of higher education was similar for both groups (44 per cent of the higher, and 46 per cent of the lower social class group). However, combining the two into one measure (familial HE experience – *ie* either a parent or a sibling), 61 per cent of the higher social class group, compared with 51 per cent of the lower social class group, had HE familial experience of this kind.

Over half (55 per cent) of the lower social class group were from low income families (as measured by them not paying a HE student fee contribution), compared to 39 per cent of the higher income group (full fee contribution).

The survey showed that having familial experience of HE made little difference to the importance given to the various reasons for entering higher education. However, family income levels did. A higher proportion of students not paying fees had gone to university for qualification/job reasons — 32 per cent gave 'getting a higher qualification for a specific job/career' as the most influential reason, compared to 25 and 28 per cent who were paying partial or full fee contributions. However, for all income groups, the most influential reason was that they wanted to study a subject that interested them.

There were few differences between the views of students with, and those without, familial HE experience on the list of issues affecting decisions on HE participation. However, by family income levels, differences were more noticeable, especially for the statements on financial aspects. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

4.3.3 Non-HE entrants

Although the non-HE entrant group were more likely to have taken career decisions fairly independently (see above), their parents had been more helpful to them than school teachers, in deciding about post-16 options and whether or not to leave school. However, parents and other family members appeared to have been of less help in deciding what they should do subsequently (*eg* on finishing college).

4.4 The influencers

In the above discussion (and earlier in Chapter 3) a number of different people in the students' backgrounds or environment have been mentioned as having had an influence on their decisions on HE entry. These included 'educators', careers advisers, family and friends. It seemed that there are at least four main ways that they could have an effect on individuals' decisions:

- giving general support and encouragement towards higher education, or discouragement
- providing information and guidance to help them come to a decision about HE (often as part of career planning)
- helping to give them confidence and improve their self-esteem
- directly intervening in individual's decisions.

In this section, we explore the role of these influencers in more detail, using the qualitative material from the discussions with potential entrants and current students.

4.4.1 Potential entrants

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the potential entrants spoke about a number of different people in their lives who had been encouraging and discouraging towards their considering higher education, but for many, the influence of their (FE) college tutors on their aspirations and plans had been crucial.

College tutors

FE college tutors were almost unanimously praised for their support, encouragement, advice and help in decision making, and for the way they boosted the students' confidence. This was particularly evident amongst mature students, for whom confidence in their own abilities was often the greatest barrier to overcome. The nurturing and support from the college and their tutors seemed to have enabled many of them to see their potential. Some contrasted the influence of college tutors with their school teachers. For example:

> *'It's different here in college; when you're in school it's a totally different setup, but you come here and you choose what you want to do, and they know straight away that you're interested so they just push you and help you and then you see yourself being directed. I finally saw that I'd like to go on even further to university, whereas in school I had no idea, and they (the teachers) weren't bothered. When you're in school, they don't care at all.'* (Male, BTEC student, North West)

Assistance with decisions about HE generally came from course tutors, or sometimes from staff in a wider student liaison role (across subjects and courses) with whom they had some regular contact, for example, for tutorials. On the whole, these prospective students took notice of personal recommendations about courses and institutions from their tutors.

Of course, tutors had not been inspirational in all colleges. In some institutions, where they were not seen as greatly influential or encouraging, they had still been supportive to those students who had decided to go on to HE. In other colleges, however, some potential entrants reported that they had been discouraged from applying for particular courses as they were considered very hard to get in to. Other students felt under pressure to apply to university even if they had decided that they didn't want to go, for example:

> *'Tutors expect you to go on to university, they are always asking me why I don't want to.'* (female, 'A' level Year 13 student)

It can be difficult for educators to get the balance right between encouraging and pushing students to move towards HE. However, in those institutions where a real and targeted effort had been made by departments or by individuals to encourage students to go into HE, the students had been appreciative. Many

students reported higher career aspirations as a result of this type of tutor intervention.

> *'The lecturers are very good aren't they? And Judy*, she's been brilliant. She encouraged us to apply to Liverpool University, and we got in!'* (*not her real name) (female Access student)

The opinions of tutors who were honest with their students about the options available to them in HE, and what it would be like when there, were greatly valued:

> *'Tutors on the Access course have been very inspirational – they tell it like it is, both positive and negative.'* (female mature Access student)

Careers staff

Careers advisors and careers tutors were felt to be less helpful on the whole than course or personal tutors in advising potential students about HE, but again this varied between different colleges and schools. For example, participants at some of the colleges said that the careers tutors were able to supply them with everything they needed or point them in the right direction for certain information. In such cases they were seen as information providers rather than influencers. They were also seen by some as being good at helping with action planning, and in running mock interviews. However, as they tended to have limited contact with students and often did not know them well, the help that they could give was also felt to be limited, and could be negative, for example:

> *'They just throw information at you.'* (male, 'A' level student)

> *'They don't really know you do they? Only you know what you want to do. They try and mould you into something you're not.'* (female, GNVQ student)

Hence, careers advisors and careers tutors were felt to be good at providing information, but not so good at helping with decisions, or providing tailored guidance about specific courses or institutions. This sort of information was often supplied by course tutors who had closer contact with HE for their specialist subject. Where the distinction was made, the careers teachers at schools appeared to have been more helpful than school careers advisers. For some of those considering pre-16, they had found school careers advisers suggesting they chose options other than going on to university.

Teachers

At the schools visited, teachers were also mentioned as being good sources of information on HE, although there was little evidence that they were as influential or inspirational as some of the FE college tutors. However, they were cited as being good

sources of advice, and helpful in supporting pupils through the UCAS application process. School careers advisors were mentioned in much the same way. At both schools and colleges, it was often up to the individual to make an appointment with the careers adviser to ask for help (*nb* careers guidance is not compulsory after 16). At schools in particular, though, earlier compulsory sessions on HE with careers staff were seen to have been very helpful.

Family

As highlighted already in Chapter 3, families could be both encouraging and discouraging, and there were examples of both given in the group discussions.

Parents tended to be supportive in general of their child's decision to pursue HE (whatever the age of the potential student and whether or not the parent had been to university), although there were exceptions to this, for example, from an Access course student:

> *'My friends were encouraging but my family weren't – they kept saying "are you sure you can afford not to work?"'* (female Access student)

Another, female Access student's mother had said to her that *'she should have gone to university at 17 if she was going to go at all.'*

Some people, primarily those who were under 21 years, and also from ethnic minority groups, felt that they were expected to follow in family footsteps, or simply to live up to certain expectations, *eg* to take the opportunities that their parents didn't have. This was sometimes described by students negatively as a 'pressure'. As mentioned earlier in Section 3.2.3, although their parents were generally supportive of their HE aim, they wanted to steer them away from studying some subjects and towards others (*ie* higher status ones such as law or medicine); or they wanted them to study close to home. In a few cases this was adding to difficulties in making choices, and one potential student felt like '*just giving up going for now*'. However, in the majority of cases, potential entrants said that their parents would be supportive of whatever they decided to do, whether that was to go to university or college or do something else instead. Some students commented that their families were very proud of them, as they would be the first one in the family to go to university, and they would support them as much as they could, and similarly, the students did not want to let their family down, *eg*:

> *'I live with my grandma and she's like going round telling everyone that her little granddaughter is going to university, she's so proud, she's amazing, and that's the only reason I'm going you know … I have thirty cousins and all of them have left school and just done nothing. I don't want to be like that.'* (young, 'A' level, female FE college student, East Midlands).

There were examples of cultural problems, primarily among women from Asian backgrounds, of parents and/or the wider family being negative about the idea of their daughter attending university. They were most usually married students, and some also had children. However, one student was of a younger age and said that her family and her culture would not encourage girls to go on to higher education. Initial announcements to families that they were intending to go back into education, *eg* to undertake an Access course with a view to continuing onto an HE qualification, were often met with a less than positive response, *eg*:

> *'It's different being Asian, once you get married you tend not to come back to education. So to come back has involved a complete change, but my family have got used to it now.'*
>
> *'My mother-in-law didn't understand why I wanted to educate myself now, when I have children to look after.'* (comments from Asian women on Access courses in East Midlands FE college, in their twenties)

With time, potential entrants like these two almost always managed to win at least some of their family members onto their side. However, in pursuing their aims they often said that they had to break away from their families to a certain extent, and move outside their families' expectations.

Some mature female students (across all ethnic groups) reported that they had faced some opposition from their partners, though we found no examples of such opposition from partners of male mature students. One woman talked about opposition to start with, '*because he's scared I'll end up earning more than him*'. Another said that her partner complained because she '*always had her head in her studies*' so they didn't get much time together.

Prospective students with cousins or siblings who had been to or who were attending university, said they were usually very encouraging about the value of the experience itself, as well as the resulting qualification. However, they were, understandably, often rather biased towards the institution that they had attended.

It seemed to be almost vital for potential entrants from lower social class groups to have at least one family member who was supportive of their aim to continue on to higher education. This seemed especially so for those who were breaking barriers of tradition, whether these were barriers associated with age, ethnicity or social class. Such students had to be very determined in the face of some opposition from their community as a whole.

Friends and peers

A number of potential entrants had friends who were already in HE, and they had generally been very encouraging about it and the benefits of going. More importantly, as for those with family

members with recent experience of HE, they were able to provide down-to-earth information on what it was actually like to be a student, how difficult the work was, how much money would be needed, and so on. This could also be gained from ex-students of the school or college who were invited back to give a talk to current students or pupils about what it was like to be a university student. This realistic information seemed to be extremely important, especially amongst those who had only begun to think about HE relatively recently, and who had no family or friends who had attended.

As mentioned earlier in Section 3.2.3, there was some negative influence exerted by peers, for example, those friends who were already working sometimes tried to discourage their friends from attending university or HE college, suggesting they should get jobs as they had done. Their working friends feared they wouldn't see them very often as they would have too much work to do, or that they wouldn't have enough money to socialise with them. Many potential entrants were planning to study locally, partly because friends and family were here and they wanted to stay near them, but also for financial reasons.

Occasionally, college students, and particularly older ones, said that their friends had tried to put them off HE, by saying that it was too big a step for them to take. But for those mature students with friends of similar age at university, it had been inspirational to them to see that it was possible to achieve their aim. Others who had contact with people who had been through university (*eg* through church or other activities) said that knowing there were people who would be able to help them if they were struggling academically, eased their worries somewhat.

As with family, it seemed the more supportive their friends were of their career aspirations the better, although no-one reported having being swayed by their peers' negative opinions to deter them from applying.

4.4.2 Current students

The current students provided less information about the 'influencers' but some insights were found in both the survey and the follow-up interviews.

Tutors and teachers

There was little from the student survey which provided specific insight into how the tutors or teachers had influenced their decision-making, other than that they provided specific information and guidance. There seemed little difference by social class group in the ease with which they could get such information from their teachers (*nb* information issues are discussed separately in the next chapter).

From the face-to-face interviews with students (all from the lower social class group), it was clear that, for those who felt their overall educational experience had been generally poor, the advice and support given to them by recent school teachers or college tutors about continuing study had been beneficial. Many spoke very highly of their most recent educational experiences, particularly about Access courses, in a similar vein to that reported by the potential entrants above, for example:

> *'The tutors on the Access course were really supportive and encouraging throughout, so different to when I was at school.'* (mature entrant)

> *'My Access course leader nagged me for about three weeks until I sent in my application. I thought I was too old but he just told me to … try.'* (female, lone parent)

Families

As shown above, only a minority of students from lower social class groups in the survey had a parent with experience of higher education, although rather more had other family members. The survey showed that students in the lower social class group generally felt that they had received less encouragement towards higher education from their families than those from higher social class groups (see Section 4.3.2).

Among the interviewees (who were all from lower social class groups), however, we found mostly encouragement and support from family but also some negative views about barriers to overcome. These two views come from older students:

> *'I came from a family with five brothers and I was the only girl. The boys were given encouragement to go on and get some education whilst the emphasis for me was to get house and home skills*.' (mature, female student)

> *'I've always wanted to go to university, but my Dad wanted me to do an engineering apprenticeship but I didn't like it.'* (young ethnic minority student)

Students who had entered HE using the traditional route, *ie* straight from school, all reported that their family were encouraging about their decision to enter HE, even where they reported being 'first generation students'. For older students and those entering via FE colleges, however, there was a more mixed picture of support, for example:

> *'My children think it's "cool that Mum's a student", but some of my friends think I'm getting above my station and wonder why I want to do it at my age.'* (lone parent, from an Access course)

> *'My family and friends thought I was a bit mad, but have generally been encouraging, even if it's only because doing this makes me happy.'* (young, ethnic minority student)

> *'My mother threatened to stop providing childcare for me. This would have made it impossible to do the course. I live on a council estate, some people there have said "why are you going to university, why are you doing that?" I'm trying to better myself, not stuck like you.'* (mature, disabled student)

Negative opinions from family, whilst important, were merely another barrier to be overcome in most cases. However, where family had reacted positively to their decision, this was seen as an important source of support.

> *'I have a very supportive family and a great personal tutor at my last college. When I got my results (poorer than expected) the lecturer knew my potential and advised me to do the HND to "get my foot in the door" he thought I'd be bored by resits.*' (young, female, college background)

Friends

Behaviour and attitudes of friends of current students was often similar to that of families, shown above. A range of views were expressed. Several interviewees had experienced a lack of interest from friends and even some animosity because of their decision to go to university. For others, however, going to university was a natural progression which they had done along with their friends (who did similar things, *eg* visiting universities, filling out UCAS forms), and it meant that they had given each other mutual support and help. There were yet others who had left friends behind to go to university and did not know anyone who was going also. This had obviously been a concern, but their commitment to university outweighed their apprehensions:

> *'I was worried about living away from home and living by myself. It's a big step in life, walking away from family and friends.'* (young, male student)

4.5 Conclusions

Pre-entry experiences clearly have had an influence on most of our research subjects, but in a variety of ways. Their period in post-16 education had the greatest influence for many on their decisions about higher education. This is likely to be because it was fairly recent and seen by them as more relevant to their HE plans. The study was not able to obtain much insight on pre-16 educational experiences, which may also have been very relevant, but currently less visible to the respondents. For many, the direct positive influence of staff in education was the key factor. Family support was generally positive, but a less influential factor on the whole than their educational experiences (though there were some notable exceptions where family support was very strong). Friends who were currently in higher education were also an important positive factor of influence. Overall, among the conclusions that can be drawn is that students from lower social

class groups, and in particular older entrants, would appear to benefit greatly in their higher education aspirations at the pre-entry stage by having a mentor or 'champion' and also role models. These could be family or friends with experience of higher education, or teaching staff with whom they have built a good relationship.

5. Information Needs and Provision

Key points of this chapter

- Plenty of information is available to potential students, but often it is too general or too complex to be effective in helping decision making about going on to higher education.
- Students would like to have information which is more tailored to their own needs and relevant to their own varied personal circumstances.
- Information given verbally is more appreciated, partly because it can be more personal.
- Information provision is geared towards younger rather than older entrants, in particular graduate career information and longer-term employment issues.
- Year 13 students were noticeably better informed than Year 12 students about aspects of higher education (as were those in second compared to first years of courses in colleges).
- Private and grammar school students appeared to be more satisfied with information on HE than were students at comprehensive schools and sixth form and FE colleges.
- Use of the Internet was confined mainly to younger students who were more likely to possess computer skills and be confident in using them.
- The main gap in information content was details of student finance.
- The majority of non-HE entrants appeared to have missed out on receiving any information on higher education when leaving school or college.

5.1 Introduction

Information and guidance on careers and study options post-16 has been highlighted as an influence on decisions about higher education (see Chapter 3). Some potential entrants were much better informed than others about aspects of HE, and some had been discouraged in their HE aspirations by a lack of information on particular aspects of HE, or information that was confusing or not relevant to them.

Information on HE is provided by a range of people and organisations, including: tutors, teachers and careers advisers, higher education institutions, and also from government agencies. It needs to cover a wide range of aspects of HE study from individual details on courses and institutions to issues relating to finance and student life. Previous studies (see Connor *et al.*, 1999a) have shown that students would like more detailed information,

simply presented, about what they might expect to experience as a student.

Although HE information provision is a pre-entry issue, and therefore linked to the previous chapter, it is discussed here separately because it draws attention to some specific issues.

5.2 Potential entrants

On balance, potential entrants viewed people as the most important source of information about higher education rather than the guides, brochures, *etc.* which contained such information. They tended to appreciate and take on board information given to them by people they respected, had good relationships with, or who had first hand experience of HE. There seemed to be too much written information *per se* for many of these prospective students to sift through and handle usefully by themselves, especially from institutional prospectuses and the various guides, which were often bulky and quite complex documents. Perhaps that is why they were so reliant on the opinions of those they trusted (see in particular views expressed in the previous chapter about college tutors and teachers being more influencers and careers advisers being information providers).

> *'Teachers were helpful but the careers staff were useless, they tried to persuade me to do other things … I would rather take advice from someone that knows me, or someone in the profession.'* (female, 'A' level student, FE College, Wales)

> *'Our tutors give us personal tutorials … we get to talk back and ask questions; they'll advise as well, 'cos they really know us, know what's best for us, what course is going to suit us ….'* (male, BTEC student, FE college, North West)

There were specific information issues of concern to those who would be entering HE as mature students. Several commented that careers advice for adults was very much lacking, in particular with regard to information about what they might do after a degree. All the guidance on graduate jobs and careers seemed to be geared towards young entrants. The lack of visible pathways for mature students after completion of an HE course simply exacerbated the fears that many potential entrants had — that they would not be able to get a good job at the end of the course, and that they would have accrued a substantial amount of debt for no apparent reward.

There were also complaints about the clarity of entry requirements in many of the prospectuses and guides, particularly from students doing Access courses and other vocational qualifications (most of whom were mature students). The only way that many of them had found out what was required of them was to ring up each institution directly and ask. Some, mainly Access course students, also said they would have liked more detail from

colleges about likely HE courses (*eg* HE/FE partnership or compact schemes) in advance of starting their Access or other course, so they could get started thinking about application decisions before the first term. They also would have found advance information on timetabling useful to help plan future childcare, and what books to read (for their current course). This may demonstrate their increased commitment to study or may illustrate their worries about their ability to keep pace with others on their course (or, most probably, a mixture of both):

> *'We had to make decisions very quickly, we got the UCAS form as soon as we started in September, not much time to think about the application.'* (male, mature, FE college Access student, London)

Overall, there was clearly a feeling amongst mature students that higher education was still very much geared towards the younger, traditional entrant.

Open days and visits to HE institutions were also mentioned as being extremely useful in giving a more realistic view of a place or a course than was possible from written information. One group felt that they had got more from informal visits to a university than they had from those which had been organised. Travel costs and time available, however, meant that visits had to be limited for some potential students. Visits from representatives of universities or colleges, and careers fairs, were also mentioned as helpful. Careers centres, student services, and libraries were other important sources of information.

It was noticeable that potential entrants in their first year of a two year course often had quite scant knowledge about higher education, or where to obtain information. Many said that they had not yet started to think about it in anything other than vague terms. However, for those who had started to look, and for most of the students in their second year, there appeared to be sufficient basic information around, although they would have liked more details on particular courses.

Clearly, not all potential entrants received the same amount of information about HE, and this varied within as well as between institutions. For example, at one college, the BTEC students in the discussion group appeared to have received less information about higher education generally than Access students, and their knowledge was limited to specific courses at a few fairly local universities. Access courses usually include modules specifically dealing with applying to HE institutions. We found that 'A' level students at colleges were generally steered towards continuing on into HE and given assistance with applications from teachers and tutors, though not in quite the same way as for Access students. This was less evident for vocational course students (BTEC, GNVQ), though not in all colleges visited.

Potential students also reported that they had not received information on the different ways HE study can be taken, for example: going to university following a gap year, taking a gap year in the middle of study, and sponsorship through a degree. These were options that many potential HE entrants were uncertain about. But the main gap in information was about financial aspects of studying in HE, which also appeared to vary greatly from group to group:

> *'They need to put more in about financial things in the guides. They tell the mature students but not the younger ones, they assume our parents will help.'* (female, 'A' level student, FE college, Wales)

This is discussed in more detail in Section 6.2.

5.3 Current students

The student survey provided an indication of the adequacy of the information about HE that current students had when they were making the decision to come to university or college. Less than half of all the current students in the survey, regardless of class, felt that they had received all the information they needed to make a decision (about HE), and slightly fewer had found the information easy to understand (Table 5.1). Even fewer (around a quarter) had sufficient cost information, and only around one-third felt that they could ask their teachers and/or university staff questions to help them decide. Students from the lower social class group were slightly less likely to say that any of the statements relating to adequacy of information applied to them.

When analysed by type of school or college, students from grammar and independent/private schools were more likely to say that they had sufficient information about HE at the time of making decisions about entry, and students from FE colleges the least likely. There was little difference between students in other respects, such as by ethnic group and by gender within social class groups, to statements about information.

Table 5.1: Information gathering: percentage of current students who said the following statements applied to them, by social class group

	Social class group	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
I got all the information I needed to help me decide	48	45
I found the information easy to take in and understand	42	40
I was able to ask my teachers and/or university staff questions to help me decide	35	33
I had sufficient info about how much it would cost to be a student	26	20

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

The survey respondents who were followed-up in interviews were asked to reflect on the information they had received about higher education and about how it had helped them. As with the potential entrants (see 5.2 above), personal advice from teachers/tutors or other individuals was seen as particularly useful:

> *'The information I received didn't make any impact, it was personal advice that was the most important factor.'* (female, mature lone parent with disability)

> *'My teachers were encouraging, they made suggestions but weren't pushy.'* (ethnic minority student, North West)

> *'I have a friend who's a lecturer at this university, and it was useful to talk things over with someone who knew.'* (female, lone parent, Access course entrant)

For more detailed information, students consulted prospectuses. These were often seen as an important starting point in a more lengthy process, with the next stage either writing off for specific information, or attending an open day. Those students who had attended open days were very positive about the experience.

Use of the Internet was confined to younger students; virtually none of the mature students had used this particular resource. This was often because they had relatively poor computer skills at that time and had only fairly recently been able to practise them on their current course.

A number of other sources were seen as influential for particular individuals, depending on their entry route and personal circumstances, including the Careers Service, specialist support services for the unemployed, local councils and the probation service. For example, a female student with hearing difficulties said:

> *'The city council was very helpful with information about fees and other financial information. I also had support from a social worker at the hospital but I made my own decisions.'*

5.4 Non-HE entrants

The non-HE entrants were asked a number of questions about information they received when they left school or college. Almost two-thirds of non-HE entrants remember receiving information at that time on the range of options which were available to them, with most of the remainder saying they did not remember.

When asked about particular options:

- more than half of the non-HE entrants (57 per cent of the sample) reported receiving information on courses available at colleges

- 42 per cent recalled receiving information on courses at higher education (*ie* university)
- and just over one-third recalled receiving information about universities themselves
- less than one-fifth of non-HE entrants could remember having any information about the cost of going to university.

When then asked how useful this information on careers options had been when making their decisions about the future:

- 32 per cent of all non-HE entrants (*ie* of the whole sample) reported that it had been either useful or very useful
- just over one in ten said that the information they had received had not been at all useful. This is in addition to those respondents who had not received any information on their options or could not remember seeing any (31 per cent of the sample).

Only around half of all non-HE entrants (51 per cent) felt that they had received sufficient information to make a decision about their future. The remaining non-entrants felt either that the information was insufficient or they had no recollection of receiving any. More than 68 per cent of all non-HE entrants stated that they would have liked more information on some of the options available to them. Of these:

- 24 per cent wanted more detailed information on the different options they could take
- 20 per cent on the kind of courses available
- 13 per cent on qualifications and career paths
- nine per cent on course contents, and
- 11 per cent more detail on the costs of studying.

5.5 Conclusions

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that there is an apparent lack of appropriate information which potential students feel they need in order to make decisions about entry. There is a lot of information produced, but much of it is seen as overly complex and not relevant or sufficiently 'tailored' to many individuals' personal situations. A substantial number of non-HE entrants appear to have missed out on receiving information relating to higher education.

The main gap in information content identified was the financial aspects of studying in higher education. This and other aspects of student finance are the subject of the next chapter.

6. Student Finance

Key points of this chapter

- There was a wide variation in the amount and detail of information available to potential students on costs of studying and funding/support available.
- Most potential students were aware of the recent changes to government student support arrangements but lacked details on the specifics.
- Potential students had concerns about affording the costs of HE study, but felt strongly that it was going to be worthwhile in the long run.
- Mature potential students, especially single parents, were more concerned about HE costs than were younger ones.
- Current students from the lower social class group felt less well informed pre-entry on most aspects of finance than those from the higher group. There were also variations in this respect within social class groups by gender, ethnicity and age.
- Overall, three-quarters of current students did not feel they had sufficient information about how much it would cost to be a student.
- Current students' pattern of funding sources/support in HE varied, in particular by ethnic group, gender, and age.
- Working during term-time was seen as necessary but not welcomed by potential or current students because of its effect on their studies. Slightly more of the current students in the lower social class group were working during term-time (50 per cent) than the higher group (44 per cent), and the average was 13-14 hours per week.
- Students who had come off benefits to enter HE study felt they were being unfairly treated by the student support system.
- Most potential and current students were resigned to accruing debt as a consequence of entering HE, though many, especially younger ones, were vague about how much debt was likely and relatively unconcerned about being able to repay it after graduation.
- Non-HE entrants were not well informed about financial aspects of higher education. Although the attractions of working and earning were the main reasons for not participating in higher education, the costs likely to be involved and the prospect of debt were also cited as 'deterrents'.
- There was an overriding negative view from all respondent groups about the current student financial system.

6.1 Introduction

The importance of economic factors in increasing participation in HE have been raised in several other reports and previous research (see Sections 2.3 and 2.4.2). It has already been shown

that it is an important issue in decisions about entering HE (see Sections 3.2.2., 3.3.2 and 3.4.1).

Several changes to student financial arrangements have taken place (outlined earlier in Section 2.3), but the main ones have been a new requirement for some full-time students to make a contribution to tuition fees and the student maintenance grant replaced by a new system of Student Loans. One of the objectives of this research study was to give particular attention to the impact of these changes on participation in HE by people from lower social class groups. This is one of the first studies on HE participation to be undertaken since the changes were introduced.

A number of different financial issues were discussed with each of the target groups, though there were some common themes, and in this chapter we focus on:

- the awareness of financial issues among **potential entrants**, and their views on the information provided; their funding intentions on entering HE; the financial barriers they face and their views on debt and borrowing
- the extent to which financial considerations affected **current (full-time) students'** decision to enter higher education
- the financial situation of **current (full-time) students**, including
    - their sources of income before starting their HE course
    - their current sources of income and extent of working
    - how well they feel they are managing their financial situation, and
    - their attitude towards debt and borrowing
- the influence of cost on the decision not to go into HE for **non-entrants** and their views on debt and borrowing.

We conclude the chapter with some general reflections on the current HE funding system from all three groups.

6.2 Potential entrants

6.2.1 Information on student finance

The information given to potential entrants on costs and funding of their HE study seemed to vary greatly in amount and quality. Some students appeared well informed about likely costs and sources of funding available to them, often as a result of a specific session provided by their school or college, but the majority appeared to have little idea about them. They lacked knowledge about where they might expect to get funding from, and how much they might need to see them through university:

'The people don't mention it. They talk about going to university, they say if you go you can do this or that but they don't tell you about the costs. I dunno, they think if they talk about it, it might put you off.' (young, GNVQ FE college student, East Midlands)

'We haven't had any lectures about finance; the college has a meeting but only about applying for a grant; I only got to know how much fees I might have to pay a month ago.' (young, sixth form college student, London)

Others said financial information was available but that they had to look for it, and it would help if it could be made more obvious. Many seemed to have picked up on financial information informally from friends and family who had been to university.

Nearly all potential entrants felt that they would like to be better informed about both the costs associated with higher education and the methods for covering those costs. Written information that they had received was criticised for being often incomplete and overly complex. The quantity of information and number of sources used varied, for example: some students had been given leaflets about finance only when they completed their loan application, while others had received packs of information from universities about bursaries and hardship funds.

Most potential entrants would have welcomed additional information that was clearly presented. One group suggested that costs could be broken down into constituent parts, and presented in a simple format overall, which would be more easily understood. Most lacked knowledge about the simple practicalities: *eg* of how the finance system operates, what money it is necessary to save before entry to higher education, and what to do in the event of running out of money. Some had specific queries: *eg* How much you have to pay at each university? What are the interest rates on Student Loans and how will they increase over time?

As with other information on higher education (see Chapter 5) potential entrants preferred information on finance to be communicated verbally, and the opportunity given to raise questions. Different circumstances often necessitated more individualised information and advice tailored to particular circumstances (*eg* those previously getting housing benefit, students with childcare needs).

6.2.2 Awareness of changes in financial support arrangements

Although many potential entrants were relatively uninformed about the details of student finance, most were aware that changes had taken place in student support arrangements, and almost all knew about the abolition of student grants. Not surprisingly though, there was a relatively high level of ignorance of the detail

of such changes. This applied especially to younger people (aged 16 to 18 years).

Very few potential entrants were aware of access and hardship funds that might be available to them; some had not heard of them, and those that had, did not know what they were, or how they could be accessed.

Almost all who were intending to enter HE in 2000 had applied for a Student Loan by the time of the focus groups. It was clear that some of them (particularly those at school) had merely gone through the motion of applying without fully understanding it, and what it might entail. Others, both older and younger students, and from schools and colleges, however, were critical of the application process. It appeared that some had not been given much time to complete application forms, or were not told when the forms were due in. For example, students in two of the focus groups received the forms two days before they had to be handed in. Many found the forms complicated and difficult to complete. For example, young people who did not live with their parents any longer (or had little contact with them) found parts of it difficult. While many students received help from tutors to complete forms, some were left to do them independently. This tended to be more the case for vocational college students who did not seem to get the same level of support on the whole from colleges to help with their HE plans, than their 'A' level or Access counterparts (also see Section 5.2).

Access students (who were mainly mature) were generally much more aware than other potential students about the specific changes in aspects of student finance that had occurred recently, especially the level of fees that they would have to pay, the amount of Student Loan to which they would be entitled, and about bursaries that could be available on certain courses. This may be due to the fact that they had been more proactive in seeking out information, and were more used to having to manage their own finances and make informed financial judgements. They were also likely to have had more input on their courses about HE itself (see above). Many however still found financial issues relating to HE '*an absolute minefield*'.

Mature students, in particular, felt that the student support system itself was overly complex and therefore discouraging. The delays involved in finding out exactly how much money they would be entitled to had put some of them at a significant disadvantage when planning how they would manage at college or university. The situation was exacerbated for mature potential entrants with children. This did not mean that they had not given much thought to it, quite the opposite, as the mature students were, on the whole, more aware of the financial aspects of studying than their younger counterparts. Several had very detailed budgets and plans about how they were intending to

finance their studies. One group of mature Access course students felt that it would be better if they could stay on income support — not because they would be better off, but because it would eliminate the worry and effort involved in trying to organise funding.

6.2.3 Funding intentions

Loans

Almost all the potential entrants who had decided to enter HE said that that they would have to supplement their Student Loan by some other form of income, mainly part-time work and financial contributions from parents. As mentioned above, all these likely HE 2000 entrants had applied for a Student Loan, but some (mainly older students) felt that they might not need the additional funds from a Student Loan because they intended to use savings and to work in term time. However, they wanted the 'safety net' aspect of having some extra money and also because '*they would never again have the opportunity to take out a loan at such a good rate*'.

Parental contribution

Although parental contributions would be sought by many potential entrants, most felt uneasy about doing so as it meant that going to university would mean less, not more, independence from parents and guardians. It was also generally seen as being unfair on their parents. Some potential students stated categorically that they did not want their parents to contribute any money, and would not be asking them. However, while most of the potential students thought that *their* parents would help them financially, if asked, they thought that there were other parents who might be reluctant to do so, and therefore prevent their child from going on to HE:

> *'Loans might put people off, at 16 or 17 … Not everyone can afford to save. That's the biggest problem now, that parents might be saying "we can't afford for you to go".'* (young, 'A' level student, sixth form college, London)

Working and studying

Most potential entrants intended to secure some sort of part-time work while they were studying. The few who did not were confident that they could rely on their parents and loans, or had concerns about the potential (negative) impact working could have on their studies. There were also some older students with children who already had experienced difficulties juggling study and family commitments which left little time available for any part-time work.

Working part-time was seen by many potential entrants as the only way '*of making ends meet', ie* meeting the gap between the amount they could borrow through loans and the costs of being a student. There were others, though, who viewed working as a way of reducing the amount of debt they may accumulate in HE. Whilst they were hopeful that working would not detract them too much from studying, many recognised that it would have some negative effect and a likely problem, especially for students taking subjects with very heavy workloads, such as medicine. Some potential entrants at colleges who currently had part-time jobs admitted they caused difficulties, but were hopeful that it would be easier to cope at university with a part-time job, as they would not be expected to attend lectures all day and every day as was presently the case at college.

Most potential entrants were unsure at this stage of how many hours they were likely to work during term time, but where estimates were given, they averaged around 12 to 13 hours per week.

State benefits

A small minority of potential entrants were currently in receipt of state benefits. Recipients were generally critical of the interaction between state benefits and the HE student support system. For example, one commented how unfair it was that he was entitled to a Student Loan but if he did not take it, he would lose his benefits. He felt that people like him would end up thousands of pounds in debt despite the fact that they would not be spending any more than they are currently. A group of Access course students felt that relinquishing Job Seekers Allowance was also acting as a deterrent to others like them (friends) who might be still considering entering HE. Others expressed some annoyance that they would receive more money whilst on benefits than at university.

6.2.4 How much was cost a barrier to their plans?

Our discussions with potential entrants suggest that cost of HE study, on the whole, and by itself, was not a major prohibitive factor in most students' decisions to continue into higher education. Having said this, the students we interviewed had already made one decision to continue in education, *ie* post-16, and were arguably already positively biased towards the value of education. The cost of going on to higher education was used only occasionally to defend an individual's decision not to progress to higher education. However, although cost may be used to explain non-participation, this may mask other reasons for not going to university. For example, one participant stated that cost was the main reason why she was not going on to HE, but it later emerged in the discussion that she did not feel that higher education was

suitable for her. Conversely, another student had always said that she would not go into HE because it would be too expensive, but had changed her mind after one of her brothers, who had been to university, did much better in the job market than another brother who had not been.

Generally, there was an acceptance that '*being poor is part and parcel of being a student*'. Higher education was expected to be costly and potential entrants expected difficulties in managing to fund it. One mature student commented: '*I've been skint all my life so it won't make that much difference*'. Another said, with nods of agreement all round: '*we'll be living on the edge'*.

Mature potential entrants were more likely to raise specific concerns about the cost of continuing into higher education, and see it as a barrier to completing their HE studies, than younger entrants. In particular, this applied to those who felt it might prove to be too much of a financial burden on their family or partner, and also single parents who would be unable to afford childcare.

6.2.5 Debt and borrowing

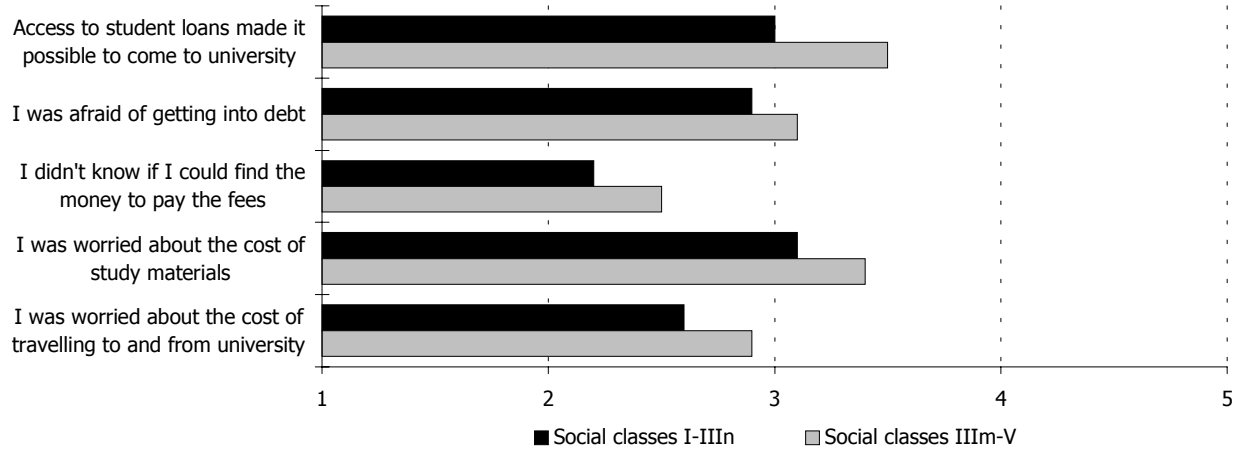
Most of the younger potential entrants (aged 16 to 18) were resigned to the likelihood of ending up with a substantial debt on completion of their HE course. Some potential entrants had a clear idea of the amount of debt they would be likely to have, whilst others had not. Mature entrants generally expected their debts to be smaller, mainly because they had savings to use. Most of the information that had been received about likely debt had come informally from friends and family who had some experience of HE. Little such information had come from college or school sources.

Some potential entrants admitted that they were worried by the possibility of debt but, again, others were not overly concerned. Some felt that as debt could not be avoided it was not worth worrying about, while those that expressed concerns still accepted the situation as '*a necessary evil*'. A few used their lack of knowledge to explain their lack of concern. One Year 13 college student remarked:

> *'There's no point in worrying about what you don't know about.'*

In essence, the vast majority of potential entrants, even if they were not particularly well informed about levels of potential debt, had adopted a philosophical approach towards it. Having said this, they may become more concerned about this issue as their level of information and knowledge about the actual 'real' debt increases over time.

Figure 6.1: Financial considerations: differences between current students in support given to the following statements, by social class group (mean scores)



note: Figures are mean scores where 5 = applies strongly and 1 = does not apply at all

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

6.3 Current students

For current students, questions in the survey were designed to elicit their views on financial considerations when deciding about going on to HE study and on their current financial situation.

6.3.1 Financial considerations

Figure 6.1[1] shows how current students viewed financial issues before they went to university or college, when they were making the decision about entering HE (using as before, mean scores to assess how much particular statements applied, see Section 3.3.2). Here, and in Tables 6.2-6.4, the statements shown have been selected from a longer list of likely issues given to the students to elicit their views. Current students from the lower social class group were more worried about financial issues, such as debt, fees and other costs related to studying than were students in the higher social class group.

Within both social class groups, women were more concerned than men about financial issues, and women from the lower social class group were more concerned than women in the higher social class group (Table 6.1). It is acknowledged, however, that such gender distinctions may reflect more general differences (*ie* women may have different attitudes towards debt generally which was not explored in the research) as much as actual differences in student circumstances (*ie* family/individual income levels, amount of parental support available, prior earnings, family related outgoings *eg* childcare).

[1] These are selected factors relating to financial issues from a longer list of issues which may affect decisions to enter HE (see Table 3.2).

Table 6.1: Financial considerations: differences between current students in support given to the following statements, by gender, within social class (mean scores, full-time students only)

	I-IIIn Male	I-IIIn Female	IIIm-V Male	IIIm-V Female
I was afraid of getting into debt	2.8	3.0	2.8	3.3
I was worried about the cost of study materials	2.9	3.2	3.0	3.5
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to uni/college	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.6

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly)

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Table 6.2: Financial considerations: differences between current students in support given to the following statements, ethnicity, within social class (mean scores, full-time students only)

	I-IIIn Black	I-IIIn Asian	I-IIIn White	IIIm-V Black	IIIm-V Asian	IIIm-V White
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to uni/college	3.7	2.3	3.0	3.8	3.1	3.6
I didn't know if I could find the money to pay the fees	2.7	2.7	2.2	2.4	2.6	2.4

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly)

Source: IES Survey, 2000

Table 6.3: Financial considerations: differences between current students in support given to the following statements, by age, within social class (mean scores, full-time students only)

	I-IIIn < 21	I-IIIn 21-24	I-IIIn 25 +	IIIm-V < 21	IIIm-V 21-24	IIIm-V 25+
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to uni/college	2.9	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.5
I was afraid of getting into debt	2.9	3.0	2.9	3.2	3.4	2.7

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly)

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Table 6.4: Financial considerations: differences between current students in support given to the following statements, by individual social class groups (mean scores)

	I-II	IIIn	IIIm	IV-V
I was afraid of getting into debt	3.0	2.8	3.1	3.2
I was worried about the cost of study materials	3.1	3.0	3.4	3.4
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to uni/college	3.0	3.0	3.6	3.3
I didn't know if I could find the money to pay the fees	2.2	2.2	2.5	2.4
I was worried about the costs of travelling	2.6	2.6	2.8	3.0
I was not concerned about costs because my parents would foot the bill	2.3	2.0	1.7	1.6

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly)

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Differences by ethnicity and class were also evident (Table 6.2). For example, black students were the most likely ethnic group to report that they were reliant on Student Loans — but this varied little by social class. By contrast, Asian and white students were considerably more likely to exhibit differences in this respect by their social class, with those from lower social classes being more dependent on Student Loans. White students from the higher social class group were least likely to say that: *I didn't know if I could find the money to pay the fees.*

Subdivision by age within class also highlighted some interesting differences (Table 6.3). The youngest group of students from the higher social classes were relatively unlikely to be dependent on Student Loans. It is also evident that the older students (over 25 years) from the lower social class group were the least likely to be afraid of getting into debt. This may reflect a more pragmatic view towards paying for higher education; alternatively, it could indicate that this group had more savings, so expected to have less debt, and/or put more value on the whole education experience of going to university (as suggested by the potential entrants' findings, see Section 6.2.5 above and earlier in Section 3.2.1).

Further analysis by social class found noticeable differences between the upper I-II and the lower IV-V group for many of the statements relating to finance (Table 6.4). In particular, greater concerns about costs of study materials and finding money to pay fees was evident among the IV-V group, while the I-II group were less concerned about costs because they expected their parents would be footing the bill. There were also noticeable differences in the support given to all the financial statements between the IIIn and IIIm social class groups, the gap being widest on the statement relating to loans making it possible for them to come to university or college (mean score of 3.6 for the IIIm group compared to 3.0 for the IIIn group).

6.3.2 Information on finance

As already shown in the previous chapter (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3), students had variable levels of information about aspects of higher education prior to entry, and this included the financial aspects. Approximately three-quarters of current students felt they had insufficient information about how much it would cost to be a student (when deciding about entering HE). A lack of information about financial arrangements was also evident in the interviews, for example:

> *'I would have liked more information about the money the college wants paying. As soon as you get to university you seem to owe them money.'* (young, 'A' level entrant)

> *'The written information didn't help me. Someone coming straight from school might be more aware of the terminology but I was completely lost.'* (mature, 'A' level entrant)

Where university prospectuses provided information on student finance, that was seen as particularly helpful. One student, for example, had found examples given in a prospectus of experiences of individual students, with quotes on how they had learned to budget, useful in building up a better picture.

Specific areas of concern for current students when deciding about HE included how studying full time might affect housing and other benefits and their council tax payments. Students with disabilities, and lone parents, reported difficulties in finding out about their entitlements, and about any special facilities, for example:

> *'You can't just give someone with special needs a place at a university, you have to make sure that you have the things in place for them. It takes careful thought and consideration.'* (female student with hearing disability)

> *'I went to student services about my disability and how it would affect my fees and other things. The information I received was very difficult to interpret and wasn't in plain English; this could be improved.'* (female student with physical disability)

> *'It was most difficult to find out about funding for lone parents and the fee waiver scheme. It was difficult to get clear advice as no-one seemed clear about the exact arrangements during the changeover.'* (female, mature student)

6.3.3 Prior income sources

Turning back to the survey again, current students were asked a range of questions relating to their financial situation. The first of these determined their income prior to starting the course. The following relates to the findings for full-time students only.

Over half of the current students had a prior income, and this varied only slightly by social class group (59 per cent in the lower social class group (IIIm-V), 56 per cent in the higher social class group (I-IIIn)). For the vast majority of students from both social groups, this prior income came from earnings (Table 6.5). These

Table 6.5: Sources of prior income of current students as a percentage of those with a prior source of income, (full-time current students only)

	Social Class*	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Earnings	91	87
Benefits	7	11
From parents	4	—
Other	3	1
Total (N)	*760*	*556*

* based on parental occupation unless student is aged 25+

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

earnings may have come from full-time employment in the case of (some) mature students or gap students, but is most likely to have been from part-time/weekend working. A small proportion of current students relied on benefits, but only slightly more from the lower social class group did so. Very few current students relied on other sources of income (Table 6.5).

The actual amounts (based on yearly incomes) which students reported receiving before entering HE varied, but differences by social class were small. As might be expected, the amounts given by those on benefits had the smallest range (£1,400 to £8,000 per year), with little variation by social class (the averages were: I-IIIn at £4,220 and IIIm-V at £3,999, but note these figures are based on very small numbers (14 in I-IIIn and 21 in IIIm-V)). The average amount 'lost' by those on benefits as a result of entering HE, however, showed more variation by social class. Those from I-IIIm 'lost' on average £1,519 more than their IIIm-V counterparts (the average for social class group I-IIIn was £3,107 and £1,588 for IIIm-V).

Those with prior earnings reported a broader range (£360 to £25,000). These figures incorporate those who had previously worked full-time alongside those who had been working only a few hours a week. The averages for the two social class groups were not dissimilar, those in I-IIIn earning, on average, £412 more than those from IIIm-V (averages were £5,177 for social class I-IIIn and £4,765 for IIIm-V). These prior earnings figures are based on a larger sample (252 in I-IIIn and 193 in IIIm-V social class groups). Income 'lost' as a result of entering HE showed very little difference by social class group (the averages were £4,575 for I-IIIn and £4,638 for IIIm-V).

6.3.4 Actions taken, or actions planned, to meet the costs of studying

Current students were asked to comment on the financial actions they had taken so far, or were planning to take in the future, and these are shown in Table 6.6. The most common action taken so far for current students from both the higher and lower social class groups was to borrow, in particular to take out a Student Loan but also to arrange an overdraft. The other main sources of income were paid employment and family contributions. Paid employment was a more likely option for the lower social class group, in particular, female students, while parents were relied on more by the higher social class group, again more so by female students. However, half of the lower social class group actually had a paid job in term time, which was only slightly higher than those in the higher social class group (44 per cent).

When the data were further disaggregated by individual social class group, it was apparent that the group most likely to be working during term time, or planning to, was social class group IIIm (76 per cent) and least likely was group I-II (62 per cent).

Table 6.6: Financial actions taken/planned by current students, by social class (full-time students only), percentages

	Social Class*			
	I, II, IIIn		IIIm, IV, V	
	Taken	Planned	Taken	Planned
Student loan taken	82	6	81	9
Used personal savings	58	9	54	9
Applied for hardship loan	6	19	8	20
Taken advice on budgeting	10	14	9	15
Arranged an overdraft	63	7	59	10
Taken a term-time job	44	23	50	23
Received a bursary from employer	4	13	4	12
Received bursary not from employer	9	11	10	10
Asked parents/family for money	57	6	45	9
Received Access Funds	5	11	6	13
Total	*760*		*556*	

* based on parental occupation unless student is aged 25+

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Those in social class group IV-V were slightly less likely than the others to have taken out a Student Loan or were planning to (but it was still high, 87 per cent for either).

When these data are also looked at by family income level (as measured by whether or not a student fee contribution had been made) the main differences related to:

- **hardship loans**: one-third of those not paying fee contribution had already applied for a hardship loan, compared with fewer than 15 per cent of those making full or partial fee contributions
- **paid employment**: slightly more of those who were not paying fees had a paid job (71 per cent) than those making partial or full contributions (both 62 per cent)
- **bursaries:** over 60 per cent of those not paying fee contributions had got a bursary of one kind or another (possibly some have included grants here), compared with around 30 per cent of those making partial contributions and very few of those making full fee contributions.

Interestingly, 81 per cent of the low income group (*ie* no fee contributions) had asked parents or families for money or were planning to, only slightly fewer than the 92 per cent of the high income group (*ie* paying full fees).

Further analysis of sub-groups of students shows some small differences within the **lower social class** group:

- men were least likely to have arranged an overdraft or asked parents/family for money, relying instead on money from a paid job or on Student Loans
- black students were less likely to be working and much less likely to have asked their parents for money to help fund their studies
- Asian students were the most likely to have asked family or friends for money but were the least likely to have arranged an overdraft
- white students were more likely to have arranged an overdraft than their black or Asian counterparts (this also applied in the higher social class group)
- older students were generally far less likely than their younger counterparts to have taken on a paid job during term-time or to have asked their families for money.

Just over 40 per cent of students (*nb* these are full time) reported working in a paid job during term time at the time of the survey (although from responses to a previous question, slightly more had worked so far during term time). A higher percentage of students from the lower social class groups reported working at present (47 per cent) than students from the higher social class group (40 per cent). The average weekly number of hours worked was similar for both groups, at 13 to 14 hours.

6.3.5 How are current students coping financially?

Current students were asked to rate how easy they were finding it to manage their finances, compared to their expectations prior to entering HE (see Table 6.7). Over half of all students were finding

Table 6.7: How current students are finding the management of their finances (full-time students only), percentages

	Social Class*	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Much harder than expected	26	31
A little harder than expected	32	34
About the same as expected	34	30
A little easier than expected	6	4
Much easier than expected	2	1
Total (N)	*760*	*556*

* based on parental occupation unless student is aged 25+

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

it harder than they had expected, but this applied to more students from the lower social class group (65 per cent). This may be due to their economic situation, but it may also be a consequence of their type of entry route into HE and how well informed they had been prior to entry about finances (see earlier, Section 6.3.2).

Interviewees were encouraged to talk about their current financial situation in terms of specific expenses and also more generally about how they were managing their finances. The backgrounds of students differed, as did their main sources of financial support. A number of the younger full-time students were at least partially reliant on parents or other family members, but most of the interviewees were relatively self-sufficient, relying on savings, benefits, loans and/or earnings. Individuals receiving incapacity or disability allowances found that their financial situation was affected very little when they started in HE, although they had experienced a number of course-related additional outgoings. Others, such as lone parents, however, had found their situation as regards benefits altered, for example:

> *'My loan is now treated as income so I don't get as much housing benefit as before, I think that's wrong.'* (female lone parent)

Reactions to the actual costs of living as a student were determined largely by prior experience. Those on previously low incomes or benefits found it easier to manage their finances, as they were used to 'just getting by'. Young entrants coming straight from school to HE were often surprised by the costs of living, having little or no previous experience of financial independence.

> *'I didn't realise until I got to university how much it would cost and how much you could spend. You could go off and spend a fortune.'* (young male student)

> *'I didn't know how much the extra outgoings would be and I'm struggling more than I thought as a result. The main cost is transport.'* (female, mature student)

> *'I knew what it was going to be like re money and being a student but the cost of just living in London is much more. There is a great difference between Nottingham and London.'* (female student, entering HE after short delay)

A number of the interviewees had worked at some point during their first year and others found it difficult to find a job which could fit around lectures and/or childcare responsibilities. When asked whether or not working had an impact on their studies, responses varied according to the nature of the job and the number of hours worked:

> *'I have a job in a bar at weekends and evenings, about 20 hours a week. It's not easy to work and study when you have children too, there are lots of pressures.'* (mature male student, London)

'I worked for 20 hours a week for the first few months, but eventually had to give this up to concentrate on studying. If I was better at time management I would have been able to carry on working whilst studying.' (young male student)

'I only work at weekends so it doesn't affect my studies, I just work harder during the week to make up for the time I take off to go to work.' (young female student)

'I work because I need the money. I don't want to work more, as it would mean working during the week. It does affect my studies. When I was not working I had plenty of time to get essays in but now I am rushing. Also, I miss lectures if I work on Thursday night as I don't finish until two am, so I sleep in the morning and miss Friday's work.' (female student, entered HE after four year gap from studying)

'I worry about getting work during term time as working weekends and evenings could make it difficult to keep up with the coursework. But, having to get work and juggle studies is just something that happens.' (female student, with short delay on entering HE)

'I feel my working is having an impact on my studies. It's difficult doing essays and I've missed some lectures. I've not even started the present essay. Previously I was a model student, never missed lectures and did essays on time. I put off working for as long as possible but near the end of the year I thought it would be OK.' (male mature student)

Clearly, there is some concern that studies are being affected because of the need to work. There was also some concern that working and studying would become less manageable in future years, as the workload increased and exams started. Having said this, those interviewed seem to accept work as an inevitable part of student life, however unwelcome it may be. Those with more parental support were generally working less hours or not at all, concentrating on paid work during the holidays only.

6.3.6 Debt and borrowing

As shown above (Section 6.3.4), over 80 per cent of the current students surveyed had taken out a Student Loan and 60 per cent had a bank overdraft by the time of the survey (towards the end of their first year), so most were likely to be in debt of one kind or another. The views of interviewees on borrowing and debt were explored and although there were some slightly different attitudes apparent, most felt confident about being able to pay the amounts back. There was only one interviewee, a part-time student, who had been put off full-time study because of the possibility of debt. The interviewees were also generally content with the level at which repayments on their Student Loans began, feeling that if they were able to earn that kind of income they would be able to make the repayments without too many problems. The general view expressed was that student debts were something to put off worrying about right now:

'By the end of the course I'll owe £10k, but this didn't affect my decision. If I am able to earn enough to start paying off my loans then I will be able to afford to, it's not really a problem.' (male mature student, receiving disability benefit)

'I plan to take out all the loans I can. I think my debts will be around £15k by the end of the course. This does worry me but I'm more worried about getting a job at the end of my studies. I knew that I would end up in debt when I started my course but this had no effect on my decision to come.' (young female student)

'I know I'm going to owe a lot of money at the end, but I'm confident I'm going to get a good job. You only pay back small amounts. Being short of cash worries me ***now*** *but not in the long term.'* (female, mature student)

6.4 Non-entrants

The views of non-entrants on student finance were of particular interest because this is a group that has been relatively under-researched. We asked them in the telephone survey, questions to find out how informed they were about aspects of student finance, and also obtained their views on debt and borrowing.

6.4.1 Informed about costs of HE?

Non-HE entrants were, on the whole, not well informed about the costs of HE study, and turned out to be the least well informed of the three target groups. This is perhaps to be expected because they were not in HE at present nor were they intending to enter HE at the time of the interviews, and so there was no actual need for them to know much in this area. However, when we asked them how informed they felt at the time they were making decisions about whether to go to university, *ie* the time at which they might be expected to have this type of information, the majority reported that they did not feel informed at all (see Table 6.8).

Table 6.8: Extent to which non-HE entrants felt informed about the following aspects of student finance (percentages)

	Well informed	Partly informed	Not informed at all
The difference between grants and loans	15	38	47
The level of fees I would have to pay	11	34	55
The Student Loan Scheme	11	34	55
The availability of other sources of income (*eg* hardship or access funds, bursaries, employer sponsorship)	3	17	80
The likely cost of being a student	7	38	54

Source: IES non-HE entrant survey, 2000

Only 15 per cent of non-entrants felt well informed about the differences between grants and loans, and fewer had information on the level of fees they would have to pay or the Student Loan scheme. Less than one in ten non-HE entrants had information on the likely costs of being a student and fewer were aware of other sources of funding available to potential students. At best, the group of non-HE entrants had only partial information on all the financial aspects of studying at the higher level.

As shown earlier in Chapter 3 (see Section 3.4.1), cost was one of the main reasons given by non-HE entrants for not going to university, mentioned (unprompted) by 28 per cent of non-entrants.

However, non-HE entrants showed a relatively high degree of knowledge regarding the costs they thought were involved in higher level studies. Many non-entrants were aware that students have to pay for:

- living expenses (41 per cent)
- accommodation costs (69 per cent)
- books and other equipment (60 per cent).

Interestingly, almost half of non-HE entrants thought that students had to pay for course fees (46 per cent) which suggests that many are also mis-informed.

When asked to give a figure of how much they thought it cost to go to university each year, responses ranged from hundreds of pounds to many thousands (Table 6.9). While 41 per cent thought that it cost £5,000 or more per year to fund university studies, 16 per cent thought it cost less than £2,000. The average annual cost for a student at university was estimated at almost £3,000. Other wide-ranging estimates such as these have been found in other surveys of young people (see for example Connor *et al*., 1999b), and also were apparent among potential entrants in this study's focus groups.

Table 6.9: Non-entrants' estimates of costs of going to university (£ per annum), (N=112)

Costs from:	to:	% of non-HE entrants
£0	– £999	12
£1,000	– £1,999	4
£2,000	– £2,999	9
£3,000	– £3,999	22
£4,000	– £4,999	14
£5,000	– £5,999	13
£6,000	– £6,999	13
£7,000	+	15

Source: IES non-HE entrant survey, 2000

Table 6.10: Non-HE entrants' attitudes towards debt, percentages giving each response (N=112)

Likelihood of getting into debt to:	Very likely	Quite likely	Unlikely
buy or rent a house or flat	32	51	17
buy a car	30	31	38
help with education	23	52	24
buy clothes/shoes	9	12	79
pay for a holiday	4	21	75

Source: IES Non-entrant survey, 2000

Turning to student income, we asked non-HE entrants to tell us what funding sources were available to students. Unprompted, 70 per cent of non-entrants said that part-time jobs were a source of income; 46 per cent said that grants were available; 33 per cent thought that parents and families could support students; 28 per cent mentioned Student Loans and a further 26 per cent also spoke of other kinds of loans available to students.

When offered a list of options to fund their studies if they had gone to university, non-HE entrants opted primarily for: working in addition to studying (89 per cent); taking out a Student Loan (72 per cent); asking parents or guardians for money (51 per cent); or, borrowing money from the bank (38 per cent).

6.4.2 Debt and borrowing

In order to contextualise attitudes towards debt amongst the non-entrant group and to gauge the 'status' and value that is placed on education *vis-à-vis* other 'goods', we asked non-entrants to tell us if they would consider getting into debt for a range of reasons (see Table 6.10). Approximately one-third of non-HE entrants thought it **very** likely that they would borrow money to buy or rent a house or flat, or to purchase a car compared to just over one-fifth who would very likely consider getting into debt to help with their education. Just over half thought, however, that it was **quite** likely that they would get into debt to help with their education and/or to purchase or rent a home. It would appear that education is almost on a par with housing in terms of whether these young people would be very or quite likely to get into debt in order to 'purchase' them.

Of course, a critical issue to put to non-HE entrants is whether the costs of studying, or the perceived costs of studying, at HE, and the commensurate debt, acted as a barrier to going into higher education. We asked a small sub-sample of non-entrants if the possibility of being in debt affected their decision not to go to

university. Just over half of them confirmed that it had (this is from a reduced sample of only 47 non-entrants).[1]

When then asked to talk more about how this had influenced them, just under half of this group reiterated that the debt would have been too great — going to university was not worth the financial burden afterwards. A further small minority of them said that they did not feel that the financial benefits of having a degree or HND *etc.* at the end of university would outweigh the costs of doing it; some said that they or their family did not believe in debt; and a few felt that they did not have enough information about how the debt would have to be paid back.

Four out of five of these non-entrants stated that they still felt that they had made the right decision not to go to university. When asked what factors might affect their decision and make them reconsider going to university, a number of issues were raised, the main ones being financially related:

- a mixed system of grants and loans would have to be in place
- help and support for new students
- costs would have to be less.

Each of these were given by over four-fifths of these non-HE entrants. Interestingly, two out of five said nothing would make them reconsider.

6.5 Views on the current financial system

Finally, we conclude this chapter by providing some views from our research groups on the current student finance system.

6.5.1 Potential entrants

There was general disapproval from potential students of the current student finance system. The overriding view was that fees should be abolished (though the vast majority were unlikely to have to pay fees and fees had not come up very much in the discussions at all). Almost all of them, though, felt that they should make some contribution to the cost of their HE studies. Although they would much prefer to have a maintenance grant, many agreed that loans were probably fairer all round. Paying fees, however, was definitely not.

Most potential entrants felt that current costs were unacceptable, off-putting and erected barriers for the very groups that should be encouraged into education, such as those with more financial

[1] Unfortunately a smaller number of interviewees were asked this question, because of an error by the interviewers in the question routing.

commitments, single parents and mature students. The older potential entrants were more vocal in their disapproval of the current financial student support system, and felt it was particularly discouraging for mature students:

> *'Many mature Access students have huge potential but lack confidence, and the more hurdles you put in the way the less likely they are to go on to higher education.'* (mature Access student, North West)

Older students often felt that the sacrifices they were making, and the value that they were placing on education, should be recognised in some way by the government. One participant described how he had saved up, and given up his job to enter higher education. He felt that if this demonstration of financial commitment could be 'matched' in some way by government, then it would be an incentive to others.

6.5.2 Current students

The current students interviewed generally accepted the present student support situation, although most were finding it hard to manage at the moment themselves (as shown in Section 6.3.5) and suggested various improvements. Few made comparisons with the old system and the idea of borrowing for your education seemed to be generally accepted. However, it was clear that finances are a worry to a great many students, and took them away from the real focus of being at university, their academic work:

> *'I think that there should be grants and loans. There should be both … The grants should be enough so that you don't have a huge amount of debt when you finish so that you can forget about it more easily.'* (female entrant with short delay before HE)

> *'Improvements could be made … It would be better if loans were available to part-timers for outgoings like books and travel. Many late entrants survive on very little and the financial burdens due to the course may just be too much despite their abilities and motivation. All my friends who are studying full-time are really struggling … but we do understand that there isn't a bottomless pit of money for students.'* (female lone parent, East Midlands)

> *'The system as it is, works, but it isn't fair … there shouldn't be any tuition fees or at least they should be lower. However, I do think that it's fair enough for students to be required to pay back some of the money they live on – it's taxpayers money.'* (female traditional entrant)

6.5.3 Non-HE entrants

Views of non-HE entrants on the current HE funding system were obtained by asking their attitudes to a number of statements about HE and how it is/should be funded (see Table 6.11). The strongest support was for the principle of free education and that education is a 'right' (86 per cent agreed with this statement). Most (72 per cent) also felt that it was impossible for students from poorer

Table 6.11: Views of non-HE entrants on the current HE funding system (percentages, N=112)

	Agree strongly	Agree Slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly
The system of Student Loans is fair – graduates will have better jobs after university and can then repay the Student Loan	17	40	3	27	13
It is right that higher education students should invest in their own education and contribute towards tuition fees	22	46	2	15	15
Parents should contribute towards the costs of higher education for their children	11	46	4	16	22
Education is a 'right' for all people and should be free	68	18	4	9	2
The current system of student funding encourages all sorts of people to go on to higher education	13	34	4	10	37
It is impossible for students from poorer families to pay tuition fees to enter higher education	46	26	2	14	11
The current system encourages people from richer families to go to university	54	25	4	10	7

Source: IES Survey, 2000

families to pay tuition fees to enter HE (72 per cent) and that the current system encourages people from richer families to go to university (79 per cent agreement).

However, it would seem that education as a 'right' which should be 'free' is recognised in some way as an idealistic belief. Perhaps more realistically, a significant number of non-entrants also agree (either strongly or slightly) that:

- students should invest in their own education and contribute towards tuition fees
- the system of loans is fair as graduates will acquire better jobs enabling them to repay their debts, and
- parents should contribute towards the costs of HE for their children.

On balance, it appears that non-entrants think that some contribution from them (or their parents) is to be expected (similar views to the sample of potential students). However, half of all non-HE entrants do not agree that the current system is as inclusive as it could be: it does not encourage all sorts of people to participate in higher education.

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter has provided a great deal of information and views from the three respondent groups on various aspects of student finance, in particular the current student support system. Particular issues identified are the need to improve information pre-entry on costs and financial support and make it more targeted and easier to understand. There seems also a need to improve the level of support available or reduce costs, as there are widely seen to be financial disincentives to going on to HE study, and for certain groups in particular.

7. Career Plans and HE

Key points of this chapter

- Potential entrants tended not to have specific jobs in mind or career goals when entering higher education, though this applied less to those taking vocational entry qualifications.
- There was uncertainty among potential entrants and current students about getting better jobs after completing HE courses, but most viewed HE as improving their employment prospects (in the long run).
- The positive impact of gaining a higher qualification for a future career and increased earnings potential was more influential on students from lower social class groups, but within this group, there was a mixed pattern by gender, ethnicity and age.

7.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the importance of jobs and career plans in the decision to enter HE or not, and as in previous chapters, considers the evidence from each group: potential entrants, current students and non-HE entrants.

As shown in earlier sections (see Chapter 3) students from lower social class groups are more likely on average to put more emphasis on the expected labour market advantages of HE study, in terms of entry to specific jobs, generally better career prospects, greater job satisfaction and improved earnings, than their higher social class counterparts. This supports findings from other studies (see Chapter 2), though few of them have focused on this issue in depth for students from lower social class backgrounds. Also, while there is a growing body of evidence showing that substantial advantages of a university education can be expected in terms of lifetime earnings and the much lower likelihood of being unemployed (see, for example, Greenaway and Haynes, 2000), little work has been done on outcomes which differentiate students according to social class.

In the same way that the expectations of better employment opportunities and earnings may push individuals towards higher education, such factors also work to pull potential students away from HE and towards labour market participation at an earlier stage. The draw of immediate earnings and independence can be stronger for some potential entrants than possible future benefits

on graduation, as shown by the results from the non-HE entrant survey (see Section 3.4.1) and for some currently on HE qualifying courses (see Section 3.2.2). Coupled with the greater financial burden on students and their families to contribute towards the costs of higher education, one might expect growing pressure on potential students to consider work options rather than going on to HE study.

7.1.1 Potential entrants

As discussed earlier (see Section 3.2.1), most of potential entrants in the study felt that a higher qualification would lead to a better job and also increased earnings potential. Only a small minority of them, though, had specific jobs or careers in mind at this stage, with the remainder expecting to decide on a future career path during their period in higher education. A range of possible jobs and careers were mentioned including: teaching, midwifery, tourism, hotel management, IT, media jobs, occupational therapy, and the police. A relatively small number were considering traditional professions, such as law and medicine. Potential entrants currently on vocational courses were, on the whole, much more focused on specific employment outcomes after completing their HE courses, than 'A' level students.

The lack of a specific job or career goal in mind may be because these potential entrants (who were primarily from lower social class backgrounds) had little in the way of role models to help them come to decisions. Unlike potential entrants from higher social class groups, whose parents and wider social acquaintances are more likely to work in professional occupations (*eg* doctors, lawyers, accountants), many of them may not have had much contact with such people. Some of the widening participation schemes within schools and colleges have given potential entrants the opportunity to meet with professional groups and these have been received well by participants.

However, some students, including those on vocational courses, were still unsure about whether they were doing the right thing in going to university at all, partly because they were unable to obtain reliable information about jobs they might get, but also because they recognised that not all graduates went on to get 'good' jobs. This was particularly the case for mature students. Many knew about students who had left university and had been disappointed in their search for a better job:

> *'You've got a degree, then what? … Some of my friends have degrees in chemistry but they are working at the leisure centre… there's a lot to be said for vocational training.'* (a young male, sixth form college student, Wales)

> *'A degree gives you a better chance but you also need good contacts and work experience too.'* (a female student who had decided to do a media studies degree)

'Very annoyed if I do three or four years (at university) and don't get the sort of job I expect to get … because I'm 50/50 whether to do my own thing or to go to university with the hope that university will be better with the job that will come at the end of it.' (male, Access student, FE college, Yorkshire)

The impression given by nearly all of the potential entrants who had decided to go on to higher education was that it was viewed as more a means to an end than an end in itself. Even if students did not have specific careers in mind, many felt that higher education would help them develop and decide on a career, and would give them a definite edge over someone without a higher education qualification. Most potential entrants were realistic in their view of higher education — that it was likely to improve their employment prospects but that it may take a while for the positive effects to be felt.

7.2 Current students

The current full-time students in the survey also viewed the employment and earnings benefits of an HE qualification as being influential factors in their decisions to go to university (see Section 3.3.1). In particular, three-quarters of the current students, when asked about reasons for going to university or college, felt that getting a higher qualification for a specific job or career was very important. This varied little by social class. Similarly, a high proportion of students from both social class groups (62 per cent) rated employment security as a very important reason. More differences by social class group were apparent in the relative importance given to increased earnings potential and obtaining a higher status job, with in both cases more current students from the lower social class group rating them as more important than those from the higher social class groups (Table 7.1). Thus, while

Table 7.1: Influences of job/career issues on the decision of current students to enter HE*: percentage of full-time students (only) rating each as very important, by social class group

	Social Class†	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
To gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	74	75
Greater security in employment	62	62
Increase earning potential	58	65
Get a higher status job	57	63
Total (N)‡	*760*	*556*

* These are selected from a larger number of possible reasons, see full list in Table 3.1

† based on parental occupation unless student is aged 25+

‡ The actual number of responses to each question varied slightly, these total figures reflect the maximum number of respondents to each question.

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Table 7.2: Influences of job/career issues on the decision of current students to enter HE: percentage of full-time students (only) rating each as very important, by gender within social class group

	I-IIIn		IIIm-V	
	Female	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**
To gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	74	75	76	74
Greater security in employment	62	61	61	64
Increase earning potential	54	65	63	70
Get a higher status job	56	60	62	68
Total (N)	*578*	*294*	*413*	*214*

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

all students are strongly influenced by labour market factors, such as greater earnings and higher job status, those from lower social class groups are slightly more influenced by them than their higher social class peers.

When further broken down by gender, ethnicity and age within the social class groups, other interesting results emerge.

- Students from both sexes and both social class groups were similarly influenced to participate in HE as a means to getting a higher qualification for a specific career and greater security of employment (see Table 7.2). However, it appears that women were generally less concerned with money and job status than men, regardless of social class. These findings mirror previous research examining young people's motivations to enter higher education (see for example Connor *et al.*, 1999b).
- By ethnic group within social class, it is hard to see any definite pattern from the data (see Table 7.3). For some of the labour market advantages of HE, the difference by ethnic group within social class was particularly noticeable, for

Table 7.3: Influences of job/career issues on the decision of current students to enter HE: percentage of full-time students (only) rating each as very important, by ethnic group within social class group

	I-IIIn			IIIm-V		
	Black	**Asian**	**White**	**Black**	**Asian**	**White**
To gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	66	83	75	95	83	74
Greater security in employment	76	68	61	68	72	59
Increase earning potential	45	67	58	58	62	67
Get a higher status job	52	63	58	65	69	63
Total (N)	*35*	*42*	*776*	*25*	*85*	*492*

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

example: 95 per cent of black students from the lower social group rated gaining a qualification for a specific career as a very important factor, compared to 66 per cent of black students from the higher social class group. By contrast, more black students in the higher social class group viewed greater security in employment as a very important reason than in the lower social class group. Similarly, Asian students from the higher social class group were slightly more interested in increasing their earnings potential by entering HE than their lower social class counterparts. Results for white students were different again, being more like the pattern for the sample as a whole (see above, Table 7.1).

- Current students in all age groups viewed the most important labour market influence on their decision to go into HE as gaining a higher qualification for a specific job or career (Table 7.4). However, in both social class groups, students in the 21 to 24 age group were more likely than their younger or older counterparts to have been influenced by this factor. In all age groups, earnings and status were more important to students from the lower social class group than from the higher social class group. For the 25+ age group in particular, increasing earnings potential was much more likely to be seen as a vary important factor relating to HE entry in the lower social class group (58 per cent) than the higher one (36 per cent). A noticeable general trend was that the relative importance given to the earnings and job status reasons for HE entry appeared to decrease as age increased, in both social class groups.

From the face-to-face interviews with current students, four basic motivations for taking an HE course were evident. Two of these were specific to employment:

- to improve career prospects and/or earning potential generally
- and to gain access to a specific job or career

whilst the third and fourth related to studying:

Table 7.4: Influences of job/career issues on the decision of current students to enter HE: percentage of full-time students (only) rating each as very important, by age within social class group

	I-IIIn			IIIm-V		
	18-20	**21-24**	**25+**	**18-20**	**21-24**	**25+**
To gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	73	91	78	74	83	78
Greater security in employment	63	58	54	63	64	53
Increase earning potential	61	55	36	67	61	58
Get a higher status job	59	45	49	66	61	53
Total (N)	*642*	*44*	*74*	*441*	*36*	*79*

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

- to prove, either to themselves or others that they were capable of succeeding academically
- to fulfil a desire to learn and/or 'better themselves'.

For most current students interviewed though, the expected long term financial benefits and better career outcomes were the overriding factors in their decisions to enter HE. But, like the potential entrants, the current students we interviewed were generally realistic about their future opportunities. There was a sense that, whilst a university education did not guarantee a job, a degree level qualification was becoming increasingly important to employers and therefore would help their job prospects. Those taking vocational degrees in particular (*eg* law) were extremely focused about their future in career terms, whereas most of those on other courses were more likely to talk about it in more general terms, *eg* the hope that HE would broaden the range of opportunities open to them.

> *'You need to sacrifice a few years in order to get better jobs and better wages. It's not as hard as you think, going through life without qualifications is actually doing it the hard way.'* (mature student)
>
> *'It's a little bit of hardship now for a better future.'* (female, lone parent)
>
> *'I'm hopeful about work but I still feel it's possible that there won't be an opportunity for me at the end of this.'* (young, 'A' level entrant)
>
> *'I've always wanted to be a solicitor so I need to do this.'* (young entrant on HND)
>
> *'The degree will give me a decent wage and some security. It will be helpful in finding the right kind of work to suit my interests and my health.'* (male, mature entrant)

7.3 Non-HE entrants

Turning to the evidence from the non-HE entrants survey, the most common reason for not applying or going to university, even though qualified to do so, was (as shown already in Chapter 3) their desire to get a job and earn some money. Almost 40 per cent of non-HE entrants gave this response in an open-ended question (see Section 3.4.1). Furthermore, when asked their views from a given list of possible reasons for not entering HE, labour market considerations applied strongly to a substantial proportion of the sample (see Figure 3.1). In particular, almost three-quarters had not gone to HE because they wanted to work and undertake training at the same time, and 45 per cent said that this reason applied strongly to them. Similar proportions preferred to start their career and earn some money. Uncertainties about achieving a better outcome by going to university also featured, with 43 per cent feeling strongly that ' there is no guarantee of a better job at the end of university'. The small sample size (just 69 of the non-

HE entrants gave their reasons for not entering HE) meant that these results could not be disaggregated further in a meaningful way.

7.4 Conclusions

The research has confirmed previous studies that students from lower social class groups are more likely to take an instrumental approach to decisions about entering HE, than higher social class groups. Current and potential students in this research believed strongly that higher education would increase their employment and career prospects and bring with it increased earnings — in other words, that their investment in education was going to be worthwhile. This view was held more strongly by some sub-groups of students within the lower social class group. However, this contrasted with the view of the majority of non-HE entrants who saw greater advantages to entering the labour market at an earlier stage.

Nevertheless, all of the respondents groups, to varying extents, expressed uncertainty about actual outcomes of HE, in terms of guaranteeing them a beneficial outcome. It would seem therefore that positive messages about labour market benefits of higher education are not getting through sufficiently to some potential target groups, and that it would be beneficial to address this better in careers information and guidance given to all young people, especially at an early stage of education.

8. Choice of Course and Institution

Key points of this chapter

- Potential entrants were considering a range of subjects and institutions which reflected their personal interest and subjects currently being studied, as well as future career plans.
- HND and part-time study were less attractive options than degrees and full-time study for potential entrants.
- Institutions were chosen by potential entrants mainly for reasons related to cost (mostly decisions about living away from home) and subjects/courses offered.
- Reputation and image of the institution were also important for potential entrants. The desire to fit in and be accepted also steered many away from traditional universities, in particular Oxbridge universities and those some distance away.
- Current (full-time) students had chosen their subject or course mainly out of interest but also for career reasons, and there was little difference by social class in reasons given.
- Further analysis of the *Student Choice* dataset also showed little difference by social class in the main influences on choice of institution. However, within the lower social class group, there were more differences by age.

8.1 Introduction

The focus of the previous chapters has been on deciding about going to study in higher education rather than on what or where students may study when they get there. As shown in Chapter 3, one of the main reasons given by current students for entering HE was their desire to study a subject that really interested them (see Table 3.1). Also, from Chapter 4, it was clear that various people who had encouraged potential students with decisions about entering HE had an influence on their choice of course and preferred institution. Other research on student choice (Connor *et al.*, 1999a) has shown that a wide range of factors influence choice of institution, and the relative importance of these vary for different groups of students.

Choice of HE course is the main issue covered in this chapter. It reports on the choices made by potential students and full-time current students in the survey. Also included is a secondary analysis of the *Student Choice* dataset, which contains data on 20,000 applicants to higher education in 1998 (Connor *et al.*, 1999a). This sought to explore in more depth than in the published report

any social class differences in factors influencing applicants' choice of institution.

8.2 Potential entrants

8.2.1 Choice of subject

Potential entrants in our sample were considering (or had considered) a range of subjects to study at university. They were more likely to be in vocational areas, in particular social and business studies areas and health related subjects, than academic subject areas. For many, this reflected their current courses, in particular, subjects taken on BTEC and GNVQ courses. Subject choices also often related to a specific career/job aim (*eg* hotel management, sports science, physiotherapy), though as highlighted in the previous chapter (Section 7.2) most potential entrants did not have a definite future job or career in mind. Mature students and those on Access courses were more likely to have chosen HE subjects for career related reasons than younger potential entrants and 'A' level students. 'A' level students were also generally less aware of which were the 'best' universities for their chosen subjects than those currently taking vocational qualifications, even although they appeared to have more, and a wider range of, information about HE generally (see Section 5.2).

8.2.2 Choice of qualification

The majority of potential entrants had considered taking only a degree course and clearly many of them had not thought about other options. The few who mentioned HNDs or other higher education qualifications were primarily Access students. HNDs were considered mainly because of their shorter length and therefore lower study costs. Sandwich courses were not mentioned voluntarily in any of the group discussions, but when prompted about them, groups reacted mostly favourably towards them. The two main advantages of sandwich courses were: the work experience gained, which was seen to be valuable on CVs and might improve their chances of gaining suitable employment after graduation; and the opportunity to earn money and reduce debt during their studies.

> *'I was going to do a sandwich course but I couldn't find the right course. You'd be getting a qualification as well as working so you can pay off some of your debts. Better prospects if you have some work experience.'*
> (female, 'A' level student, sixth form college, North West)

8.2.3 Part-time study

Most potential entrants were choosing to study full-time and there was opposition to part-time study mainly for financial reasons. These mainly included:

- being more costly, as full time meant less time within higher education and therefore less time having to fund your study. Student loans were likely to be smaller for part-time courses (*ie* pro-rata to reflect part-time nature), although there was some confusion about what loans part-time students could receive
- it was seen as dragging out education and delaying getting into full-time employment. Many students were impatient to start work, and while recognising their time in higher education would ultimately help their career prospects (see Chapters 3 and 7), they were reluctant to delay this for too long.

> *'I wanted to get it out of the way as soon as possible, part-time takes too long.'* (young, 'A' level, sixth form college student, Wales)

There were also a few instances where a part-time option was not available, *eg:*

> *'The nursing course here at xx university is full-time, there is no part-time at all, so if you only go to do nursing it's got to be full-time.'* (female, Access student, East Midlands)

Younger students felt that part-time study was more suitable for older students but the older students interviewed were equally as disinclined towards part-time study as their younger counterparts. Many of them already had new careers in mind and therefore wanted to start them as soon as possible. Also, some of the older students felt that part-time study would necessitate more part-time employment, and they would prefer to concentrate on studying while at university. They were keen to focus on '*learning for learning's sake*' (see earlier discussion in Chapter 3 about older students being motivated more by the educational virtues of higher education). There seemed also a view that '*if they could do it the normal way (ie full-time), then why not?*'

8.2.4 Sponsored degrees

Most students had not seriously considered employer sponsored study (some had never heard of it), but when mentioned by the interviewer, it was an attractive option because of the additional income. They would not need to worry so much about money while studying, and also have some security of employment during the vacation and after graduation. But many students had been put off seeking out employer sponsorship because they did not want to be tied or committed to one particular employer. This was the main negative view given. Some also did not think their choice of subject was likely to attract employer sponsorship (*eg* medicine, pharmacy). No one mentioned any possible disruption to student life or the social side of higher education.

8.2.5 Institutional choice

For potential students, two main factors influenced choice of institution:

- the courses or subjects they wanted to study, and
- financial aspects, especially costs involved (including living away from home, but also travelling costs), and also the ability to earn while studying through part-time work.

It was sometimes difficult for students to separate these out, *eg* '*I can do x course at y university which is a good course, without moving away from home*'.

The costs involved in living away from home had undoubtedly made many of the potential entrants apply to (or think about applying to) only local higher education institutions. One young student taking 'A' levels commented:

> *'I definitely wanted to go away from home, but I thought about the cost and decided to stay at home.'*

Cost, however, was only one issue in decisions about moving away to university for certain group of students. For example, most potential entrants living in rural areas were keen to move away to university, to escape the isolation and boredom they were currently experiencing and to build a better social life. On the other hand, some students, particularly from ethnic minorities, were worried about discrimination and feeling 'different' and isolated if they moved away from home. Institutions in towns with a diverse ethnic mix were therefore more attractive, *ie* in London or Birmingham. In addition to any financial pressures to stay at or close to home, some potential entrants (primarily Asian girls) had parental pressure encouraging them to stay in the home area. One girl in London commented: '*My mum cried when I said I was going to the open day at Manchester*'. The majority of mature students also expressed a preference for local institutions, having an established life (and often family) in the area, and also because of the lower cost involved.

Availability of part-time work while studying (and therefore an income source) was mentioned in several groups as an influence on choice of HE institution. For example, it was better to be in a larger town or city, not a rural location, where there were likely to be more work opportunities, or preferring to stay near where they currently lived so they could continue in their current type of work (*eg* in a shop, bar, club).

The perceived reputation and image of an institution was also an important factor when choices made by potential entrants were explored in more depth in discussions. Some, especially 'A' level students, categorised all traditional (*ie* pre-1992) universities as

enjoying better overall academic reputations than the newer universities or colleges, but the latter were felt by many potential entrants to have an overall advantage in terms of better facilities. They were also felt by some (interestingly mainly the 'A' level students) to be more suited to GNVQ students because of their bias towards vocational courses. Potential entrants with relatively low expectations about their abilities to get the grades for entry to HE also felt that they would 'fit in' better and be accepted more easily to the new universities. On the whole, though, potential entrants were more inclined to talk about particular institutions than group them into old/traditional and newer ones.

Most of the views expressed about traditional universities were about ones nearby and it was clear that most potential entrants had little detailed knowledge about any traditional universities some distance away. On the whole, there were few very negative views expressed about traditional universities, *ie* few mentions of universities as being places they would not consider, with the exception of Oxford and Cambridge Universities which were seen as being very different from the others.[1]

The reaction to the proposition put to the groups of applying to Oxford or Cambridge was treated with scorn by most of the potential students. Virtually all of them believed, first and foremost, that they (*ie* people like them) would be isolated if they went there into an alien culture. Some also viewed the entry requirements as being too high, while others saw the costs of living there as being prohibitive (*'I'm not rich enough to go there'*). There was scepticism from some that even if they did apply, they would not be treated seriously, or that they would experience positive discrimination (also disliked), for example:

> *'They would look at my application and say you're from like another country – and put it in the bin.'* (Access student, FE college, North West)

> *'I wouldn't be treated fairly because I went to a sixth form college and they wouldn't choose me over someone from a school … they have a few schools that they select from.'* (young, female 'A' level, sixth form college, London)

> *'We would only get in because we would be cherry picked.'* (black, female, FE college student, East Midlands)

These very negative views revealed much about the more deep-seated fears many had about higher education (*ie* academic, posh, snobby, *etc.*) and their lack of confidence and self-esteem – *'I'm not clever enough'* – which had been a strand running through other parts of focus group discussions.

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[1] The discussions took place before the widespread negative publicity in June about Oxford's selection process.

Although attitudes to Oxford and Cambridge were negative, some potential students at FE and sixth form colleges recognised the efforts that college staff had made to encourage them to think more positively about applying there and had provided information about open days and visits (but few had taken them up).

8.3 Current students

Students in the survey were asked an open question about the reasons for choosing their course. Many of the students responded also with reasons for their choice of institution. These responses have been coded, and the most frequently occurring responses are presented in Table 8.1. Students were not limited to one reason and therefore the total percentages may be higher than 100 per cent.

The results are similar to the reasons for entering higher education shown earlier in Chapter 3. The two most frequently cited reasons for choosing their course or institution were 'interest in subject' followed by 'career reasons', and there was little difference between the two social class groups in the support given to them (Table 8.1). A large number of other reasons were given but each by small numbers (ten per cent or fewer) and there was little difference there also by social class, though reputation featured slightly more strongly in choices made by the higher social class group and lower social class students had more limited choices due to qualifications and 'clearing'.

Table 8.1: Reasons* for current students choosing particular courses/institution (full-time only), percentages, by social class group

	Social Class*	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Interest in subject	55	57
Career reasons	35	37
Diversity/flexibility of course	10	11
Limited choice ('clearing' or poor qualifications)	4	6
Most appropriate course	4	5
Reputation of uni/course	7	4
Close to home/local	3	4
Location of uni	3	3
Other†	9	8
Total (N)	*760*	*556*

* based on parental occupation unless student is aged 25+

† other reasons not shown were given by under three per cent of the sample

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

The findings thus would seem to suggest that once the decision to enter HE has been taken, the key factors of influence on choices of courses and institutions are broadly similar regardless of social class.

Current students were also questioned in the interviews about the specific reasons for choosing their course and subject. The main ones were: interest in the course subject, the flexibility of the course, the perceived appropriateness of the qualification (both in terms of outcome and difficulty level), and other course specific benefits. For example:

> *'I failed the first year of a degree and decided that I still wanted to be in higher education, but that I wanted to do something that I had a better chance of succeeding at.'* (female, aged 20, studying for an HND)

> *'When I did my Access course I planned to go onto a BEd, but part-way through the course I realised that I was changing so much as a person that perhaps teaching wasn't what I wanted to do. I chose a more flexible degree which allows me to make up my mind at a later date.'* (female student, over 25 years)

> *'I chose the course out of interest, I enjoyed aspects of the law course on my Access course.'* (female, lone parent)

> *'I wanted to get away from the technical side that I'd been involved in all my life. I chose History as I was interested in it.'* (male, over 25 years)

As for choice of institution, a number of students had chosen only from local universities. In particular, those who were older or who had family commitments had stayed locally:

> *'I applied for two universities in the area, but I chose xxxx university as the staff were so friendly when I visited.'* (male, aged over 25 years)

> *'I picked yyyy university as I wanted to stay at home to be near my boyfriend, I only looked at local universities.'* (female student, aged 21)

> *'Deciding on university was a mixture of the course I wanted to do and trying to stay local.'* (female, lone parent)

Other students had chosen their institution and course from a great many options, and a range of factors had helped in their decision making, for example:

> *'I got information on a range of institutions, but I chose zzz college as it was small and friendly, I'm used to studying in small organisations.'* (young, dyslexic student)

> *'I wanted to stay local really, but I applied further afield where the course had a good reputation.'* (female, 'A' level, 18 year old entrant)

> *'I've got an older sister at xxxx university and my family wanted me to go.'* (male, 'A' level, 18 year old entrant)

'I had a friend who had moved here and liked it, I didn't want to stay local as I had family problems.' (female, aged 20)

8.4 Student Choice survey

An additional piece of work undertaken as part of this study was a secondary analysis, focusing on differences by social class, of the IES survey of applicants in the *Making the Right Choice* study. This explored factors influencing choice of institution and the decision-making process through a large-scale survey of applicants in 1998 (Connor *et al.*, 1999a). Data on 18,352 applicants to full-time courses at UK institutions were analysed by three social variables:

- social class group (based on parental occupation)
- parental education level (father and mother if given) and
- type of school or college last attended.

8.4.1 The sample

A breakdown of the sample by age for these three variables is show in Table 8.2. The main social class break was between social class I-II and III-V, to allow sufficient disaggregation within social class groups by sample size. Points of note are:

- the sample is predominantly young in age
- those in the older age groups (over 21) have a lower social class profile. Interestingly, the oldest age group (over 35 year olds) have a higher social class profile than the other mature

Table 8.2: 'Student Choice' sample, analysed by age

		Under 21	21-24	25-34	35 and over
Social class	I-II	62	37	39	49
	III-V	38	63	62	51
Last type of school attended	Comprehensive	34	7	8	9
	Grammar	10	3	3	7
	Independent	12	3	2	2
	Sixth form college	26	10	6	5
	FE college	17	71	75	67
	Other	1	7	6	10
Parental education	Father with HE experience	29	24	19	11
	Mother with HE experience	14	10	5	
No. of respondents		*15,661*	*643*	*697*	*327*

Source: IES Making the Right Choice, 1999

groups (which may point to them having different aims, *eg* studying more for interest/'recreational' reasons)

- the over-21 year olds come predominantly from FE colleges, while over half of younger entrants come from comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges
- these age differences by social class and entry routes are very similar to those seen in the population of applicants to higher education (UCAS data, see Chapter 2)
- younger applicants are more likely to have a parent with HE experience, though differences between under 21 and 21 to 24 year olds were not large.

8.4.2 Factors influencing choice of institution

When choosing a university or college, applicants consider a number of factors, but top of the list is the search for the right course, and this was evident regardless of social class (Table 8.3). Applicants from different social classes gave 'offered the subjects I wanted' an equally high rating of importance, well ahead of other factors. Next in perceived importance came a cluster of factors, the order of which differed slightly by social class group, but the average importance ratings were very similar.

When the data are disaggregated further, young applicants (under-21 year olds) from the lower social class group (III-V) were slightly more concerned about factors relating to term-time employment, work placement, distance from home and safety and security, while those from the higher social class group were more interested in social life and accommodation for first years. Mature applicants (21 years and over) from lower social groups, were slightly more influenced by their subject/course interests, teaching reputation of the institution, its attitudes to ethnic minorities, disabled and mature students, and distance from home. Some of the highest average scores for factors came from the independent school group, in particular those relating to social life, image and reputation, and accommodation for first years (Table 8.3).

8.5 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that a range of factors influence choice of course and institutions but, on the whole, differences are not great by social class of students. The principal difference is that issues relating to cost of study are a more important influence on students from the lower social class group, in particular older students. A range of views was expressed about particular institutions, which reflected their 'populist', though not entirely accurate, image, and for many potential entrants their knowledge about institutions was restricted mainly to those in their localities. It would seem that many HE institutions have a considerable

Table 8.3: The most important factors when choosing a university or college for applicants in social class groups I-II and III-V, also shown are the highest scoring sub-groups, where identifiable

Factors	I-II	III-V	Highest scoring social group(s)	Highest score for this group(s)
Offered the subjects I wanted	6.6	6.6	Mature, I-II social class group	6.7
Social life at university/college	5.5	5.2	Young, I-II; and independent school students	5.6
Overall image of university/college	5.6	5.4	Independent school students	5.7
Teaching reputation	5.5	5.4	Independent school students; and mature III-V	5.6
Entry requirements	5.5	5.5	Similar for all sub-groups	5.5
Its location	5.4	5.3	Similar for all sub-groups	5.4
Academic support facilities	5.3	5.4	Mature students; and FE college entrants	5.5
Graduate employment prospects	5.4	5.5	Young, III-V social class group	5.6
Social life nearby	5.3	5.0	Young I-II social class group; and from independent school	5.4
Distance from home	4.6	5.0	Mature, III-V social class group	5.2
Research reputation	4.5	4.6	Similar for all sub-groups	4.6
Accommodation for first years	5.1	4.6	Independent school students	5.3
Competition for a place	4.4	4.5	Similar for all sub-groups	4.5
Sports facilities	4.3	4.2	Independent school students	4.7
Safety and security	4.3	4.5	Young III-V social class group	4.6
Work placement option	3.9	4.2	FE college entrants	4.3
Cost of living	4.4	4.4	Young III-Vm social class group; and grammar school and sixth form college students	4.6

note: Other factors not shown had low average scores, of 4.0 or less; average score calculated from individual scores given by respondents to each factor, where 1 = not at all important, and 7 = extremely important. The higher the average score, the higher its influence.

Source: IES Survey, 1998/1999

amount of work yet to do, to project a more positive image to potential students from lower social class groups, if they are going to succeed in attracting significantly more of them to apply in the future.

9. Part-Time Students

Key points of this chapter

- Part-time current students differed in many ways from full-time students in respect of their motivations for entering higher education. This may be linked to their different personal profiles and domestic circumstances.
- Future employment and career related reasons were more significant factors motivating entry to HE for part-time than full-time students from the lower social class group.
- Apart from expressing more concern, as might be expected, about coping with both work and study, part-time students also gave more importance to the benefits expected from their investment in education.
- Part-time students were more likely to be concerned about both academic and financial issues. They also, generally, had less parental support but more family commitments (mainly because they were older).
- The main source of income for part-time students (other than their job for those who were working) was their personal savings, and this applied to both higher and lower social class groups.
- Although finding it harder to manage financially than expected, their financial difficulties did not, on the whole, seem as great as reported by the full-time students in the survey.
- Part-time students appeared to be less well informed pre-entry about financial aspects of higher education study than were full-time students.

9.1 Introduction

Most of the discussion so far has focused on full-time study in higher education. This is because there was much less coverage in this research of part-time HE study. As shown in the previous chapter, very few potential entrants were considering, or had been attracted to, part-time study (see Section 8.2.3). It should be noted, however, that these potential students were all on HE qualifying courses at that time, and so the study did not include potential part-time HE students who decide to apply for part-time degree courses while in employment. There was little obtained from the non-HE entrants' survey about part-time study either. This then leaves the survey of current students as the main source of information on part-time HE study in the research.

The sample of current students included a small number (196) on part-time courses. The results from this group have been drawn

together here for purposes of clarity and any differences highlighted between them and the results for full-time students.

9.2 The part-time student sample

The 196 part-time students differ from the full-time students in many important respects, in particular in their chosen courses, age profile and educational backgrounds. The main ones are highlighted below, and further sample details are shown in the Appendix.

- Part-time students in the sample were less likely to be taking degrees and more likely to be taking other undergraduate courses: 41 per cent of the part-time students were on HND and other higher diploma courses, compared with just 20 per cent of full-time students.
- Part-time students were more concentrated in the social and business studies areas (37 per cent) and education (13 per cent) than the full-time sample, who were studying a broader range of subjects.
- Half of the part-time students expected their course to take five years or longer to complete.
- The part-time students tended to be considerably older: almost 90 per cent were 21 years or older, and half of them were over 32 years. By contrast, the vast majority, over 80 per cent, of full-time students were under 21 years.
- Part-time students were more likely to have last attended an FE college (55 per cent) than full-time students (33 per cent), which relates partly to these age differences.
- Most part-time students (86 per cent) reported a gap of at least a year between leaving school or college and starting their current course, while less than half of the full-time sample had this gap. For a quarter of the part-time sample this gap had been over ten years.
- Part-time students were more likely to have been in a job at the time of applying to university or college (two-thirds) and only 15 per cent had not been working (by comparison, only ten per cent of full-time students had been in a job prior to HE entry).
- 70 per cent of part-time students had vocational or other entry qualifications to higher education, and only a quarter had 'A' levels. This contrasts with 67 per cent of full-time students with 'A' level entry qualifications.

However, in respect of social class, the profile of the part-time sample was similar to that for full-time students, with 42 per cent of part-time students in the lower social class group (IIIm-V) and 58 per cent in the higher group (I-IIIn). There was an even greater

bias towards women in the part-time sample (three-quarters of the part-time sample were female, compared to two-thirds of the full-time sample), which is likely to be partly related to subject differences (see above). Ethnic minorities were less well represented in the part-time sample (only ten per cent were from ethnic minorities, compared with 15 per cent in the full-time sample).

Because of the small size of the part-time sample, much of the analysis is based on the totals in different social class groups and there has been much less scope to undertake any further breakdowns within social class groups.

The chapter first discusses the significance for the part-time students of the various issues shown to have an impact on HE entry, highlighted in Chapter 2 and then discussed in subsequent chapters, and then focuses on one particular aspect, that relating to financial considerations.

9.3 Key issues affecting decisions on HE entry

9.3.1 Main reasons for going on to HE

When asked about their main reasons for going to university or college, the part-time students were as likely to have gone for job or career related reasons as interest in studying a particular subject. This is seen in the ratings of importance (mean scores) given by them to various factors (Table 9.1; see Section 3.3 for

Table 9.1: Main reasons for going to university or college: mean scores of full-time and part-time students, relating to the importance of each factor, analysed by social class group

	Full-time				Part-time			
Reasons	**I & II**	**IIIn**	**IIIm**	**IV & V**	**I & II**	**IIIn**	**IIIm**	**IV & V**
To study a subject that really interests me	2.8	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.7	2.6	2.8	2.6
Gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.6	2.5	2.7	2.8
To gain greater security in employment	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.1	2.4	2.1
To increase earning potential	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.1	2.4	2.4
To get a higher status job	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.2	2.5	2.6
To keep options open	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.2
Always assumed would go to university	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.4
Enjoy studying	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.2	2.1
Wanted the social life of a student	1.9	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.4
To get away from home	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.0	1.2	1.0	1.0
Number of students (N)	*554*	*198*	*346*	*200*	*86*	*25*	*44*	*23*

Source: IES Survey, 2000

Table 9.2: The most influential factor in making decision to come to university or college: percentage of full- time and part-time students who chose these factors, analysed by social class (*nb* four top factors only shown)

	Full-time		Part-time	
	I-IIIn	IIIm-V	I-IIIn	IIIm-V
Gain a higher qualification for specific job/career	32	30	37	52
To study a subject that really interests me	38	36	26	18
To increase earning potential	9	11	9	4
To gain greater security in employment	6	7	6	8
Number of students (N)	*752*	*546*	*111*	*67*

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

further details of rating scale). Compared with full-time students, the part-time students generally scored lower (*ie* giving them lesser importance) on the factors shown, in particular those relating to social life, keeping options open, and the assumption that they would always go to university, but differences were small overall. When asked about the single most influential factor in their decision to go to university or college, more part-time students chose 'the gaining of a higher qualification for a specific job or career'. This is in contrast to the full-time students where more put their subject interest as the most influential factor (Table 9.2).

By social class, some small differences were evident among part-time students, in particular the greater importance given to getting a higher qualification for a specific job or career by the lower social class group (52 per cent rating this as the most important factor, see Table 9.2).

9.3.2 Issues affecting decisions on HE entry

Views on issues affecting their decision to go to university or college were obtained by giving the students a series of statements and asking them how they had affected their decision to enter HE (see Section 3.3.2). Those which applied more strongly to part-time than full-time students (all social class groups) were concerns about working and studying at the same time and the length of their HE course, while those applying less to part-time students were concerns with accessing Student Loans and getting into debt (Table 9.3). Part-time students also appeared to have been less affected by concerns about moving to a new area and that the application procedure had been off-putting. Fewer part-time students had encouragement from parents and more of them had felt uncertain about getting enough qualifications.

Table 9.3: Key differences between full-time and part-time students: mean scores, showing the extent to which these issues affected decisions to come into HE

	Full-time	Part-time
Access to Student Loans made it possible to come to university/college	3.2	1.2
I was worried about juggling studying juggling with a job	2.3	3.8
My parents encouraged me to go to university/college	3.6	2.3
I was worried about the length of the course	2.2	3.4
I was afraid of getting into debt	3.0	1.9
I was concerned about moving to a new area	2.0	1.2
I wasn't sure I would get enough qualifications to get a place	3.0	2.2
I was not concerned about the cost of studying because my parents would foot the bill	2.0	1.2
I found the application procedure very off-putting	2.5	1.8
I felt sure the financial benefits (after completing) would outweigh the cost of doing a course	3.4	2.8

note: mean scores range from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (applies strongly)

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

Many of these differences between part-time and full-time students can be explained by differences in age and backgrounds as well as personal circumstances, highlighted in Section 9.2. It is worth noting, though, that part-time students were as likely as full-time students to say that 'wanting to continue their studies' had applied to them when making decisions about HE (each with scores of 3.7) but this statement is not included in Table 9.3 as it highlights only those statements where differences between part-time and full-time students were most apparent.

Looking at the results for part-time students only, the statements which were seen as affecting their decisions about HE entry the most (*ie* where average scores were all above 3.0) were:

- *I was worried about juggling studying with a job* (3.8)
- *the investment in my education is a necessary one* (3.7)
- *I wanted to continue in full-time study* (3.4)
- *I knew I would have to work my way through university* (3.4)
- *I was worried about the length of the course* (3.4) *and*
- *I got all the information I needed to help me decide to go to university* (3.1).

In all but the last two on the above list, the average scores for part-time students from the lower social class group (IIIm-V) were greater than for the higher social class group (I-IIIn) (for the last two statements the scores were almost the same), thus indicating that these issues are more likely to have an effect on HE decisions by lower social class part-time students than are others.

Table 9.4: Concerns about going to university or college: percentage of part-time students who identified each of the following as being of most relevance when thinking about going to university or college, by social class (*nb* multi-response, asked to identify the three most relevant from the list)

	Social class group I-IIIn	Social class group IIIm-V
Coping with academic pressure workload	84	89
Financing myself for the duration of the course	48	60
Domestic commitment (*eg* childcare)	36	38
Achieving necessary entry qualifications	33	33
Finding sufficient information on courses	20	36
Dealing with the red tape	21	13
Finding the advance payments (fees, halls)	15	20
Making new friends	15	7
Number of students (N)	*89*	*55*

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

9.3.3 Concerns

The students were asked also about concerns they had when thinking about going to university or college. It was clear here that concerns about the academic side of things were uppermost in the minds of many part-time students at that time as well as financial issues. Of all the possible concerns listed, 'coping with academic pressure or workload' was identified as being one of the three most relevant issues to over 80 per cent of the part-time student sample. Next came 'financing myself for the duration of the course', of most relevance to over half of the part-time students. Others on the given list were seen as having been highly relevant to only a minority of part-time students, one-third or less (Table 9.4). When the data were analysed by social class, small variations were apparent, the most significant difference being for concerns about finance.

9.3.4 Second thoughts?

Once the offer of a place had been accepted, the majority of the part-time students had no second thoughts or doubts about going to university or college there. However, around one-third admitted to having had 'a little bit of doubt' but very few had 'serious doubts' (around five per cent). The main option being considered by those who had some doubts was taking or remaining in a job. A desire to improve career prospects (*eg* gain qualifications for a particular job, get a better job) were the main factors which helped those with doubts to make up their mind to go.

Finally, when asked if anything could be improved which would have made it easier for them to make the decision to come to

university or college, the main issues raised were financial ones, for example: more financial help, being less of a financial burden, not having to fund myself, free education (by around one-fifth of the part-time sample). A small number (one in ten) suggested more or better information about courses. The main response though was 'nothing' (by around one-third).

This pattern of response to these questions was similar to those made by the full-time student sample.

9.4 Student finance

9.4.1 Financial arrangements

Because of the differences between the two samples (highlighted above in Section 9.2), it was not surprising that the financial arrangements of part-time students differed from those of the full-time students. Part-time students were more likely to have family or domestic commitments and were less reliant on parents for financial support.

Almost all of the part-time students (80 per cent) had an income before starting their HE course, and this proportion did not vary greatly by social class group. The income was mostly earnings and only a small minority were in receipt of 'benefits' (14 per cent) or other income (five per cent). Social class group IIIm were more likely to have received 'benefits' than other groups, with one-fifth

Table 9.5: Actions taken/planned by part-time students: percentages in each social class group taking/planning to take each of the following financial actions (*nb* more than one actions could be taken so percentages add to more than 100)

	Social Class group			
	I, II, III		IIIm, IV, V	
	Taken	Planned	Taken	Planned
Student loan taken	4	5	4	18
Dipped into personal savings	29	5	36	7
Applied for hardship loan	3	5	4	9
Taken advice on budgeting	5	2	4	4
Arranged an overdraft	19	1	18	6
Taken a term-time job	15	1	12	7
Received a bursary from employer	12	2	9	3
Received bursary not from employer	3	2	7	3
Asked parents/family for money	13	1	13	4
Received Access Funds	4	2	4	4
Total	*111*		*67*	

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

doing so. Almost all part-time students (80 per cent) were not paying a contribution to tuition fees.

The main source of income for part-time students at the time of the survey was personal savings, with around one-third relying on them (Table 9.5). Other sources included overdrafts and obtaining a term-time job. Few differences were apparent in the pattern of income by social class group. However, as a very high proportion (77 per cent) said that they had a paid job during term-time, it is likely that this was a more important source of income than implied by the results in Table 9.5. There is a possibility that some working was under-reported (from the question wording they may have not counted continuing in a prior job under 'taking a term-time job'). On average, the part-time students worked around 32 hours per week, substantially higher than the average reported by full-time students (13 to 14 hours per week, see Section 6.3.5).

9.4.2 How well were they coping financially?

Part-time students were either finding it about the same (56 per cent) or a little harder (24 per cent) than expected to manage their finances now they were at university or college. This contrasts with full-time students who were more likely to be finding it harder than expected (61 per cent). There was little difference apparent by social class group among part-time students.

One of the part-time students interviewed commented that the financial situation was much simpler if you are studying part-time: '*… the only real help on offer is the course fee payment which has been useful. The major problem is the cost of travel and childcare. I can't socialise with the rest of my course as I don't have the time or money. This might make it easier as I don't get any support at home.*' (mature female student)

It may be that, like this example, other part-time students are unable to participate fully in aspects of student social life because of domestic commitments, and so may be less affected by some of the costs of student social life.

9.4.3 How well informed were they about finance?

The full-time students varied in the extent to which they had prior knowledge about aspects of student finance, and this was identified by them as one of the main information gaps prior to entry (see Section 6.3.2). Part-time students seem even less well informed about most aspects of student finance than their full-time counterparts when making the decision to apply to university/college (Table 9.6). Since Student Loans had not been introduced to part-time students at that time, it is not surprising that such a high percentage of part-time students did not feel informed about them.

Table 9.6: Extent to which students felt informed about aspects of students finance: percentage of full-time and part-time students who did not feel informed at all about the following:

	Full-time	Part-time
Level of fees	11	12
Other advance payments	22	68
Student loan scheme	12	70
Other sources of income	53	71
Likely cost of being a student	26	53

Source: IES Student Survey, 2000

9.5 Conclusions

The evidence from this student survey, though limited by the small sample, has shed light on aspects of decision-making by part-time students. These differ from those of full-time students in many respects, and relate to their different personal circumstances, backgrounds and financial arrangements. Some small differences were apparent by social class among part-time students in factors encouraging HE entry, and also in relation to their concerns about going on to HE. However, much larger differences exist in these respects between full-time and part-time students, especially in relation to academic and financial pressures. The data did not permit us to explore the barriers to part-time study in the same level of depth, for example by sub-groups of students, as has been done for full-time study (see previous chapters) but this would be an area for further investigation.

10. Conclusions

This report has presented the findings of research which explored factors that encourage and discourage participation in higher education by students from lower social class backgrounds. These students continue to be under-represented in higher education, despite the major expansion in the number of HE students that has taken place over the last decade and the various initiatives that have been introduced to widen participation.

The reasons for this under-representation are recognised as being complex and relate to a number of inequalities in society on a wider scale, and also the way HE has developed over time, and in the image the HE sector (or parts of it at least) continues to project. Previous research has shown that a range of factors can influence decisions to go on to higher education study, including:

- educational factors, and particularly those which relate to achieving entry qualifications and earlier school experiences
- family background and support (which link also to the educational factors)
- financial factors, both those associated with the costs of studying, and also the perceived benefits of HE in terms of employment, careers and improved earnings in the future, and
- institutional factors, in particular the access and recruitment policies and practices of individual universities and colleges.

However, most of the existing research evidence does not focus on the specific issues and concerns of people from lower social class backgrounds, nor on particular sub-groups within this group. In addition, little research to date has assessed the impact of recent changes in student support arrangements on decisions about HE entry. The research reported here aimed to cover this aspect by focusing on people who had taken recent decisions about applying for a place in higher education.

Issues on participation in higher education were explored with three groups of respondents: **potential students** on HE qualifying routes; **current students**, *ie* recent entrants to HE study; and **non-HE entrants**, young people qualified to enter HE but who have decided not to do so. The main points presented in the report are shown at the beginning of each chapter. In this final chapter we

present our main conclusions and draw out some policy implications.

10.1 Factors of influence

It is clear from the research evidence presented here that going on to higher education was not an easy decision for many students or potential students from lower social class groups to take, and several factors needed to be weighed up. In the main, these factors centred on:

- the **positive benefits of gaining a higher qualification**, in terms of improved job and career prospects, and also improved earnings in the future, and a wish for 'self-betterment' or personal development, versus
- the **negative impact of the costs involved** in studying and student life, and foregoing earnings and financial independence in the short term, in other words — '*can I afford to go*?'

These factors varied in their significance depending on individual circumstances, in particular by age, family commitments, ethnic background, and entry qualification/type of previous educational institution attended, route.

The sample of current students from the lower social class group tended to have put slightly more emphasis on longer-term financial and employment factors when they were deciding about going on to HE than students from the higher social class group. This was also the case with some other groups of students, in particular, those from some ethnic minority groups, those on vocational entry routes and older (21 to 24 year old) students.

Students in the sample from lower social class groups seemed to have taken into account a wider range of factors as part of the decision-making process about HE entry, than students from the higher social class group. This is arguably due to the latter group assuming (perhaps without question) from an early age that they would go into higher education. Students from the higher social class group also seemed to have more confidence in their career decisions and their ability to succeed in higher education without having to consider as much the range of positive and negative factors.

The small sample of non-entrants to HE decided against higher level participation for a number of reasons. These were usually employment-related and included:

- the desire to start employment with a specific career goal in mind which did not require a degree
- the desire to start employment, earn money and be independent.

However, many non-entrants could also not see the value in entering higher education in terms of improved employment opportunities. Further 'deterrents' were the perceived cost involved and the likely debt that might accrue.

10.2 Influencers

The research shows the important role that various actors on the pre-HE scene can play in decisions about HE participation, such as what and where to study as well as whether to go at all or not. These 'influencers' usually had a positive impact on potential students in this study in encouraging them to apply to HE. In particular, the research highlighted **FE college tutors** as being highly pro-active in their encouragement of potential students, though this varied considerably between colleges. **Friends and family** with current or past HE experience were also positive influencers. By contrast, there was generally less encouragement from **teachers** and **careers advisers** in the earlier stages of education, with some examples of students being dissuaded from considering higher education, though it was likely that the focus of teachers' influence pre-16 was more on encouraging them to continue in education than helping them with HE aims.

10.3 Student finance

Student finance is one of the main concerns when deciding about HE entry, though not the sole or principal one. For many current students, especially part-time students, concerns about coping with academic pressures/workload were seen to be of more relevance. Amongst the group of non-entrants to HE, the cost of being a student in HE was given as one of the main reasons for not going, but it was generally seen as less important as a reason for not going than wanting to get a job and be earning at an earlier stage. Amongst potential students, the cost of higher education was unlikely to be, by itself, the major prohibitive factor in most students' decisions , but specific groups of potential students, for example mature students with family responsibilities and single parents, saw it as being more of a barrier.

It was evident from the research results that the majority of potential and current students identify **being poor as being part and parcel of student life**. Those taking part in this research were not overly concerned about it nor were they deterred in their HE plans by likely student debts and repayments. However, students from the lower social class group wee likely to have more concenrs about financial issues prior to coming to university, including concerns about debt, fees and other costs related to studying, than students from the higher social class group.

The majority of current students in the survey were finding it more **difficult to manage their finances** now they are at

university or college than they had expected, and again this applied more to students from the lower social class group than from the higher group. The need to **live at, or close to home, to reduce costs** was a major factor in decisions about where to study, in particular for students from the lower social class group. The majority of current students surveyed were relying on a combination of **borrowing, working and parental help** to provide the income they needed to support their time in HE.

There was widespread dissatisfaction from the research respondents about the current system of student funding. While it was generally accepted that HE could not be entirely free, the current level of **support available to students was seen to be too low.** The costs incurred during HE were viewed by the research respondents as likely to be a particular disincentive to students from low income groups.

Another issue of concern identified in the research is the **timing of financial decisions.** Whilst awareness about fee contributions and Student Loans was generally high among the research respondents, there was an issue about the late stage at which decisions are often taken by financial authorities, especially for older applicants with quite complex financial commitments. There was also little understanding among potential students of the timetable for processing financial support applications, which had caused some difficulties for them.

10.4 Information

The research has identified **a need for better and more targeted information about higher education**, tailored more to the individual circumstances of students, which can vary widely. There was a call for:

- more detailed, specific and accessible information on HE courses
- more information on the outcomes from higher education, especially on employment opportunities and financial benefits
- more information on the financial aspects and costs of studying in higher education, sources of funding *etc.*, and
- better communication and presentation of information.

Mature entrants seemed in particular need of detailed and more individualised information to assist them in the decision making process. The research also showed that the non-HE entrant group were the least well informed about higher education at the time they took the decision not to enter HE and their views on likely costs involved were based on a relatively poor level knowledge about aspects of student finance. Much information had been gleaned by potential students on an informal and *ad hoc* basis, and

there was a degree of misinformation (*eg* about fee contributions and cost of living in certain areas).

10.5 Further research

This study has highlighted the main factors which encourage and discourage participation in higher education and so has given some indication of the ways in which greater participation by students from lower social class groups, who are qualified or about to qualify to enter higher education, can be achieved. However, many potential entrants are discouraged from considering higher education at a much earlier stage in their education, which may be due to many of the factors discussed in this study and others besides. It is important to understand the role that various influences, such as financial circumstances and lack of information, have on potential HE entrants who are still in compulsory schooling. It is also important to consider further the role of influencers on this group of students. We recommend that further research is carried out on these issues in the earlier educational stages to help bring about higher levels of participation in HE.

We also recommend that more in-depth research is undertaken into the motivations and barriers affecting HE participation amongst certain student groups, including students from specific ethnic minority groups, students in different geographical locations, and those preferring part-time study.

10.6 Policy implications

Our research has highlighted a number of implications for policy which need to be addressed. These are:

- The benefits of higher education need to be more widely communicated.

In particular, those outcomes associated with improved employability and financial returns from higher education need to be given more prominence, though it needs to be recognised that this is an area of variability across the student body, especially in the first years after graduation. There is an increasing body of research evidence which could be utilised to show what kind of returns on higher education can be expected, and also growing evidence from schools' and colleges' own records of individuals and their progress through higher education (*ie* footsteps to follow). This is particularly relevant for young people before they leave compulsory education, and also subsequently in post-16 education at schools and sixth form and FE colleges.

- HE 'champions' or mentors should be introduced and more widely used.

Potential students, and especially those from the lower social class group who are less likely to come from families (or local communities) with HE experiences, would benefit from having 'HE champions' of one kind or another. These may be mentors from within their school or college, or former students now in higher education, or even recent graduates. Current HE students from a wide range of backgrounds and institutions and courses could be encouraged to visit schools and colleges in low participation neighbourhoods to talk to potential students, discuss their hopes and fears, and explore how they can be addressed. Some partnership programmes of this type have been started and ways should be explored of expanding these initiatives.

The role of tutors, teachers and careers staff in students' decision making about higher education should be explored further with particular emphasis on the interaction with pupils and students from lower social class groups. Examples of good practice should be identified and disseminated widely.

- More relevant and timely information on student finance is needed, as well as greater financial assistance made more accessible to those students in greatest need.

There is a clear indication that affording the cost of going to higher education, though not in itself the single major prohibitive factor for the majority of potential students likely to be qualified to go, does have a negative impact on decisions by some. The research has shown that information on the current funding arrangements and how they apply to individual students is not available in an appropriate format. Up-to-date information from government sources and individual institutions on the actual costs of living for students and potential income sources (*eg* more targeted discretionary support available through Access funds and university's own funds), should be made more available, and earlier in the decision-making process, in a user-friendly way. Ways should also be explored for making the menu of financial support now provided by government (sometimes involving different departments and agencies) to students in different situations, simpler and clearer. A greater emphasis on verbal communication of such information and advice on higher education at a personal level, clearly identified as a need in the research, could be be linked better with other government initiatives, including the development of the 'Connexions' strategy.

Appendix: Methodology

A.1 Research design

The research was not intended to be a comprehensive survey of barriers and motivations to enter higher education (HE) by people from lower social class groups. To do so, would have been far beyond the resources available. After all, students enter HE via a variety of routes and their decisions about HE participation are taken at various times, both in pre-and post-compulsory education and subsequently. Instead, within the budget and timescale proposed, it was decided to focus the research on three target groups of respondents:

- **A: potential entrants** — potential 2000/01 entrants into HE from lower social class backgrounds
- **B: current students** — 1999/00 entrants from lower social class backgrounds, and a 'control' group of entrants from middle and higher social class backgrounds, and
- **C: non-HE entrants** — people from lower social class backgrounds who have decided not to enter HE, but have qualifications which make them eligible to enter HE.

The research design took account, in particular, of the social diversity within HE study, especially by type of institution, and the HE participation and entry patterns of non-traditional students. It included a quantitative dimension, in order that results could be generalisable to the population, and also a qualitative dimension so that specific issues could be explored in depth. The design was governed also by the relatively short timetable for the study, just nine to ten months, with the fieldwork to be fitted around the academic year timetable.

The geographical coverage of the study was limited to England and Wales. Different methods were used to identify and contact members of the target groups. These are discussed further below.

A.2 A: Potential entrants

A.2.1 Target group

Target group A, potential 2000/01 entrants, were people currently in post-16 education, on courses which lead to qualifications

giving them entry to higher education. Whilst this does not cover the whole population of potential entrants, it covers a large proportion of it, in particular most of those likely to be going on to full-time rather than part-time study. The main entrant group we excluded by this approach were people who were already qualified but in jobs prior to entry (who are more likely to opt for part-time study in HE). They are a much more difficult group to contact, and it was felt to be beyond the resources available to include them also. Nor did we include the small group of entrants who are economically inactive (*eg* unemployed or at home with family responsibilities) immediately prior to going into HE.

It is recognised that there would have been value in talking to young people who were still in compulsory education about their perceptions of HE, as HE is considered, if not decided upon, by many before the age of 16 years, and progression to post-16 education is often done with HE study in mind. Limited resources prohibited this from happening but this may be a valuable route for further research.

An advantage in focusing on this target group was that it included people at the point of making their decisions about whether or not to participate in HE, or had done so very recently. It thus provided an up-to-date perspective on issues affecting HE entry decisions, in particular the impact of recent changes to student support arrangements (post -1997).

A.2.2 Method

A qualitative approach was taken involving focus group discussions. This method was chosen partly because of the limited timescale and budget, and also because it allowed us to explore in some depth the experiences and attitudes of particular groups of interest, including those on different HE qualifying routes.

FE and sixth form colleges and schools were approached for their help in identifying groups of students, and also in making arrangements for the focus groups on our behalf. The key contacts at the colleges and schools were also interviewed for contextual information, in particular the progression of their students into HE and specific links they had with HE institutions.

A.2.3 Sample selection

A sample of colleges and schools were identified in five geographical regions. The selected regions were: London, East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside, North West and South Wales. In each region, a cluster comprising two FE colleges, one school and one sixth form college were selected (four in each, 20 in all). The main selection criteria for the colleges and schools were that they were in areas of relatively high social deprivation and low participation in HE. A number of other criteria were also

taken into consideration, including local labour market profile of the catchment area, ethnic mix, rural/city location and whether or not it was a 'feeder' institution for one of the participating HEIs in the Group B student survey (see Section A3.3).

The English FE and sixth form colleges all had social deprivation indicators which were 'high' or 'very high'. These indicators are published by the FEFC. They also had high WP indices (*ie* the percentage of 1997/98 student intakes for which colleges received specific Widening Participation funding from the FEFC). Five of them had WP percentages above 70 per cent. Two of the FE colleges were 'Beacon' colleges (*ie* colleges considered to be examples of good practice in widening participation). The English schools were selected in the same localities as some of the colleges. They were schools with sixth forms which did not have a tradition of sending young people to college or university, though some were beginning to develop this and some had a widening access 'compact' agreement with a local HE institution. The final selection was agreed after consulting with staff in universities and colleges taking part in the Group B part of the work (student survey).

A slightly different selection approach had to be used for the sample in the South Wales region, as the information we needed came from a different source, the Funding Council for Higher Education in Wales. We used its information on the percentage of HE students in wards with relatively high social deprivation levels and low numbers of HE students. A number of schools and colleges were then identified in these wards, and these were discussed further with staff in the universities and colleges participating in the Group B part of the work before the final selection of four institutions was made.

A.2.4 The focus groups

Twenty-nine focus groups, comprising a total of 223 students were held between March and May 2000 with an average of five or six focus groups per region. They comprised the following:

- Eight Access course groups and eleven groups in their second year of GNVQ, 'A' level, BTEC courses at **FE colleges**. One Access group was wholly part-time and others included some part-time students.
- four **sixth form** college groups of mixed Year 12 and 13 students, taking GNVQs and/or 'A' levels
- four Year 12 and two Year 13 **school** groups, taking 'A' levels mainly but also some GNVQs.

It was not possible to select group participants according to their social class (as individual student data are not available from colleges or schools on a consistent basis).

A.2.5 The sample

The main sample breakdown of the 223 research respondents by course was as follows:

- **Type of course/qualification**: almost half (46 per cent) were taking courses leading to 'A' levels. A similar proportion (44 per cent) were taking courses leading to a range of vocational qualifications: BTEC (13 per cent), GNVQ (27 per cent), and other diplomas (four per cent). One in five (19 per cent) were on Access/foundation qualification courses. (*NB* these percentages add to more than 100 because a small number of students were taking combinations of these qualifications: *eg* 'A' levels plus a GNVQ).
- **Subject**: a range of subjects was represented. The Access students were, in the main, studying business studies, IT and social studies. The other students were spread across a wider range of subjects including, sciences (14 per cent), maths and IT (13 per cent), social studies (20 per cent), media studies (13 per cent), languages (13 per cent), and humanities and arts (seven per cent).
- **Type of institution**: two-thirds of the students were at FE colleges, one in six were at sixth form colleges and one in five at schools.

In terms of personal characteristics, the sample comprised the following characteristics:

- two-thirds were young students (*ie* 18 years or under). A further 14 per cent were aged 19 or 20 years, and 20 per cent were aged 21 years or over. However, most of the Access students (88 per cent) were aged 21 year or over, and over half were aged 25 years or over. In other words, most of the older students (21+) in the sample were on Access courses.
- one-third were from ethnic minority backgrounds — 12 per cent came from black ethnic groups, seven per cent Indian, nine per cent Pakistani/Bangladeshi, and five per cent from other ethnic minority groups. Access students were less likely to represent ethnic minorities (26 per cent) than the other groups of students
- 61 per cent of the sample were female, 39 per cent male; Access students were more likely to be female (69 per cent), and
- geographically, they were spread across the five targeted regions, with approximately one-third located in the north of England, one-fifth in the east Midlands, 16 per cent in London, and 19 per cent in South Wales.

Three-quarters of the participants had already made up their mind to go on to higher education, including 43 per cent who had applied to enter in Autumn 2000/01; 18 per cent were undecided and nine per cent had decided against going on to HE study. The

majority of the undecided group were in Year 12 at school. Almost all of the Access group had applied to HE for 2000/01 entry.

A.3 B: Current students

A.3.1 The target group

Target group B were 1999/00 entrants to HE, *ie* students who had recently entered HE study at a range of types of institution. Unlike the potential students (group A), they covered both higher and lower social class groups. By focusing on recent entrants (*ie* first year students) we were able to ask people about decisions which were still fresh in their memories, *ie* within the previous year or two. Also, this was an important entry group to target because they had experienced the introduction of student fee contributions and the new Student Loan scheme (in 1998, just prior to their entry to HE).

A.3.2 Method

A large postal survey plus follow-up interviews with individuals drawn from particular sub-sets of students in lower social class groups was used. This was felt to be the most cost-effective method in the timescale available, as it would provide some quantitative generalisable data and also enable issues to be explored in more depth with students.

Students to be surveyed were identified from institutional records (see below). For reasons of confidentiality, samples had to be selected and survey questionnaires sent out on our behalf by the institutions involved. This was because the Data Protection Act does not permit names and addresses of students held on institutional databases to be supplied to third parties without their permission. We are grateful for the co-operation given by staff at the institutions in the study. The printing of the questionnaires and mailing of them to institutions for onward distribution to students, and the subsequent coding of questionnaires, data entry and analysis, were all undertaken by NOP Research Group.

A3.3 Sample selection

A two stage design was used: a sample of institutions was selected according to type and geographical location, and then a sample of students was selected at each of the institutions according to the students' social class.

Fourteen institutions were approached in the five regions (see Section A.2.3 above). This included one pre-1992 university and one post-1992 university or college of HE in each region (ten altogether), plus four FE colleges, two in London and two in the North West each with substantial numbers of HE students.

HE institutions were identified which had higher than average participation by lower social class students (*ie* 25 per cent or more of their young entrants were from lower social class groups (IIIm, IV and V) based on parental occupation, according to 1997/98 published Performance Indicators, derived from HESA data). We also took into consideration other selection criteria including: ethnic minority representation, environment (city/campus style), subject provision and their access history. The aim was to produce a broad, balanced sample overall with sufficient representation of students in the lower social class group (a small minority in many institutions, see Section 2.2).

FE institutions were selected in each region by reference to data on numbers of HE students in FE institutions (provided by FEFC). We tried also to aim for a broad subject coverage.

A total target sample of approximately 4,000 students was felt to be sufficient to meet the study's objectives. Each participating HEI was asked to select a sample of around 300 to 350 first-year students on a random basis but split 60:40 in favour of lower social class groups. As with the institutional selection, this bias was introduced to ensure that students from lower social groups were well represented in the achieved sample. The indicator of social class on the student record was to be the main selection criterion, but this proved to be more difficult to use than envisaged, as not all institutions were able to do this. Instead, a mixed approach had to be used for pragmatic reasons. In some cases, a proxy for low income was used instead of the social class indicator. This was the 'payment of no fee contribution'. In others, a simple random sample had to be drawn with no quotas being set according to social class.

At the FE colleges, all first year HE students (mainly HNDs) were selected by the colleges as there was no available information relating to the social class of individuals that could be used and sampling on any other basis was not considered appropriate.

In total, a sample of 4,070 was selected, 770 in FE institutions and 3,300 in HE institutions. Just under half of the latter (43 per cent) were in 'old' *ie* pre-1992 universities (Table A.1).

Table A.1: Survey mailing and response by type of institution

	Pre-1992 universities (5)	Post-1992 universities (3)	HE colleges (2)	FE colleges (4)	Total sample
Total sent out	1,450	1,150	700	770	4,070
Total received which could be identified to institution attended	395	353	218	137	1,103

note: A further 574 questionnaires, not shown above in the totals were received with no indicator of the type of institution attended, bringing the total received to 1,677 (41 per cent overall response)

Source: IES/NOP

A.3.4 Survey response

As outlined above, questionnaires were distributed by the individual institutions. They used internal mail systems mainly, but where this was likely to be problematic, external mail was used. Two reminders were sent. The questionnaires were returned directly by the students to NOP Research Group in a prepaid envelope. Publicity about the survey at each institution was given via the student unions and posters to help boost the response. A suggestion was made to use student e-mail systems to improve response but no institution was able to so this for us.

An overall response rate of 41 per cent was achieved, 1,677 completed questionnaires. It varied significantly by institution, from as low as six per cent to over 48 per cent. However, it was not possible to identify the institution attended for around 35 per cent of responses, therefore response rates for each institution cannot be calculated precisely. However, from the numbers available, it is clear that different methods of distribution, at institution level, were largely responsible for these fluctuations. The approaches taken by institutions, and especially the effectiveness of their distribution systems, were largely beyond the control of the research team.

Distribution appears to have been most successful via the following methods:

- a well used internal mail system — mainly found in pre-1992 institutions
- external mail direct to students home addresses. This was not always successful, however, and was greatly dependent on the accuracy of the institutions' records
- distribution during tutorials where the completed questionnaires were collected immediately after completion. The response rate was considerably less where students were asked to take the questionnaires home.

Despite a lower than expected response rate overall (the target was 50 per cent), the sample comprised a wide cross-section of entrants, including, as planned, substantial numbers in the lower social class group, and in the sub-groups identified at the outset, and questions were completed well on the whole. The achieved sample comprised 37 per cent (625 students) from the lower social class group (IIIm, IV and V) and 57 per cent (954) from higher one (I, II and IIIn), with six per cent (98) unknown (because information on parental/own occupation was not given). As intended, the percentage in the lower social class group is higher than the population for full time students. In other respects, the sample was better represented by women and by younger students than the student entrant population (Table A2). The younger age profile is due mainly to there being a lower proportion of part-time students (88 per cent) in the sample

Table A.2 Characteristics of the student survey sample (N=1,677) and the student entrant population in 1999/00 (N=346,500) (percentages)

	Sample	Population
Sex		
Male	34	48
Female	66	52
Ethnic Group**		
Black	4	4
Asian	9	14
White	84	79
Other/mixed origin	3	4
With a disability**	4	4
Age group		
Under 21	85	72
21 +	15	6
Social class *		
I,II,IIIn	57	63
IIIm, IV,V	37	24
Unknown	6	13

* For social class breakdown, percentages relate to full-time students only not total entrants as comparable population data available only for full-time students (via UCAS).

** based on known ethnic origin and known disability

Source: IESSurvey 2000; HESA;UCAS

compared with the student population (nb see Chapter 9 for separate discussion of part-time students).

A.3.5 Sample breakdown

The two social class groups in the sample were broadly similar in many respects but there were some important differences. Data on their personal characteristics are shown in Table A.3:

- by **gender**, the sample was biased towards female students (two-thirds of the sample), but the gender balance was the same for the two social class groups. The higher percentage of female than male respondents is likely to be mainly due to the sample design, which relates to the gender profiles of the particular institutions in the sample.
- by **ethnicity**, the higher social class group was less represented by ethnic minorities, in particular Asian students, than the lower social class group (IIIm-V). For black students, representation was similar between the two social class groups.

Table A.3: Personal characteristics : percentage of sample in each social class group (*nb* total on which percentages are based varied slightly for each characteristic from the N shown)

	Social class group	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Sex		
Male	34	34
Female	66	66
Ethnic Group		
Black	4	4
Asian	5	14
White	89	79
Other/mixed origin	2	4
With a disability	4	3
With dependants	11	16
Age group		
Under 21	75	72
21 to 24	6	6
25+	19	22
Total (N) for whole sample	*954*	*625*

Source: IES Survey, 2000

- by **age**, older mature students (*ie* aged 25 years plus) were slightly more likely to be in the lower than the higher social class group (IIIm-V). Also, more students from the lower social class had dependants (16 per cent), which is mainly due to the older age profile.

Sample information for other socio-economic measures is shown in Table A.4, again separately for the two main social class groups:

- **financial circumstances**: just over half of the students from the lower social groups (IIIm-V) were required to make no contribution to fees, and 29 per cent were making a partial contribution. Fewer from the higher social class group made no fee contribution (39 per cent)
- **parental education**: considerably fewer students from IIIm-V had parents educated to degree level (11 per cent versus 39 per cent)
- **school attended**: very few students in the whole sample had attended a private or grammar school (just four per cent), and even fewer in the lower social class group (two per cent). Both groups were more likely to have attended a comprehensive school or sixth form college than any other type of institution. A slightly higher proportion of the lower than the higher

Table A.4: Socio-economic variables: percentage of total sample in each social class group (*nb* total on which percentages are based varied slightly for each characteristic from the N shown)

	Social class group	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Fee contribution		
None paid	39	55
Partial	28	29
Paid in full	33	16
Parental education level		
Degree	39	11
Professional	28	23
Neither	33	66
Type of school last attended		
Comp/Grammar/Sixth form	57	54
Private/Independent	6	2
FE/Tertiary College	32	40
Other	5	5
Total (N)	*954*	*625*

Source: IES Survey, 2000

social class group (IIIm-V) had attended a FE/Tertiary College.

As highlighted in Chapter 9, part-time students in the sample (196) differed from full-time students in many respects. In particular, the part-time students were much older on average (90 per cent were over 21 years), and they were more likely to have entered via FE colleges and with Access or vocational qualifications. Their financial arrangements and circumstances were also different. For these reasons, the sample information that follows is only for the full-time students in the sample, as sample details for part-time students are presented in Section 9.2 of the report.

Full-time students

By educational background, the full-time students from each social class group in the sample were similarly qualified on entry, though the lower social class group tended to have slightly higher 'A' level points than the higher social class group (Table A.5). Also, slightly more of the lower social class group had vocational qualifications and had attended a FE college prior to entry. There was little difference in the application method of students, with similar proportions (eight and seven per cent) who had applied direct to the institution rather than through UCAS.

Table A.5: Educational background: percentage of full-time student sample in each social class group (*nb* total on which percentages are based varied slightly for each educational variable from the N shown)

	Social class group	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Entry qualification		
'A' levels (16 points or lower)	33	35
'A' levels (more than 16 points)	38	27
Vocational/other	24	29
Access/foundation	4	9
HE entry route		
Studying full-time (at school/6th form)	60	53
Studying full-time (at college)	19	26
Studying part-time	3	3
Working (full or part-time)	11	11
Gap year	3	3
Unemployed	1	2
Caring for a dependent	1	1
Application method		
UCAS	80	79
'Clearing'	11	11
Direct to institution	7	8
Other	1	2
Total (N)	*840*	*546*

Source: IES Survey, 2000

A wide range of subjects was being studied. These are shown, classified by UCAS subject coding, in Table A.6 below. On the whole, the subject distributions were similar for the two social class groups: a slightly higher percentage of the lower social class group (IIIm-V) were taking social, economic political studies and humanities than the higher social class group (I-IIIn), who in turn were slightly more likely to be taking subjects allied to medicine.

A.3.6 Follow-up interviews

Follow-up interviews were undertaken with 20 respondents on full-time courses at five HE institutions. The interview sample was constructed to reflect the views of a range of age groups, and also include students from specific groups, *eg* lone parents, students with disabilities, and ethnic minority students. Interviews were conducted at the place of study for most students, but those

Table A.6: Subject studied: percentage of full-time students in each social class group

	Social class group	
	I, II, IIIn	**IIIm, IV, V**
Medicine/Dentistry/ Veterinary science	4	3
Biological sciences	4	5
Agriculture and related subjects	—	1
Mathematical sciences	1	1
Engineering and technology	6	5
Social, economic or political studies	7	11
Business and administration studies	13	11
Languages	5	4
Creative arts and design	9	7
Subjects allied to medicine	11	6
Physical sciences	3	5
Computer sciences	6	8
Architecture, building and planning	1	—
Law	6	8
Humanities	11	15
Education	3	2
Mass communication and documentation	2	1
Other	8	7

Source: IES Survey, 2000

unable to attend a face-to-face interview were subsequently contacted by telephone.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain more detailed information than could be obtained on a survey questionnaire, about decisions taken by individuals to enter higher education and their experiences to date.

Among the interviewees were:

- seven students with disabilities
- three lone parents
- three from ethnic minority backgrounds
- two ex-asylum seekers
- 13 mature students (over 21 years).

All of the sample, except for the disabled, were either making no or a partial contribution to their fees.

A.4 C: Non-HE entrants

A.4.1 Target group

The third target respondent group in the study were people from lower social class backgrounds who have decided not to enter HE, but have qualifications which make them eligible to enter HE. They have 'rejected' HE for some other activity. In this study we have called them the non-HE entrants. This group was the most difficult to identify and contact.

A.4.2 Method

The approach we decided to use was to identify them from the 1998 Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) No. 8, Sweep No. 2, and re-contact them by telephone survey. These were people who had been surveyed twice before, the last time in Spring 1998 when they were aged 18/19 years. The work on contacting and interviewing respondents was undertaken by NOP Research Group.

The advantages of this method over any other (*eg* screening via population surveys, use of college or school records) was that we could restrict the sample to those people who had entry qualifications in 1998 (around the time when changes were introduced to student finance arrangements), and therefore capture information about people who had made decisions not to enter HE after that time. The sample achieved could also be assessed for its representativeness.

Although this was felt to be the best method to use, and did achieve interviews with 112 non-HE entrants, there were several problems with it. Firstly, we had hoped to be given a sample from the YCS cohort group of around 1,000 to 1,500 people who met our criteria. In the event, the sample was much smaller (mainly because the qualification criteria for inclusion were made tighter). Secondly, we had hoped to make use of the considerable amount of information known about the respondents' backgrounds from previous surveys, but this was not disclosed, for data protection reasons. However, we did get a breakdown of the sample as a whole, which was useful for looking at representativeness. And thirdly, a much smaller number had telephone numbers or could be traced by the telephone than was hoped, and so the response rate was lower.

A.4.3 Sample selection

A subset of respondents in the YCS cohort No. 8, Sweep No. 2 was selected. This was done on the basis of the following information from the Sweep 2 survey. Respondents were to be from:

- social class IIIm, IV and V
- not in higher education or intending to enter HE in 1998, and
- holding qualifications to NVQ level 3 or equivalent.

This produced a sample of 694 people who were sent a postcard asking for their permission to be contacted. A total of 127 refused at this stage, leaving a sample of 567. These were then contacted by telephone at their last known location by NOP Research Group, and 176 telephone interviews was achieved.

A.4.4 The sample

The 176 in the achieved sample were all aged 20/21 years. Just over one-third of them had entered higher education (59) or were studying at further education colleges (5) since the 1998 survey; the remainder (112) had not, and were mostly in employment.

Comparisons with the population (YCS cohort) from which they were drawn showed that the sample we approached was broadly representative in terms of gender, ethnicity, qualifications, regional location and previous current activity.

Non-entrants

The personal characteristics of the 112 non-HE entrants were as follows:

- 19 per cent were in the higher social class group (13 per cent in groups I and II, six per cent in group IIIn), and therefore outside our original focus of social class groups III-V. The remainder of the sample were mainly in group IIIm (59 per cent) rather than groups IV and V (22 per cent).

This change between the two surveys is likely to reflect a real upward change in parental occupation, but also there may have been some previous coding errors. (*NB*: the analysis in the report is based on their social group at the time of sample selection, aged 18/19 years).

- Only two non-HE entrants were from ethnic minority groups, which is considerably lower than in the student survey, and one had a disability.

By education background, the non-HE entrant sample was a relatively homogeneous group, having mostly gone to comprehensive schools (86 per cent) and then continued in education beyond 16 (88 per cent).

- They had mostly achieved well at GCSEs: 86 per cent had five or more GCSEs at grades A-C, and 15 per cent had ten or more GCSEs at these grades.

- 18 per cent had stayed on at school at age 16, 28 per cent had gone to sixth form college and the largest group, 42 per cent, had attended a FE college.
- 60 per cent had gone on to obtain 'A' levels (60 per cent), and the remainder had vocational qualifications: including GNVQs (17 per cent) and BTEC (15 per cent).
- A small proportion (11 per cent, or just 12 respondents) had gone into work-based training (*eg* Youth Training or a Modern Apprenticeship) when they left school at 16. Only one young person had gone on to get a job without training at the age of 16.

By home background, very few non-entrants had parents with degree qualifications (four per cent have mothers qualified to this level and five per cent have fathers with degrees). A greater number, though, had parents with professional qualifications, such as a teaching or nursing qualifications (20 per cent of non-entrants have mothers with these types of qualifications compared to 15 per cent of fathers). However, interestingly, almost half of all non-entrants (46 per cent) have brothers or sisters who have attended or who are attending university or college at the present time.

The vast majority (89 per cent) were currently in employment, across a broad range of occupations and sectors, including sales, computing, retail, finance and the civil service. More than one-third of the employed were in clerical positions, such as accounts clerks and cashiers, whilst a small number were in skilled manual occupations and the forces. The few not in employment were either in work-based training such as a Modern Apprenticeship (five per cent), unemployed (just one person), or at home looking after children (five per cent).

Seven per cent of the non-entrants in our sample had dependent children.

Young delayers

This was the name given to the group of people who were interviewed because they had not entered HE in 1998 (as recorded in the YCS) or had not given any intention to do so. They had in effect delayed their entry past the traditional age of 18 years. However, two out of three (64 per cent) had actually entered in 1998 and 31 per cent in 1999, and so most had not delayed for very long but had simply changed their minds in the period during 1998. None of those interviewed had 'dropped out' of higher education by this time.

The primary reason for delaying entry to HE was to take a gap year out to work (67 per cent), mostly to earn and save money for university. Some had also delayed because they had not achieved the necessary grades to get into university and were having to re-

sit their exams before they could secure a place. A small number (one-fifth) wanted to travel for a year before going to university.

The characteristics of this 'delayer' group turned out to be not very different from their non-entrant counterparts. The main disparities were that they had a higher social class profile and were better, and more traditionally, qualified:

- Delayers were slightly more likely to come from social class groups I and II (current classification) than actual non-entrants (21 per cent compared to 13 per cent), and slightly less likely to come from social groups IV and V (16 per cent of delayers compared to 22 per cent of non-entrants).
- Delayers were slightly more likely to have gone to grammar school (six per cent) or the independent, private and public sector (13 per cent), which fits with their slightly higher social class profile.
- Delayers were also likely to have more qualifications: 92 per cent had five or more GCSEs at Grades A-C; 33 per cent of them had ten or more at these levels. Significantly, more delayers (42 per cent) went on to sixth form college than FE college (36 per cent). Similar numbers stayed on at school across the two groups.
- Delayers were more likely to leave college with 'A' levels than non-entrants (84 per cent of all delayers).
- Interestingly, the delayers were more likely to have mothers with higher-level qualifications than their non-entrant counterparts (13 per cent of mothers are reported to have degrees whilst 28 per cent have some other sort of professional qualification), while differences by father's qualification were much smaller. Delayers were also slightly more likely to have siblings who have attended or are attending university or college (52 per cent) than non-HE entrants.

A.5 Further information

For further details of the research, and copies of questionnaires used, please contact Helen Connor at the Institute for Employment Studies.

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