How Do Young People Make Choices at 14 and 16?

Sarah Blenkinsop, Tamaris McCrone
Pauline Wade and Marian Morris
National Foundation for Educational Research

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

How Do Young People Make Choices at 14 and 16?

Sarah Blenkinsop, Tamaris McCrone Pauline Wade and Marian Morris

National Foundation for Educational Research

Contents

Executive summary

In order to support young people's decision-making at a time of greater and more complex choices, the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned NFER to explore how young people make the educational choices required of them at ages 14 and 16. The study adds a further dimension to previous research on decision-making by exploring the ways in which, for each individual, structural contexts and individual attributes interact both before and during the decision-making process. Two waves of in-depth interviews were held with 165 young people across 14 schools between February 2005 and February 2006. This summary presents selected key findings and messages for policy and practice.

Key Findings

- Schools can make a difference to how young people make decisions. The research shows a link between schools which appeared to be effective in relation to curriculum management, student support, staff expectations and school leadership, and the young people who were making the most rational, thought-through decisions, and who remained happy with their choices six months later.

- When students felt supported in decision-making by the school they were more influenced by school factors (such as individual talks with teachers and the careers education and guidance provision) and less reliant on external factors such as friends and family.

- Young people valued having sufficient time to make choices, the opportunity to have individual conversations with teachers to discuss their options, and detailed, clear and impartial information on courses and pathways so that they could make informed choices. Evidence shows that teachers in 11-18 schools sometimes lacked impartiality by encouraging students to stay at their school sixth forms.

- Young people made decisions in different ways. The quality of their decisions seemed to vary according to context (including the curriculum offer and support mechanisms in place to support them in decision-making), the ways in which information and advice was being mediated to them, and their own individual approach to and skills of decision-making.

- Young people brought different mindsets to the decision-making process, and made decisions differently across and within schools. Their decisions had also often fluctuated over time, even amongst students who had at first appeared very decided about their choices. These issues suggest that any single approach to support will not work for all young people and that all individuals need varying levels and type of support at different stages in their school careers.

- Few young people, particularly at age 14, made the link between careers education and guidance activities and the actual personal decisions they were making, suggesting the need for schools to make such links more explicit.

- There was evidence that external provision of vocational courses was being reduced, with a preference for courses being taught by staff in schools. This highlights the need for such staff to be appropriately trained so that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver vocational courses.

- Vocational qualifications were not always recognised in the same way as 'academic' qualifications for entry to A Level courses, leading to restricted student choice in some areas. This is important given that vocational courses are compulsory in some schools.

Background

The 2005 *Education and Skills* White Paper outlines curriculum and qualifications reforms, at the heart of which is the entitlement for all young people to choose personalised pathways which suit them and which form a strong basis for their progression. Given the impact on the extent of choice at 14-19, the White Paper emphasises the need to '*help young people assess themselves and improve their decision-making abilities… We cannot have young people making such narrow choices at the age of 14 that they cannot later change tack... We cannot have young people ignorant of what is available or unable to make choices that are good for them... good quality and impartial information, advice and guidance are crucial*'.

The *14-19 Implementation Plan*, which outlines how the reforms set out in the White Paper will be implemented, emphasises the need for '*diverse and autonomous institutions to work together in collaboration to achieve more than a single school, college or training provider can do on its own*'. The expectation that young people will be making choices at the level of the course rather than the level of the institution has implications for young people's decision-making. However, the *Implementation Plan* highlights that '*young people will receive better advice and support, so that they are well informed to make choices*'.

In order to support young people's decision-making at a time of greater and more complex choices, DfES commissioned NFER to investigate *how* young people make decisions at 14 and 16. Particular focus was given to the impact young people's attitudes, thought processes and the context in which they make choices has on the outcome of their decision-making. The study, which concentrated primarily on young people's own stories in 14 schools across England, explored the *interaction* between structural contexts and individual attributes during the decision-making process.

This summary discusses a range of issues concerning student choice and decision-making that have implications for policy-makers (at all levels, including Government, local authorities, local 14-19 partnerships and schools), practitioners and those who offer support to young people when they are making choices. In particular, the study has raised issues related to the structure and nature of the curriculum on offer (both pre- and post-16) and of the provision of support for transition amongst young people.

Key messages for policy

During the course of the study, issues concerning curriculum provision emerged which provide lessons for policy-makers. Key messages that stand out concern student choice, provision of vocational and language courses, and issues related to the impact of teaching collaborations on the provision of learning opportunities.

Student choice

The curriculum reforms outlined in the 14-19 *Education and Skills* White Paper enhance choice for young people and encourage personalised pathways. In addition, the Further Education White Paper (*Raising skills, Improving Chances*) discusses an approach to 14-19 funding which is reactive to student choice. It states, '*funding methods and allocations must not drive young people's choices...on the contrary, their choices...must drive funding allocations so that they can pursue the programme best meeting their needs*'.

While the policy emphasis is on increasing choice, how do young people feel about the options available to them? Young people's experiences of the pre-16 curriculum varied, in terms of the type of subjects available and open to them in schools.

Curriculum structures varied (ranging from open choice to option blocks to which students were guided or allocated) but, whichever structure was available, young people felt they had a restricted choice. Even where an open choice was available, the number of subject choices was usually limited to two or three.

Most schools in the study were attempting to broaden the curriculum by offering an increasing range of courses to their students, and making fewer courses compulsory (such as modern foreign languages, as discussed below). Only two of the 14 schools did not offer vocational courses. However, some schools offering such opportunities had faced challenges, particularly in relation to timetabling (not all courses were available to all young people). There were also concerns that vocational courses might even restrict choice post-16.

Vocational courses

The majority of schools in the study included vocational courses as an optional element of the curriculum at key stage 4. In most cases they were available to all students, and in two schools they were compulsory. The majority of schools emphasised the need to broaden the curriculum for *all* students. However, some guided the '*less academic*' down vocational pathways, or saw such courses as a way of '*re-engaging disaffected students*', and therefore did not make vocational options available to all students.

Vocational courses were provided off-site by a number of schools (six were involved in the Increased Flexibilities Programme, and six were in 14-19 Pathfinder areas). Although off-site provision was welcomed by students, there were some difficulties faced by schools, in relation to timetabling, costs and the quality of provision. As a result, some schools had reduced their external provision and were opting for school staff to deliver vocational courses internally.

Furthermore, there appeared to be an issue with the parity of esteem given to vocational courses compared with traditional academic courses. It seemed that not all post-16 providers understood and/or accepted the QCA equivalences for vocational qualifications. They were not including the point score equivalences for vocational courses in the same way that GCSEs were included. As a result, vocational qualifications were not always recognised in the same way as 'academic' courses for entry to A Level courses. This suggests that studying vocational courses may, in some areas, restrict student choice, which is an important point to note given that vocational courses are compulsory in some schools.

An issue was also raised about parents' lack of knowledge of vocational equivalences. Some were said to have been putting pressure on their children to study traditional academic courses. In all, this raises the issue as to what work needs to be done to raise awareness of, and to encourage acceptance of, the QCA equivalences for these vocational qualifications amongst both post-16 providers and the wider public.

Languages

In order to broaden curriculum opportunities for young people and make the curriculum more flexible, from September 2004 Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) became an entitlement that schools must offer at key stage 4 but was not a compulsory part of the curriculum. Indeed, just two of the schools in this study retained its compulsory status. This was welcomed by students, who generally saw languages as less enjoyable or relevant to their future lives compared to other key subjects such as English, mathematics and science. In one school, for instance, only eight per cent of Year 10 students were studying a language course.

However, following Ministerial guidance in January 2006, there is an expectation that all schools should be working towards a benchmark of between 50 and 90 per cent of students studying a language course at key stage 4. Students' attitudes towards languages may be a barrier faced by schools trying to meet this target.

It is acknowledged that the National Languages Strategy seeks to address these issues, by encouraging teaching of languages at an earlier age to help build young people's enthusiasm and aptitude. The Strategy highlights the work being done at key stage 2, which will include e-learning.

Collaboration

The *14-19 Implementation Plan* emphasises the need for schools, colleges and training providers to work in collaboration to provide young people with their full entitlement of opportunities. Teaching collaborations between pre-16 and post-16 institutions included in the study did not appear to be extensive. In some cases collaborations had been reduced, with vocational provision being brought back into school because of issues to do with timetabling, cost and the quality of provision. This was true even in some 14-19 Pathfinder areas, where models of good practice might be expected to be found.

Examples of good partnership practice exist, with institutions operating common curriculum frameworks and timetables. However, the research evidence raises a question as to the extent to which schools are aware of such models of good practice, particularly in relation to ways that 14-19 partnerships have overcome any barriers to collaboration.

Even where effective partnerships exist, it was evident that not all young people were willing or able to travel distances to study courses not available at their own school. In all, these issues have implications for meeting the requirements of the 14-19 agenda.

Key messages for Providers of Support

The research identified a range of issues to do with how young people were being supported in making their decisions, the importance of which is emphasised in the *14-19 Implementation* Plan. Current policy accentuates the need for young people to be well-prepared for the choices ahead, by being given good quality and impartial information, advice and guidance. This raises a question as to the extent to which schools have the capacity to support young people's decision-making.

Decision-making skills

It was common for young people's choices to fluctuate over time, even amongst those who had at first seemed very certain about their future goals. Some did not cope very well when faced with unanticipated changes to their

plans, and many had not thought of alternatives. This suggests that young people did not always have the necessary skills in the process of decision-making.

Although the exact level of young people's skills was not specifically 'measured' in the study, there appeared to be a link between schools in which young people felt supported through careers education and guidance and young people who seemed to have the most 'positive' mindsets and the skills of positive decision-making. At a time of increased choice for young people, there is a need to ensure that they not only have information but the skills to make the best use of that information. Emphasis should perhaps be on the process of decision-making rather than on the decision itself.

There are likely implications for practitioners in terms of filling this skills gap, and there may be a need for local authorities to assess how they can assist schools to enhance their strategies. It is acknowledged that the QCA is in the process of developing a framework of Personal Learning and Thinking Skills, which is expected to include reference to decision-making skills.

There is a need to consider the range of types of support for young people, and the timing of such support, recognising young people's different mindsets, approaches to making choices, and decision-making skills. For example, some young people will be require more one-to one support and even guidance down particular pathways in helping them make a decision, whereas for others they will have good levels of skills and confidence so that group-based sessions and a range of literature (paper or ICT based) will be more appropriate.

The quality of careers education and guidance

Careers education and guidance was deemed to be most effective when it was comprehensive and impartial, delivered by trained staff within the school with the support of external professionals (e.g. Connexions) and has a dedicated part of the curriculum.

There appeared to be an association between schools in which such effective careers education and guidance provision was in place and the schools in which young people seemed to be thinking through their choices more rationally, weighing up all of the information they received. They were also less reliant on family and friends, and more influenced by internal school factors (such as teachers or careers education and guidance).

In contrast, young people in schools which did not appear to have such support strategies and careers education and guidance provision in place were more likely to have varied approaches to decision-making, to change their minds about their decisions over time, and to have mindsets that reflected a 'comfort-seeking' or 'defeatist' approach to decision-making.

It is acknowledged that quality standards are currently being developed for DfES that will encourage the driving up of standards in provision of careers information, advice and guidance beyond the minimum. But, to what extent do schools have the capacity to raise standards? Some schools included in the research did not appear to have the capacity at present, with schools reducing their input, using non-specialist staff and allocating only a limited amount of time to careers education and guidance.

Even in schools with the most effective practice, young people did not always make the links between careers education and guidance and the decisions they were making about the future. This suggests the need for schools to make the links more explicit.

In relation to the information they required, young people said they wanted more detailed, clear information on subject options for key stage 4, particularly on subject content (modules and topics covered, for instance), coursework and future post-16 pathways. The 14-19 Prospectus aims to offer standardised, detailed information on all 14-19 opportunities available to young people. However, a question remains about how such information is mediated to young people and how they are supported in processing the information they receive.

Mediation of information

The importance of young people accessing good quality and impartial information is at the forefront of meeting the requirements of the 14-19 Implementation Plan. The training needs of professionals (such as teachers and Personal Advisers) who help young people to make use of information (such as the 14-19 Prospectus) should be considered.

There was evidence, in this research, of teachers in 11-16 schools providing apparently impartial information about post-16 opportunities, although their knowledge of such opportunities did not always seem to be comprehensive enough to give fully informed advice. In contrast, teachers in 11-18 schools appeared to have the knowledge but did not always seem impartial in giving it, tending to encourage students to stay at their own school sixth form. This likely to have an impact on young people's decision-making.

Arguably, in some cases, information might be more appropriately provided by external experts who are more likely to have a broader range of information and be impartial. Indeed, many young people appreciated help from experts such as Connexions Personal Advisers, although it should be noted that others valued support from teachers who knew them well, and for some young people this would be the most appropriate medium of support.

Personalised support

Patterns in young people's decision-making suggested the importance of personalised support (that is not to say that for some young people generic support was not acceptable, if delivered in a way to meet their needs). Young people made decisions in different ways, bringing varied experiences and mindsets to the process of making choices, across and within schools. Mindsets also fluctuated over time, even amongst young people who at first seemed decided on a particular pathway. This suggests that individuals need varying levels and types of support. Different methods of support (such as one-to-one discussions, group exercises, literature on options, or a mixture of such approaches) are likely to be appropriate for different young people. But, who should provide support?

The findings suggest that teachers were essential to the decision-making process; young people were influenced by discussions they had with teachers, particularly in schools which had support systems which appeared effective overall. However, questions were raised about whether teachers had the necessary knowledge to provide the information and guidance young people needed.

In conclusion, this summary has drawn attention to the key messages emerging from the research which might be of interest to policy-makers and practitioners. In particular, account should be taken of what information is given to young people, by whom and how it is mediated. Attention should also be given to young people's decision-making skills, so that they are able to process the information they are given about their choices. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that young people make decisions in different ways and have different needs for support, depending on their experiences, thought processes and the context in which they make choices, which emphasises the importance of personalised support for young people.

About the Study

The research took place between February 2005 and February 2006 in 14 schools (seven of which had a sixth form) selected from seven local authorities (LAs) in England. In the spring term 2005, one-to-one narrative eliciting interviews were carried out with 165 young people, 85 of whom were in Year 9 and had just made decisions about their option subjects for key stage 4. A further 80 were in Year 11, thinking about applying for courses, training or jobs for the coming year. In the autumn term 2005, follow-up interviews were carried out with 127 students (70 originally in Year 9 and 57 originally in Year 11), in order to reflect on the decisions young people had made.

During initial interviews with students, they were asked to complete a 'circle of influence' activity, which sought to explore the level of importance and value that young people gave to the various influences on their decisions they

had identified. During interviews, students may have mentioned some people (such as parents or teachers) or things (such as a lesson or television programme) which may or may not have been useful in influencing their decisions. They were asked to place these people or things in concentric zones in a circle to reflect the extent of influence (with greatest influences placed in the central zone).

Alongside this, information on their attitudes towards selected key stage 3 subjects (Mathematics, English, Science and Languages) and on school-based support mechanisms was collected through the use of short self-completion questionnaires.

Contextual interviews took place with key school staff (including senior managers, heads of Years 9 and 11, heads of sixth form and guidance staff), in which to situate and interpret the experiences and perceptions of young people. Information relating to post-16 opportunities was gathered via interviews with FE and sixth form college staff, training providers and local learning and skills council staff.

The focus of the analysis was on characterising each of the case-study schools in terms of the structure, ethos, curriculum offer, support mechanisms and local situation, in order to contextualise how young people were making decisions. Where possible, students were matched according to the educational mindset model developed for DfES by SHM, and the relationships between school context, decision-making and students' educational mindsets were explored.

1. Introduction

One of the central beliefs underpinning the *14-19 Education and Skills* White Paper (2005) is the view that '*young people begin tacitly to make choices early*' and that those '*starting Year 11 with the view that they will leave education very rarely change their mind over that year. Similarly, we might expect young people's decisions about learning from 14 to be formed by Year 9*'. As a result, the Paper concludes that '*We … need to help young people assess themselves and improve their decision-making abilities … We cannot have young people making such narrow choices at the age of 14 that they cannot later change tack … We cannot have young people ignorant of what is available or unable to make choices that are good for them … good quality and impartial information, advice and guidance are crucial*'.

The challenges that arise from these statements relate both to ensuring that the structure of the curriculum at 14 is such that young people can follow appropriate courses through Key Stage 4 and beyond, and that there is an effective mechanism in place to help young people make what Tomlinson referred to, in the *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (2004), as '*important choices…which, for many, could have a significant impact on the direction of their future education and training*'. The implementation of such a mechanism, however, requires more than the development of a support infrastructure. It requires a greater degree of understanding of *how* young people make decisions; the ways in which, for each individual, structural contexts and individual attributes interact both before and during the decision-making process. This report focuses specifically on such interactions in order to explore more fully:

- the processes by which young people make decisions about subjects to study in Key Stage 4 and post-16 and about destinations at age 16
- the influences upon those decisions.

The need for this greater understanding is evident in the recent youth Green Paper, *Youth Matters* (2005), which, in the related consultation, specifically asks '*What kind of help and support is most important for young people*?' and '*How can we ensure that information, advice and guidance provided to young people is comprehensive and impartial and challenges rather than perpetuates traditional stereotypes*?'

1.1 Background

Much research has already been undertaken to examine the key factors that seem to influence young people's subject and career decisions, particularly at the end of Key Stage 4. Drawing on the literature, Payne (2003), for instance, summarised the differential impacts of student attainment, background characteristics (such as sex and ethnicity), home circumstances (including the level of parental education), careers education and guidance provision, responses to the local labour market and young people's attitudes to education (including views of education that could be termed as instrumental) on the choices that were made at age 16. In a recent review of research on decision-making at the end of Key Stage 3, McCrone *et al.* (2006) concurred that both individual factors (including the value that young people placed on specific subjects) and a range of structural factors (such as school provision and context) appeared to play a part in the decision-making process at age 14. However, the review also indicated that, to date, the investigation of structural factors was relatively limited by comparison with individual factors. Moreover, some elements of individual factors (such as what might be understood by the term 'enjoyment' of a subject or by the intrinsic or extrinsic value accorded to individual subjects) appeared to have been subject to only a limited amount of research to date.[1] Yet the research evidence suggests that factors of agency and factors of structure are interdependent. It is the extent and complexity of this interdependence that is not yet fully understood.

This lack of understanding is not surprising. Unlike the field of learning styles, in which theoretical and empirical research has led to the development of some 71 different models of learning styles (13 of which could be said to be major models in terms of their theoretical importance, commercial or academic use and their influence on other models),[2] the field of theoretical literature on the decision-making process amongst adolescents is at an earlier stage, with most studies drawing on conceptual understanding initially derived from research into decision-making amongst adults.

Payne, in 2003, identified three dominant theoretical models in the literature related to young people's career choices at 16. The first of these, informing much of the educational and sociological literature of the 1970s and 1980s, were the structuralist models, proponents of which suggested that decisions were circumscribed by (sometimes unconscious) constraints, be they institutional, economic or cultural. These meant that 'choice' became an almost automatic response to what Roberts (1984), for example, described as well-sign-posted trajectories.

---

[1] Indeed, the extent to which young people value a subject and the role that this plays in academic choice and performance has been the focus of only a limited number of studies (see, for example, Brophy, 1999 and earlier work by Wigfield and Eccles, 1992 and Wigfield et al., 1990) to date.

[2] See, for example, Coffield et al., 2004).

In contrast to this are the economic models, in which education (and training) choices are seen as '*investment decisions in which subjects make a rational calculation of the relative returns to each of the different options open to them*' (Payne, 2003). Such models of decision-making necessarily make assumptions about motivation (that individuals seek to maximise their outcomes – economic and social – based on self-interest) and about the way in which people access and use information (through a comprehensive information trawl). The third group of models are those based on the concept of '**pragmatic rationality**'. These models were developed to reflect the fact that few young people (or adults) appeared to approach decision-making in the planned and context-free way assumed by the economic model.

Each of these three dominant models of decision-making have played a part, not only in the ways in which previous research into educational decision-making was approached and analysed, but in the development and implementation of guidance theories and models of practice for both teachers and guidance specialists. For example, in response to a structuralist understanding of decision-making, and in reaction to the notion of 'matching' young people and careers, many educationalists and guidance specialists sought to develop models of practice that challenged young people's internalised expectations and assumptions about their career paths, widened their horizons and developed their ability both to seek out information and to use it to inform their decisions. Indeed, the notion of challenging expectations, it could be argued, underpins the implementation of many current policies linked to raising aspiration and widening participation (including Aimhigher).

Other models of practice have reflected the notion of rational decision-making implicit in economic models. The action planning process used in drawing up formal careers guidance action plans (these became more widespread during the 1990s) assumed a 'technical rationality' in which young people's decisions were based on the acquisition of comprehensive information (and on a national rather than purely local basis) were context-free and were linear. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1993), in a discussion of the particular CGAP (Careers Guidance Action Planning) process used in one Training Credits pilot, suggested that there was a place for such action planning, but that it should acknowledge the fact that young people would be operating in a context-specific environment (social, cultural and economic; that their career decisions might be opportunistic (based on contacts and experiences); and that their decision-making would not follow a specific timetable, but would be sporadic, as they sought to balance the different influences (including those related to emotional responses) and demands in their lives. The introduction of a formal planning process into acknowledged realities had the potential to contribute, they argued, to enhancing pragmatic rationality, increasing young people's control over the decision-making process while not ignoring social and cultural realities.

However, in both the United States and in Europe, there is a growing body of research into decision-making amongst adolescents and young adults. Some of this research (focusing on areas such as self-efficacy and self-regulation models of decision-making) seeks to identify the kinds of skills that young people should be developing and '*clues regarding ways to intervene, if these skills are not developing as they should*' (see Miller and Byrnes, 2001). It also provides some support for the notion that young people's career trajectories may become crystallised at an early stage (see, for example, Bandura *et al.,* 2001), and that decision-making competency may be a valuable predictor of achievement oriented behaviour (see Miller and Byrnes, 2001).

As summarised in Bandura *et al.* (2001), for example, perceived self-efficacy (the belief that one has the power to produce effects by one's actions) amongst adults had previously been identified (Lent *et al.,* 1987) as having greater predictive power in occupational choice than, for example, theories based on personality matching (Holland, 1985), or expectancy-value (Wheeler, 1983). In a study of young Italians aged between 11 and 15, Bandura *et al.* (2001) suggested that the power of such self-efficacy amongst children was also high. Following an analysis of socio-cognitive data from 272 children, they concluded that self-efficacy emerged as a result of the interaction between '*socioeconomic, familial, academic and self-referent influences* [operating] *in concert to shape young people's career trajectories'*. Family socio-economic status, they argued, had only an indirect effect on young people's perceived occupational efficacy through raising parental aspirations. These in turn were mediated through their impact on young people's self-conceptions of efficacy, academic aspirations and achievement. Moreover, young people's beliefs in their academic efficacy, rather than their actual academic achievement,[3] '*had the most direct pervasive impact on their judgements of their occupational efficacy'*. By contrast, young people's view of themselves as socially efficacious did '*not, in itself, shape occupational trajectories'*.

This concept of self-efficacy has resonance with the assertion in the 2005 White Paper of the '*need to help young people assess themselves'*. However, it also suggests that such help may need to go beyond the notion of helping young people to accurately assess their academic performance or current skill levels, but instead to help them to believe that they have the power to do better. In a study of ninth and eleventh grade students in a number of US high schools, Miller and Byrnes (2001) found that competence in the decision-making process was clearly associated with subsequent achievement oriented behaviour. While they cautioned that such behaviour was not necessarily commensurate with actual attainment outcomes, it could be postulated that young people who lacked skills in the decision-making process were less likely to demonstrate achievement oriented behaviour. Translated into

---

3   The term academic is used here in its widest sense to include the outcomes of all educationally-based courses.

occupational and career choice terms, young people without decision-making skills would also be at risk of making poor course or career choices.

1.2   The research

Acknowledging these various perspectives on young people's decision-making, the methodology that was undertaken for the research study sought to ground the investigation of decision-making at 14 and 16 both in specific environmental and educational contexts and in young people's subjective realities. These included young people's perceptions of themselves, the ways in which they acquired and processed knowledge and their hoped for futures, as well as their anticipated futures. Through narrative eliciting interviews[4] the researchers sought to ascertain the contexts (social, cultural, educational and economic) in which young people were making their decisions and the specific interactions of the various factors that bounded those decisions. It is recognised that many of the influential factors operating in their lives (family, friends, work-related experiences, attitudes to school and relative academic and vocational success etc.) have been identified in the past. The research sought to identify the ways in which they interact (or are perceived to interact) in order to develop a deeper understanding of the decision-making process, to identify emerging potential models of decision-making around subject and career choices and to ascertain the capacity of such models to inform and assist strategies for supporting young people through the decision-making process.

1.3   Methodology

In order to explore the interaction between young people's individual attributes and structural contexts during the decision-making process, it was necessary to obtain credible, qualitative information that would provide the detailed insights that are often more difficult to obtain from quantitative approaches. The research design that was adopted, therefore, was primarily qualitative, involving detailed one-to-one interviews with young people, teachers and parents. The evaluation consisted of a two-stage approach. Wave 1 (February-May 2005) centred on interviews with young people in Years 9 and 11, exploring the choices they were making at that time. These young people were re-visited during October to December 2005 (wave 2), so that they could reflect on the decisions they had made at the end of the previous key stage. Further details of the activities undertaken during each wave are given below.

Wave 1 (February-May 2005) of the evaluation involved:

---

[4]   See Appendix A for an explanation of this method

- Case-study visits to **14 schools**[5] across **seven Local Authorities** (LAs) in England.

- Collection of contextual data in which to situate and interpret the experiences and perceptions of young people. This was gathered through face-to-face interviews with **67 key staff** (including senior managers, heads of year and guidance staff) across the 14 schools, as well as through documentary analysis (using documents such as prospectuses and option booklets), information from NFER's Register of Schools and from 2001 Census data matched to school level.

- In-depth narrative eliciting interviews with **165 students** (85 in Year 9 and 80 in Year 11).

- Collection of data on these students' perceptions of individual school subjects (collected through the use of **proformas** using a technique involving semantic differential items) and of school-based support mechanisms, including careers education and guidance provision. These proformas were used during interviews, when appropriate, as stimulus materials for discussion. Some of the data (particularly that related to subject choice in Year 9, course choice in Year 11 and views on the value of careers education and guidance activities) were used as aids to reflection during the second round of interviews in the autumn term.

- Collection of data on the influences on young people's decision-making, through a **'circle of influence'** activity completed during interviews with students.

- Telephone interviews with **47 parents** (26 parents of Year 9 interviewed students and 21 parents of Year 11 interviewed students).

Wave 2 (October-December 2005) of the evaluation involved:

- Follow-up visits to all **14** case-study schools

- Gathering further information on the school context, to build on that obtained in wave 1, and to identify and examine any change in policy or practice which might have an impact on young people's decision-making. A senior manager in all 14 schools was interviewed face-to-face, as was the head of sixth form in 11-18 schools.

- Follow-up interviews with **127** of the 165 students interviewed in wave 1 (**77 per cent**); 70 of the 85 students who were in Year 9 in wave 1 (82 per cent)[6] and 57 of the 80 who were in Year 11 (71 per cent).[7] A total of 35 Year 11 students were interviewed by telephone as they were either no longer in school, or, if they were attending the school sixth form, were

---

[5]   The school names used in this report have been changed to protect anonymity.

[6]   Attrition amongst the original Year 9 sample was mainly due to students being absent from school on the day of the follow-up interview.

[7]   During interviews in wave 1 Year 11 students were asked for contact details (for example, home and/or mobile telephone numbers) so that if they were no longer attending school by wave 2, researchers could contact them by telephone to conduct a follow-up interview. Attrition was due to the fact that a minority of students did not give their contact details, that contact details had changed by wave 2, or because some students did not respond to researchers' telephone calls.

unable to participate in a face-to-face interview on the day of the follow-up visit.

- Collection of contextual information relating to the post-16 opportunities available in each of the seven LAs. This data was gathered through interviews with key personnel in **local FE colleges** (eight interviewees across five FE colleges) and **sixth form colleges** (three interviewees across three colleges). In each area, a representative from the Local Learning and Skills Council (**LLSC**), most often the 14-19 Strategy Manager, was interviewed by telephone about their views on post-16 provision. They were asked to give details of local **training providers**, who were then interviewed by telephone in order to increase the understanding of the local context.

Details of the selection of case-study areas, schools and students are given in **Appendix A**, along with a more thorough description of the research conducted in the case-study schools.

The study, in its early stages, was also informed by a DfES commissioned **literature review** (McCrone *et al.*, 2006), which provided an insight into what was already known about the processes by which young people make their subject and pathway choices, and the factors or supporting mechanisms that enable young people to make such decisions effectively.

1.4 The profile of the schools and students

This section gives a brief overview of the characteristics of the case-study schools and of the students who took part in the research. It should be noted that the names of the case-study schools have been changed to protect anonymity.

1.4.1 The profile of the case-study schools

Of the 14 schools included in the study, seven (two of which were secondary moderns and one of which was a grammar school) had provision for a sixth form. The schools ranged in size from one 11-16 comprehensive school with no more than 500 students, to a large secondary modern with over 1,600 students. The schools were variously located in a range of locales from inner-city metropolitan areas to rural and coastal settings, encompassing the full scope of socio-economic settings.[8] The schools included four in which the majority of households in the catchment areas could be described as multiply deprived, with few households in which adults were qualified up to or above Level 2, or who were in employment. Levels of eligibility for free school meals were high in such schools, while attainment at Key Stage 3 and Key

---

[8] Full details of the case-study schools are presented in Appendix A.

Stage 4 was in the bottom quintiles (based on the proportion of students achieving five or more higher grade GCSEs, for example) by comparison with all schools nationally. In contrast, four schools were based in catchment areas in which there was a high proportion of adults in managerial or professional occupations and in which the majority of households were owner-occupied. With the exception of one secondary modern school, in which attainment levels were in the middle quintile, attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4 were relatively high in the case-study schools in these more advantaged areas.

Six of the schools (all in metropolitan or unitary authority areas with relatively high levels of disadvantage) had been engaged in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative, aimed at increasing motivation and raising aspirations to higher education.[9] Six schools were also engaged in the Increased Flexibilities Programme (IFP), in which, through partnerships between schools and further education colleges, young people in Years 10 and 11 had the opportunity to follow a vocational course, pre-16 (either through GCSEs in vocational subjects, National Vocational Qualifications or other Section 90 approved vocational qualifications). Three of the case-study LAs, and therefore six case-study schools, were involved in the 14-19 Pathfinder initiative (which encourages collaborative working between schools and colleges to enhance provision for young people aged 14-19).

1.4.2 The profile of the students

Prior to taking part in the narrative eliciting interviews[10] during wave 1, young people completed a short proforma designed to obtain information on their background characteristics, such as their gender and ethnic group. **Table 1.1** below illustrates the profile of the students who took part in both waves of the research. There were proportionately more boys than girls in the Year 9 sample, during both waves of the research, although the sample of Year 11 students was evenly split at wave 1 and almost so in wave 2. The majority of students in Years 9 and 11 identified themselves as White British. The largest minority ethnic groups were mixed race White and Black Caribbean, Black African and Black Caribbean, reflecting the populations of students in the schools in the study, although numbers were still small. The small numbers of young people in what was primarily a qualitative study meant that no statistically meaningful analysis could be done by individual minority ethnic group; 'white' and 'non-white' categories have, therefore, been used for analysis purposes where relevant.

---

[9] Other schools had been engaged in similar aspiration raising activities under the Partnerships for Progression initiative (jointly funded by HEFCE and the LSC) or had become involved in the integrated Aimhigher programme since its inception in August 2004.

[10] It should be noted that parental consent was obtained prior to students being interviewed, and that it was a voluntary activity for the students who took part. Teachers were asked to select students for interviews, as discussed in detail in Appendix A.

Table 1.1   The profile of the students

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	Year 9 **N**	**Year 11** **N**	**Year 10** **N**	**Post-16** **N**
Gender				
Male	45	40	38	29
Female	38	40	32	28
Missing data*	2	-	-	-
Ethnic group				
White British	60	59	53	44
White Irish	1	1	-	-
White European	3	-	3	-
Black African	4	3	3	2
Black Caribbean	3	4	2	3
Black other	1	1	1	1
White and black Caribbean	5	4	3	3
White and Asian	1	-	1	-
Indian	2	1	1	-
Pakistani	2	-	2	-
Bangladeshi	-	1	-	-
Chinese	-	2	-	2
Other	1	3	1	2
Missing data*	2	1	-	-
Total N	85	80	70	57

* Missing data resulted from a minority of students not completing a proforma in wave 1, or from invalid data being provided

Teachers were asked to select students in Years 9 and 11 who represented different ability ranges (for example, two in higher sets/high ability, two in middle sets and two in lower sets – see Appendix A). Following the collection and analysis of student performance data (2005 Key Stage 3 levels for English, mathematics and science for Year 9 students and 2005 GCSE scores[11] for Year 11 students), it was possible to explore the attainment ranges of the students in the sample.[12] Data on Key Stage 3 levels were obtained for 71 of the 85 students in Year 9, and it should be noted that they consisted mainly of students who had achieved levels 5 and 6 for science, levels 6 and 7 for mathematics and levels 5 and 6 for English (very few students had achieved less than a level 5 for any subject). Regarding the Year 11 sample, 2005 GCSE data was received for 65 of the 80 students. The total GCSE score across the 65 students ranged from 118 (equivalent to no more than five GCSEs at grade F) to 452 points (equivalent to six GCSEs at grade A* and

---

[11] The 'best eight' GCSE scores (a measure used by DfES for comparison purposes) for each student were used to calculate their total and average scores. GCSE scores for grades A*-F are as follows: A*, 58 points; A, 52 points; B, 46 points; C, 40 points; D, 34 points; E, 28 points, and F, 22 points. The maximum total score is 464 (eight A* grades) and the maximum average score is 58 points.

[12] Note that some schools were unwilling to supply individual student-level attainment data.

two at grade A). Overall, while students with a wide range of abilities were represented, the sample appeared to be skewed towards those with higher attainment. Two thirds of the students for whom data was received had achieved eight grades C and above, for instance, and indeed most (92 per cent) had achieved five grades A*-C. In relation to total GCSE point scores, the overall mean, median and mode scores suggest that students in the sample were generally just above a C grade.

1.5 Analysis of data

The following two key areas of choice have been central to the research and the analysis of data:

- The choices young people make at the end of key stage 3 about what to study during key stage 4
- The choices young people make at the end of key stage 4 about whether to continue in education and training, and what form this participation will take.

In order to understand the **context** in which young people were making such decisions, the following research questions were the focus of the analysis:

- What is the nature of the curriculum 'offer' available to young people? To what extent do young people have a real choice about the subjects they may study? Are academic and vocational options available (and to all students)? Are choices restricted by the structure of the option blocks/groups?
- What are the constraints on the curriculum offer, such as difficulties with staffing, timetabling or finances?
- How is the 'offer' presented to young people? When are curriculum options introduced, by whom and in what context?
- What support mechanisms, including careers education and guidance, are in place in schools to support decision-making? What amount, type and nature of information, advice and guidance do young people receive to support their decision-making?
- What opportunities are available to young people locally, such as employment and education opportunities, which may impact on choice?
- To what extent does the background of the school, its philosophy, ethos and culture, have an impact on decision-making?
- What do young people perceive to be the key influences on their decision-making? What level of influence do certain individuals have on young people?

In order to address these questions, and to explore the context in which young people made their decisions, each of the 14 schools has been characterised (as far as possible) in terms of its structure, culture and ethos, the curriculum offer that is available, the support mechanisms in place and the local socio-economic, learning and employment context (based on census data and information obtained on post-16 provision and employment opportunities). This meant that student responses (in terms of their decision-making and educational mindsets) could be interpreted within the wider school and local context.

An analytical framework, drawing on previous research into school context (for example, Fosket *et al.* 2004), school effectiveness (for example, Sammons *et al.* 1995) and careers education and guidance provision (for example, Morris *et al.* 2001) was designed in order to address these research questions and to build an accurate and detailed picture of each school. This framework was completed for each case-study institution, drawing on documentary evidence and on data from interviews with staff, students and parents, as well as on data from completed student proformas and the 'circle of influence' activities. Information on the post-16 opportunities in each area, gathered through interviews with personnel in FE colleges, sixth form colleges, LLSCs and training organisations, added further contextual information and helped build a picture of the broader circumstances in which young people were making decisions. Further detail on school contexts is given in Chapter 3.

Once the context of the school had been established, the research team sought further insights as to the ways in which young people perceived the various factors (such as the nature of the offer, the support strategies that were in place and the levels of peer and parental influence) mentioned by teaching staff during interviews. In particular, the following questions were explored:

- To what extent did students view school factors in the same way as they were characterised by staff? How much variation was there between students?

- Did students also see as influential those factors mentioned by staff as being significant for decision-making?

- To what extent were students in different 'types' of school influenced by different things when making decisions? Did they make decisions in different ways?

In addition, an analysis of the student proforma data was undertaken in order to provide background information on the students, their choice of subjects (for Key Stage 4) or pathways (for Key Stage 5), the extent of the information, advice and guidance they had received to date and their views on core National Curriculum subjects.[13]

---

[13] The findings from this analysis are reported in Appendix C.

Student interviews were also analysed to examine the possibility that the young people might be categorised as having a particular educational mindset. This analysis was based on prior research carried out for the DfES by SHM (details of the SHM work on educational mindsets, and how it was used as an analytical tool, can be found in Appendix B). According to the SHM model, a young person's educational mindset can be 'built' from data on a number of specific dimensions (orientation towards the past, present or future, outlook or picture of the future, level of risk tolerance and theory of success). Drawing on the SHM model, each student's transcribed narrative interview from wave 1 was examined in order to establish, as far as possible, these dimensions and to determine their overall educational mindset.[14] Their follow-up interviews from wave 2 were also analysed in this way, re-assessing their mindsets and whether they had remained stable or changed over time. Using this analysis, the research team explored whether it was possible to make any links between types of school, young people's educational mindsets and the ways in which young people made decisions.

1.6   Structure of the report

This report begins by setting the context of young people's decision-making. **Chapter 2** focuses on the choices available to young people in Key Stages 3 and 4 in the case-study schools, and how the curriculum offers were presented to them. The apparent choices made by students (and subsequent changes to those choices) are also explored in this chapter. **Chapter 3** explores the context of the case-study schools in which decisions were being made, including the apparent focus of the school, its ethos, its approaches to curriculum management and its provision of careers education and guidance. **Chapter 4** then discusses young people's perceptions of decision-making, including an exploration of the influences on young people's choices, their perceptions of the consequences of choice and the reactions they gave to the decisions they had made. It seeks to make links between the school context discussed in Chapter 3 and young people's decision-making. **Chapter 5** explores the potential influence that young people's educational mindsets could have on decision-making, and investigates the possible links between educational mindsets, decision-making and school context. **Chapter 6** concludes by focusing on the implications of the research for policy makers and practitioners.

---

[14]   It should be noted that the narrative eliciting interviews were not designed specifically to establish these mindsets. Rather they were designed to obtain detailed insights into young people's own perspectives of the decision-making process. As a result, it was not always possible to map all young people across all of the identified dimensions. However, the research team felt confident about identifying the mindset of 129 of the 165 students (78 per cent) participating in wave 1.

Appendix A provides further details of the methodological approach outlined in this chapter, and **Appendix B** provides information about the SHM model of educational mindsets which was used as an analytical tool. **Appendix C** provides an overview of young people's attitudes, in Year 9 and 11, to core subjects.

2. The curriculum offer and young people's choices

<div style="border: 2px solid gray; padding: 10px;">

Summary of Curriculum Offer and Young People's Choices

- The focus of the Key Stage 4 offer varied across schools. Two schools were almost entirely academic, ten included optional vocational elements and two included a compulsory vocational course for all pupils.

- There was some concern that, paradoxically, the introduction of vocational courses restricted the options available pre-16 because of the timetable constraints associated with providing such options, particularly off-site. Post-16, the concerns expressed were more to do with a perceived lack of credibility for these qualifications amongst some post-16 providers.

- The structural organisation of the Key Stage 4 offer varied across schools. Subjects were made available on an open choice basis or through option blocks, identified pathways or compulsory elements. There was some criticism from students about the restrictions on choice associated with each offer structure.

- Few young people made a direct link between careers education and guidance and the decision-making process (particularly Year 9 students making subject choices).

- The sixth form offer in 11-18 schools varied, reflecting school ethos (for instance, the grammar school offer was purely academic, and although the others offered a mixture of vocational and academic courses, the balance varied) and local circumstances (such as the lack of local alternatives or competition with other post-16 providers).

- Students in city schools had more choice of post-16 destinations.

- Young people in 11-16 schools appeared more appreciative of the information they had been given about post-16 choices (there was evidence that some 11-18 schools focused more on marketing their own sixth forms), but some did not feel they had received sufficient advice.

- Only a small minority of students had not stayed in full-time education or training post-16. Most students in 11-18 schools stayed on in their school sixth forms post-16 (except in two schools – see Chapter 3). In 11-16 schools, those following academic routes were most likely to go to sixth form colleges, whereas those undertaking vocational courses most often went to FE colleges.

</div>

Previous research has indicated the relative importance of both individual and structural factors in influencing young people's decision-making (see, for example, McCrone *et al.* 2006, and Payne, 2003). Less clearly understood is the interdependence of these factors. However, prior to an exploration of this interdependent dimension, it is important to establish the choices available to

young people and the contexts in which they are making choices. This chapter explores the curriculum offer available to young people, and how it is presented, both factors that are likely to have an impact on decision-making. Students' attitudes to the curriculum offer and the choices that they made during the course of the project (as well as any changes they made to those choices) are also discussed.

2.1   The Key Stage 4 offer

At Key Stage 4, the curriculum offer across the 14 schools could be characterised according to three main elements; **focus** (whether primarily academic, vocational or mixed); **structural organisation** (whether subjects were made available on an open choice basis or through option blocks, identified pathways or compulsory elements) and **presentation** (whether young people were taken through a timetabled programme of decision-making, were guided through their choices, or were left to make subject decisions for themselves).

2.1.1   Focus

Although fewer than half (six) of the schools in the study were engaged in the IFP, only two (both schools with high levels of academic attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4) did not offer vocational courses as part of the main Key Stage 4 curriculum.[15] The majority (10 schools) included vocational subjects as an optional element of the curriculum at Key Stage 4, even though, for some, the introduction of such an option was relatively new. However, in two schools (Hawke and Haig, both 11-16 comprehensives), a vocational subject (through BTEC) was part of the compulsory core for all students at Key Stage 4, with staff arguing variously that this broadened the curriculum, '*prepared* [young people] *for the world of work in a general sense'* and was better grounding for post-16 choices: '*our curriculum was not preparing them adequately for the curriculum which is on offer if they go on to vocational courses. This now gives them a head start'*.

Young people interviewed in these two schools were enthusiastic about the chance to follow the BTEC course ('*It's a better qualification so that's going to help you get a better job, so I thought it was a good idea*), with only one student demurring, preferring instead to take on more GCSEs. The introduction of the BTEC was marketed to students in terms of how many

---

[15]   Both, it should be noted, operated a system whereby elements of the curriculum could be disapplied in order to enable a small number of students to attend off-site vocational training, where this was felt to be in the young person's best interests.

GCSEs it would be worth, perhaps a recognition that, even in schools with a complete ability range, there was resistance from some students and their parents to taking a course that was not seen as 'academic'. In addition, as the deputy headteacher in one of these schools pointed out, for students going on to other school sixth forms or sixth form colleges, taking a vocational option could actually put them at a disadvantage, because, despite the existence of the QCA equivalences, some schools and colleges did not count vocational awards to the points scores that they used as entry qualifications for A Level courses. This deputy headteacher reported that the local sixth form college staff thought it was '*ludicrous*' that a GNVQ should be seen as equivalent to four GCSEs. This, she thought, was a good example of confused thinking about vocational courses in the education system more generally. It is interesting to note that this school is in a 14-19 Pathfinder area, which might be expected to have established partnerships and collaborations between schools and post-16 providers. Generally though, there seemed to be broad agreement from staff interviewees that any school with a complete ability range now needed to offer vocational subjects within the school at Key Stage 4.

The rationale behind the introduction of vocational courses was not identical in all 12 cases. Whilst both Hawke Comprehensive and Haig, in particular, emphasised the need to broaden the curriculum for *all* young people in order to increase their post-16 options and facilitate their transfer to post-16 institutions, some schools saw the vocational option (particularly when delivered off site) primarily as a means of re-engaging or motivating disaffected students, those who were '*at risk of being excluded,* [who were] *badly behaved, weren't interested and* [were] *truanting'*. Others focused less on the role of vocational courses as a means of countering disaffection (which in itself appeared to be a self-perpetuating approach), but saw them as a means of providing an alternative learning environment for those who (in some cases) struggled with the traditional school setting; or as a means of introducing some diversification into a predominantly academic curriculum; or as a way of raising the status of vocational study, through targeting such courses at potentially high achievers. An element of selection was clearly in operation, however, with young people sometimes being steered away from vocational courses ('*it was quite a low level course*'), or being advised to study an NVQ in school instead of a different NVQ off-site.

The opportunity of taking a vocational course off-site was welcomed enthusiastically by many of the students interviewed, as described by this student, talking about his 'taster visit' to the local college: '*One group was looking under the car and the other group were looking at the engine. I really enjoyed it, it made me want to go on that course – desperately sort of thing'*.

However, there were perceived practicalities associated with offering vocational courses (particularly off-site). For instance, timetabling off-site

arrangements became very complicated and sometimes resulted in students missing core subjects while they were out of school, with the result that introducing vocational options *'actually lessens the choice that students have'* primarily because *'you can't create a curriculum for that group'* so that *'when they are out for the day, they are in fact, missing lessons'*. Some schools were able to find a way round these problems and the smallest school (an 11-16 comprehensive), which one might have expected to have encountered the greatest level of difficulty in timetabling, claimed to have avoided difficulties by entering into partnerships with other local schools, blocking all of the vocational options on one day and so avoiding clashes with what the staff described as *'critical subjects'*.

These practical issues had led several schools, by the time of the second wave of case-study visits, to restrict their vocational offer to what could be provided in school. This was usually because of issues such as reductions in funding,[16] or concerns about the quality of some external provision.

It is worth noting that even some of the schools in 14-19 Pathfinder areas were experiencing some difficulties with external provision of vocational courses. In one Pathfinder area, only one of three case-study schools was taking advantage of any vocational provision at all and there it was mainly in-house provision, with just one group of students going to a local college once a week *'to use their facilities'*. They had concerns about the quality of the external provision. In another Pathfinder area, one of two case-study schools was offering limited external provision (aimed at the less academic students), which was seen as useful for *'opening up'* the curriculum, but which *'put constraints on the timetable'* because *'travel time has to be built in'* and they *'have to match with other institutions'*.

There was also a certain discomfort felt by some staff about the educational justification for channelling some students through externally provided vocational courses. One senior manager, commenting on another local school where a large number of students were being sent off-site, reflected: *'I must say if I was looking at their curriculum, I would be very critical of that. How can over 100 students not be motivated by the offer in place at Key Stage 4'?*

This view of the relevance of a school's own Key Stage 4 curriculum appeared to be shared by other interviewees, one of whom suggested that the use of Entry Level rather then GCSE courses might be more appropriate for less able students. Elsewhere, in another school, the integration of a vocational element into all GCSE subjects was felt to be fairer than providing vocational courses for less able students (although, arguably, this approach might not offer students a real vocational experience).

---

[16]   For instance, a funding reduction for schools involved in the Increased Flexibilities Programme.

2.1.2 Structural organisation

Across the 14 schools, the extent to which young people had a real choice to make at the end of Key Stage 3, and the number of subject choices they had to make, varied markedly. In all 14 schools, there was a **compulsory core**, though the constituent subjects were not identical and the number of compulsory subjects ranged from four to six. In each school, the core comprised a minimum of English, mathematics and science (though there was sometimes an element of choice as to whether this was single or double award science). Traditional science courses were supplemented in several schools by Applied Science GCSE. Applied ICT was also beginning to feature more frequently, either instead of, or as well as, ordinary GCSE ICT. Some schools included ICT as a core subject by making the short course GCSE compulsory for those students who did not opt for the long course. Reflecting the earlier disapplication regulations and the increased flexibility now evident in the National Curriculum, modern foreign languages were compulsory in only two schools (both comprehensives).[17] One was a specialist language school, while the other regarded the subject as a key requirement for a broad-based curriculum and felt it was more useful for students, regardless of their ability, than offering vocational subjects. It is worth noting that in one school languages were no longer compulsory, and, in the first year of this change, only eight per cent of pupils had opted to study a language at Key Stage 4, which had caused problems with small class sizes. Technology was compulsory in five schools, although, in one of these, it was apparently possible for parents to make a written request for an additional humanities or expressive arts subject instead.

Outside the compulsory core, young people were offered Key Stage 4 subjects in three broad ways, through open choices, through option blocks or through pathway systems. The **open list** approach, adopted in four of the 14 schools (including one grammar school, two 11-16 comprehensives and a secondary modern school), presented young people with a completely free choice of available subjects, enabling young people to choose their options regardless of the nature of the subject. However, in effect, the number of choices that young people could make from this list was as few as two in the schools in which the compulsory core included a modern foreign language and a technology subject. Elsewhere, the open list approach allowed young people to select up to four subjects, although there was a tacit acceptance amongst staff that young people might be steered towards (or away from) particular subjects in order to address particular strengths or weaknesses. Regardless of the number of choices available to them, however, the majority of young people in Year 9 felt that their choice was restricted: *'I wish I could have put*

---

[17] The compulsory language element was welcomed by students in both schools, who made the link variously between language study and helping people to *'understand other countries and communicate with people'* and between language study and the possibility of working overseas.

them all as my first choice, because all of them are subjects I really enjoy and would like to do and it would be nice if you could have more options'.

Option blocks, in which all young people were able to make a relatively free choice from within specific subject categories (such as humanities, languages, technology, expressive arts, for instance) were in evidence in two of the schools. Schools that adopted this strategy (both were medium-sized comprehensives) indicated that their aim was to encourage young people to keep a broad mix of subjects, thus not closing down their future potential post-16 options. Young people, who had a particular interest in a specific area of learning, sometimes resented this grouping, however: *'we had to choose between drama and music and I like them both'.* Some parents also questioned the merit of a system that made some subjects compulsory, while others that they regarded as equally valid were not available to their children: *'I didn't agree with him having to do PSE and RE at the expense of history and geography. Who says they have to do these subjects – is it the school or the government'?*

However, the most common approach across the 14 schools was the **pathways system**, in which the relatively free choice for *all* students that characterised the open list and option block approach was replaced by one in which the extent to which young people had to make subject choices was determined by their prior attainment. For many students in these seven schools, it could be argued, the choices that they had to make under this system were little different from those that young people made under the open list or option block systems. Those students seen as more academically able generally followed a compulsory core and then selected their subjects from option blocks or open lists. However, those young people who were regarded as less able tended to have a more limited choice of subjects, or a more directed choice of subjects, often involving a vocational option. Models varied, ranging from a simple two tier system, to a more complex set of pathways involving a number of different ability groups and a range of different balances between academic and vocational options. While staff suggested that they recognised that less academic did not necessarily mean less able, it was rare for the 'offer' for the higher attaining students to include many vocational subjects. Instead higher attaining students might be encouraged (as in one 11-16 comprehensive) to take on additional GCSEs.

The system was not without its critics. Young people were generally quick to see how the pathways operated: *'If you're in group 1, you're clever; if you're in group 2, then you're average and if you're not so good you'd most likely do NVQs and that. It blocks out two* [subjects] *that I wanted to do'.* They were also clear that they did not always share the same values as the teachers who devised the pathways: *'I'd rather have chosen another subject, but I didn't have that choice open to me. I really don't enjoy French anyway. I think it's the most boring subject ever.'*

2.1.3 Presentation of the Key Stage 4 offer

Schools maintained that they did not introduce the options process in isolation, with most indicating that it was part of wider careers education and guidance provision. The data gathered via student proformas in wave 1 revealed that, overall, most young people had taken part in careers-related activities by the spring term of Year 9, although they did not always feel these had been helpful. Nearly three quarters of the students had used a computer to access careers-related information, two fifths had talked to the careers coordinator in their school, almost one third had spoken to a Connexions Personal Adviser, and one third had visited their school's careers library.

The proforma data (as well as findings from interviews with students) revealed considerable variation across individual schools in relation to the perceived usefulness of such activities.   It seemed that some schools had a comprehensive programme of activities which were deemed useful, whereas others had limited provision. In four schools, for instance, only half of the students said that they had talked to a careers education and guidance teacher in their own school, and in only six schools had any students found such conversations 'very helpful'. There were variations in opinions about how useful talks with Connexions Personal Advisers had been (only eight students across all schools had found this activity 'very helpful'). It was more likely for students to have had conversations with teachers and members of their family (siblings, cousins and grandparents, as well as parents) and found those helpful.

The extent to which the decision-making process was fully integrated with the wider advice and guidance process and the extent to which young people recognised that integration varied markedly. Few young people, for instance, made a direct and unprompted link between the activities they had undertaken in Year 9 (including, in some schools, activities such as the *Real Game*) and the decision-making process related to selecting their Key Stage 4 options. This may be less a reflection on the value of such activities as of the way in which young people perceived them. The interviewees' recall of the decision-making process often appeared to be dominated by the time they were given to make the decision ('*they just sprung it on us – they gave us a week to decide. I wasn't very pleased about that – no warning!'),* rather than the quality of the preparation they had received prior to the option period. As teaching staff frequently suggested, however much the principles of informed choice and thinking ahead were encouraged, the process appeared to mean little to young people until it was tied to personal experience.

This apparent failure amongst young people to make the connection between the Year 9 careers education and guidance programme and the specific act of choosing their Key Stage 4 options might go some way towards explaining young people's different reactions to the process. On the surface, the ways in which Year 9 students were presented with their option choices tended to

follow a fairly similar pattern. A formal introduction of the options, normally involving an options evening to which students and their parents were invited, was generally accompanied by the distribution of options booklets. This preceded a period of decision-making (of varying length) for the students, often including some level of consultation with subject teachers, heads of department and/or form tutors. Completed option forms were generally required back by the end of the spring term, although most schools indicated that they were prepared to consider changes to these up to the end of Year 9, if the timetable could accommodate this. Year 9 students, in discussing the ways in which they chose their options, tended to comment not on the ways in which they had been helped to think about the decision-making process, but on the quality of the information (written or verbal) they had received, the extent of their interaction with teaching and/or Connexions staff during the decision-making period and the length of time they had been given to make the decision. Parents, in interviews, also tended to focus on the extent to which they had been informed about the choices that had to be made and not on the ways in which their children had been assisted in making those choices: *'We were totally satisfied with what we got from the options evening; the school was excellent'*.

This poses a dilemma for schools. Many interviewees argued that the quality of the decisions that young people made were dependent upon adequate preparation, so that they could adopt 'decision-thinking' strategies (in which they clearly defined the problem and considered the options open to them) rather than falling into an 'automatic thinking' mode (based on inadequate understanding of the problem or of the options available).[18] All 14 schools indicated that they made some provision for preparation time through careers education and guidance in Year 9, although the extent of this and the relative expertise of the staff delivering it varied. At one extreme were the two schools in which careers education and guidance began at an early stage (at least Year 8) and was developed and delivered by a specialist (and qualified) team (liaising with the Connexions service) within the school. At the other extreme was the school in which a member of the teaching staff suggested that '[careers education and guidance for Year 9] *doesn't work out. It's a waste of time. Pointing them in the right direction is better than being taught.*'

Yet, even where careers education and guidance provision appeared to be good, Year 9 students were not always positive about the help and support they received. At Raleigh High School, for example, where careers education and guidance was introduced from Year 8 (within PSE), where *KUDOS* and the *Real Game* formed part of the Year 9 programme and where the Connexions Personal Adviser worked with small groups prior to the spring

---

[18] Many young people were said to have misconceptions about the availability of Apprenticeships for instance, or had little understanding of the wider skill or academic requirements (or costs) of a particular course, relying instead on bias ('*I like animals so I want to be a vet'*). See Dawes (1988) *quoted* in Arvai et al. (2004).

term option period, students generally failed to mention the role played by such activities in their decision-making, focusing instead on what one young person saw as a lack of personally targeted intervention *'I actually thought we got hardly any support off our PSE teacher. We didn't get hardly any advice about it. It was just basically "you've got to choose your options"'*. Amongst these younger students,[19] it seemed that the real worth of dedicated careers lessons was not always fully appreciated at the time unless it was accompanied by opportunities for one-to-one discussions or by a belief that they would be able to access the information that was pertinent to them. As Year 9 students in Hawke Comprehensive noted; '[the careers coordinator] *has got everything you need to know really. You just go to her –she's the main woman!'*

So what did young people value? **Clear information**, provided though option assemblies (*'that's what got me interested in history and geography even more'*), through subject 'tasters', particularly for vocational options (*I really enjoyed it, it made me want to go on that course'*) and through written booklets, was welcomed. A common criticism, however, was that such booklets often failed to give enough information about *'what it entails'*, particularly about course content and coursework. Some parents, particularly those who had not been able to take part in open evenings, also expressed concern about booklets that were insufficiently informative (*'there were some gaps that the booklets didn't fully explain, like why some subjects are compulsory'*) or that used educational jargon (*'the terminology is so different to when I was at school – that was confusing'*).

Individual conversations with teachers, whether formal or informal, were generally valued, although young people sometimes placed less credence in the views of subject teachers than in form tutors or senior members of staff: *'In some subjects we were pressured to do that subject. They say "I hope you've picked our subject for your GCSEs."* Senior staff, by contrast, were thought to be more impartial: *'They didn't try to dissuade us from choosing subjects, they just asked why we chose them'*. Such senior staff were also thought to have a better overview: *'I went home and looked at the ones I wanted to choose and the ones she wanted me to do and the ones that matched, I put them in straight away'*.

Many young people valued having **sufficient time** in which to read the options booklets, consult with their parents and teachers and make their subject decisions. The majority of schools (11 of the 14) introduced the options procedure at various points during the spring term, arguing that they were largely constrained by the need to draw up timetables and staffing lists and, more tellingly, by the need to enrol young people on externally provided

---

[19] It should be noted that older students – those in Year 11 – were often far more complimentary about careers education and guidance provision. Many also made mention of the work they had done in Year 9, suggesting that the relevance of activities sometimes became more obvious on reflection than during the decision-making period.

vocational courses, for which there was often much competition. There were some exceptions to this; two schools began the process in the autumn term of Year 9 and one launched it early in the summer term.[20] However, young people were concerned not so much about the time at which options were introduced (although some felt that the process began too close to Key Stage assessment tests) as to the length of time devoted to the decision-making process. These views were expressed in schools in which the deadlines for making decisions ranged from one week to more than half a term, suggesting that it may not be the time between the distribution and completion of forms that is the main issue, but young people's feelings of readiness to make a decision.

2.2   Year 9 choices

What choices did the Year 9 students make? **Table 2.1** below summarises the subjects that the Year 9 students reported they had chosen to study in Year 10 in 2005/06 in these 14 schools, drawing comparisons with the national picture of attempted GCSEs for 2003/04. Although the number of students in the study is relatively small, percentages have been included in the table to facilitate comparisons with the national picture.

Compared with the national picture for 2003/04, a greater proportion of students in the study had elected to study individual science subjects (as triple or single award science) in 2005/06 (this was particularly the case for boys), and were less likely to be planning to do double award science. This reflects the recent changes made by QCA, in which all young people are encouraged to pursue a science curriculum at Key Stage 4, following the revisions to the science Programme of Study, and in which disapplication is no longer applicable. It possibly also reflected a tendency in some schools, particularly Specialist Science schools, to encourage students likely to take science A/S levels, to study triple award science.

---

[20]   One 11-16 school, preferred to introduce the decision-making process after the completion of the end of Key Stage tests in May, arguing that delaying the process enabled staff and students to focus solely on making subject decisions, without the distraction of the assessment process.

Table 2.1   GCSE subject choices

	National picture 2003/04			Subject choices for 2005/06 (N = 83)*		
Science subjects	**Boys %**	**Girls %**	**Total %**	**Boys %**	**Girls %**	**Total %**
Single award science	9	9	9	18	10	15
Double award science	72	77	75	31	29	30
Physics	8	5	7	27	8	18
Chemistry	8	6	7	27	11	19
Biology	8	6	7	27	11	19
Other subjects						
Information Technology	14	11	13	36	26	31
Geography	34	28	31	29	40	34
History	32	32	32	47	47	47
Any Modern Foreign Language	63	73	68	38	53	45
Art and Design	24	34	29	20	34	26
Drama	10	19	15	20	40	29
Physical Education	24	13	19	62	34	49
Religious Studies	16	22	19	31	26	29

* 83 of the 85 Year 9 students provided this data in wave 1
Note: 2003/04 figures are provided for comparison as they were the most up-to-date available
official figures, published in June 2005.

Source: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000357/tab002.xls   (Science subjects)
Source: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000474/tab006.xls (Other subjects)
Source: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000585/index.shtml (Bold figures)

A higher proportion of students (particularly boys) in the study were opting to
study ICT than was the case nationally in 2003/04. History appeared to be a
more popular option with students taking part in the study than with students
nationally and there was no gender difference. Compared with the national
picture:

- a smaller proportion of students were opting to study languages; the
  subject was still more popular with girls than boys

- similar proportions of students in the study were planning to study
  geography, although, unlike the national picture, the subject seemed more
  popular among girls than boys

- similar proportions of students were choosing to take art and design

- a greater proportion of students in the sample than nationally were
  choosing to study drama (particularly girls) and RE (particularly more
  boys compared with boys nationally) although it should be noted that some
  students could have confused compulsory RE within a school with an
  optional RE GCSE

- a substantially larger proportion of students in the study were going to
  study PE, particularly boys, although it should be noted that, as with RE,

some students could have confused compulsory PE with an optional PE GCSE.

Although there were very few students from minority ethnic groups, some small differences emerged in the choices that students in white and non-white categories had made. White students appeared slightly more likely than non-white students to have chosen to study history, drama and PE, whereas non-white students seemed more likely to have opted for science subjects and applied ICT. These differences were small and not statistically different.

It should be noted that the information above reflects choices that had been made during wave 1 of the study: a number of students changed their minds about the subjects they wanted to study at GCSE, either before the end of Year 9 or at the beginning of Year 10. Students' reactions to their choices, including the extent to which they had changed their minds, are discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

Data from the student proforma on attitudes towards core subjects revealed that young people regarded the core subjects of mathematics, English, science and modern foreign languages in different lights. While mathematics and English were considered relevant to potential future careers and to wider adult life, modern foreign languages were largely seen as irrelevant to either. Science was seen as important for future careers but less important to adult life generally. English, mathematics and science were not considered 'hard' by Year 9 students, although languages were thought to be difficult. The proportions of young people reporting difficulty were higher for all subjects in Year 11. In Year 9, English and science were thought to be 'fun', whereas mathematics was regarded as 'boring' (views were mixed in relation to languages). Science alone was seen as 'fun' by Year 11 students. Two-fifths of Year 9 students found languages difficult, and one in five felt 'overworked' in languages. Students' attitudes towards these core subjects are discussed in more detail in Appendix C.

2.2   The post-16 offer

2.2.1   The presentation of the post-16 offer

For young people in Year 9, choosing option subjects was often their first experience of decision-making. By the time they reached Year 11, students were faced with choices that were, arguably, more significant in terms of their future direction (whether or not to stay in learning), their activity (educational or training course or work, for example) and their location (such as their own or another school, FE or sixth form college, training provider or employer). In preparation for such decisions, most had embarked on some careers education and guidance activities, although the range of people to whom they had spoken was often limited (only a small number said that they had spoken to an

employer, for instance) and the extent to which they had accessed careers information varied (less than half reported visiting their schools careers/Connexions library, while less than one third had written away for careers information).

The Year 11 students seemed to have had more opportunities for advice and guidance (or had been more active in taking advantage of such opportunities) than young people in Year 9. In only one school did a high proportion of interviewees report not having spoken to a careers education and guidance teacher, and in all the schools except that one, most had found this contact helpful. Some students in all 14 schools had spoken to a Connexions adviser and in three schools, all the Year 11 interviewees had done so. This contact with Connexions advisers would have included both formal interviews arranged as part of the careers education and guidance programme and more informal discussions arranged by the students themselves, but interviewee responses to these talks varied considerably even within such small numbers and in the same schools. In Essex School, for example, all six interviewees had spoken with the adviser; four had found the talk quite helpful, one very helpful and one not very helpful. This pattern was repeated elsewhere and is probably an indication of how difficult it can be to target information and advice to young people at this stage of decision-making, as their individual needs can vary so greatly. Altogether, almost half of the Year 11 interviewees (38) described their contact with Connexions as very or quite helpful and only ten said it was not very helpful.

Only nine of the 80 Year 11 students said that they had spoken to an employer (although many respondents did not answer this question) yet, by this stage, the majority would probably have completed at least one week of work experience. One might question whether this was because work experience, especially if undertaken in Year 10, was regarded by young people as a detached activity and not associated with personal decision-making or the wider careers education and guidance programme. Few Year 11 students referred (in their wave 1 interviews) to work experience as having been important in helping to clarify ideas about a future career. In general, awareness of local labour markets and employers' expectations was limited, as revealed by the second wave of interviews (see Chapter 5). Around three-quarters of the Year 11 students said that they had spoken to their parents/carers about their post-16 options, with the majority having found this helpful. Of the 33 students who had talked to their siblings, and the 25 who had spoken to their grandparents, most had found this helpful. As with Year 9 students, therefore, discussions with family members were regarded as being as important and useful as access to school support.

2.2.2   The post-16 offer from the 11-18 schools

The post-16 offer across the seven 11-18 schools varied in emphasis, partly reflecting school ethos (the grammar school, for example, offered academic courses exclusively) partly reflecting local circumstances (such as the lack of other local accessible post-16 provision, or competition from other school sixth forms with a reputation for higher levels of academic achievement) and partly reflecting the need to maintain a viable sixth form. In all, six of the schools with sixth forms offered a range of both academic and vocational courses post-16, although the balance of academic and vocational courses varied. Three offered a curriculum that was predominantly A level based, but with some vocational courses (a limited number of AVCEs and BTEC courses). The remaining schools offered a greater range of vocational courses (mainly BTEC and AVCEs) alongside the academic courses.

Attitudes to the post-16 curriculum offered by their school differed both amongst staff and amongst potential students. Staff suggested that many young people chose to remain in the sixth form because it was a known environment (*'it's a community school where they feel valued and respected and the teachers care about them'*) and because their strengths and weaknesses would be known (*'I think they realise if they stay here we'll get the best out of them'*). This was reflected in many young people's responses: *'I feel so secure here, because I've got to know the teachers and they know how good you are and they can give you a push'*.[21] There was a perception that FE colleges did not provide the same level of academic and pastoral support as school sixth forms, with many of the Year 11 students suggesting that '*college is only good if you are self-motivated and I know I need to be pushed'*. To what extent was this 'comfort seeking' behaviour a function of an innate conservatism amongst young people and to what extent was it encouraged by the way in which the post-16 offer was presented to young people?

All seven of the 11-18 schools, for instance, held sixth form open evenings, during which the application process was explained and subject teachers were available for consultation. Such events were often advertised in the local press and were, essentially, a marketing strategy to recruit young people from other schools as well as within the school. In only one of the 11-18 schools in the study was there a parallel event, to which other post-16 providers (FE colleges, training providers and employers) were invited to present the options they had available. Such evenings were not the only means by which young people were introduced to post-16 opportunities. In addition to a programme of careers education and guidance activities (which varied markedly in quality and nature), young people in these seven schools had access to open days and

---

[21]   This was reflected by the fact that most young people in schools with sixth forms stayed on at school, except in schools which were deemed 'ineffective' (this is discussed further later in the report).

taster days at local FE colleges,[22] as well as college prospectuses (sometimes made available via the Connexions Service, rather than through careers education and guidance staff in school) and, in some cases, a guidance interview with a Personal Adviser.[23]   However, the extent to which young people were exposed to the full range of post-16 options appeared to be far less than was the case for young people in the 11-16 schools.

Teaching staff in at least four of these schools readily acknowledged that, when presenting post-16 options, the emphasis was primarily on what could be done within their own sixth form. Some felt that this was not only in the interest of the school, but in the interests of the students: '*We know the youngsters best, so we tell them "you know the school, the teachers and if you go elsewhere, it will take you a while to get used to things". So we could be accused of being biased and not impartial*'. Others were more forthright about the potential self-interest involved, which they felt was no different to the marketing strategies used by FE colleges: '*We don't advertise it* [alternative post-16 provision] *here. We'd be stupid to do so. We go out and sell the school to other schools*'. The overt 'selling' of the sixth form was clearly recognised by many of the interviewees in this particular school. While those who intended to follow the academic route were relatively accepting of the stance the school took ('*obviously they've tried to sell* [the sixth form] *to us*, *but I think it's the best option for me*') others resented it ('*all they care about is people who go to this sixth form. They don't really bother about other people.*').

Even where written information was provided, some teaching staff admitted: '*I have to be honest and say that I have been trying to steer our students into staying on in the sixth form, as we provide just as good a variety of courses*'. Others were less sanguine, particularly where the post-16 course on offer was primarily academic: '*I don't think our post-16 offer is broad enough, because we have a pass rate of five A* to C of about 58 per cent, which is a Level 2 pass. Our post-16 curriculum is 93 per cent Level 3, so what happens to all those other students who would have had progression at Level 2'?* This was not only an issue in schools however; one LSC interviewee from wave 2 commented that in her area generally there was '*a gap in level 1 and 2 provision for post-16 – there are courses, but they are at capacity*'. There was an acknowledgement amongst some interviewees that such progression into the sixth form could sometimes be restrictive, with young people choosing courses not on the basis of the most appropriate course, but on whether or not the school offered it ('*the thing that informs their* [subject] *choice is where the course is based and they want to stay where they know the environment and are comfortable*').

---

[22]   52 of the 80 young people in the study had taken part in such visits.
[23]   48 of the 80 Year 11 students had spoken to a Connexions Personal Adviser, although not always as part of a guidance interview.

During wave 1, young people's perspectives on their post-16 options suggested that many were indeed likely to opt for the known environment, as they were talking about studying A levels or other courses in their school sixth form.[24]

Those indicating a different destination said that this was because, variously:

- the school did not offer the course, subjects or facilities required

- they were unlikely to get the necessary grades (each of the schools operated a form of point system, either as a means of entry, or as a means of directing students along particular pathways)

- they felt that they wanted a change of environment (because other local schools had a better reputation, because they disliked school and wanted to go to college, or because the experience of older siblings suggested that staying on in school would be a mistake).[25]

While the tendency of 11-18 schools to promote their own sixth forms was hardly surprising, some of the FE college staff felt that they were excluded from access to Year 11 students and that this was not only unfair on their institutions, but also on the young people: *'In 11-18 schools there is a massive influence to stay in the sixth form and do A levels. We can only give them advice when we are asked into a school and often young people have no real idea about alternatives. Some school with sixth forms won't let us in and I know of cases where schools refuse to let students attend careers fairs because they may be "infected" by college representatives'.* While this was an extreme attitude, there was a perception among FE college staff that they were often kept at arm's length by schools anxious to protect their own sixth forms and that this could result in young people not having access to information on the full range of post-16 courses.

To some extent, the openness of 11-18 schools was influenced by the level of competition that they thought they faced. A school in a metropolitan area where there were other school sixth forms, sixth form colleges and FE colleges was likely to be more concerned about keeping its sixth form viable, than one in a location where there was little alternative provision, or where there was real confidence in the quality of their sixth form. Several staff made the point that a school with a good sixth form would not want to retain

---

[24] In wave 2 of the study, information on students' actual post-16 destinations was obtained (see Section 2.4 below for details). In five of the seven schools with sixth forms, most of the young people interviewed had indeed stayed at school. However, in the other two schools, students had made more varied choices (although most had gone to FE colleges). An exploration of the factors that appeared to have had an impact on these different destination outcomes is explored in Chapter 3.

[25] Whether these perceptions were always borne out in reality was challenged by one head of sixth form who suggested that, although some students decided to go to a college because they *'were attracted by the idea of greater freedom and less checking up... [in the end] those turn out to be the very reasons why they decide to come back here'.*

students who were clearly not suited to, or not interested, in that environment. One head of sixth form explained that, '*any students who are not suited to an academic sixth form are given advice on alternatives by the school and by the Connexions adviser*'. This statement was supported by the Connexions adviser herself who said she knew tutors advised students to '*look outside the school if they know they are not suited to an academic sixth form*'. In her view, the problem was not the attitude of the school, but rather '*the pressure that some young people are under from their parents to stay and do A levels when they are not suited to that path*'. This opinion was also voiced by staff and Connexions interviewees in other schools.

In making the decision about post-16 destination, however, it seemed that Year 11 students in these 11-18 schools seemed no more likely to make direct linkages between their careers education and guidance experiences and their post-16 decision-making than their younger peers had made in Year 9. A few indeed, felt that such experiences were an unnecessary distraction, with one girl, reflecting the view of careers education and guidance also presented by her teachers, commenting: '*In two periods we had to do practice CVs and stuff like that. It was a waste of time as I could have been revising*'. Others, however, suggested that they would have liked to have had more systematic help ('*I wasn't sure who to talk to*') and were critical of some of the assumptions that had been made about them, particularly that they had a career path marked out ('*There wasn't much help in actually deciding which courses to take. It* [the guidance interview] *was more focused on what to do next.*') and that they understood the implications of their subject or career choices ('*I didn't feel I was listened to. She didn't tell me how to get the qualification...she didn't give me any information on what it means or anything*').

The postponement of discussions about post-16 courses until Year 11 that characterised most of these 11-18 schools was also criticised by a few young interviewees, who felt they were expected to make decisions with too little lead-in time. While this was not a widely expressed view, a feeling of disappointment ('*I felt I was let down by the school*') and panic was evident in some cases ('*we didn't have enough time to make our decisions. We didn't get enough warning really, because they kept pounding into our heads about GCSEs and then all of a sudden they say "Here are your A level choices. You've got to decide now".*') To what extent was this mixed picture of understanding of post-16 opportunities reflected in the 11-16 schools? This is discussed in the following section.

2.2.3 The post-16 offer from the 11-16 schools

In schools without sixth forms, the possibility of the 'comfortable' post-16 option was clearly not available, although it became apparent that the desire to '*stay in the local area, rather than travel into the city centre*' could be an

important factor in deciding on destination. As a result, a number of young people were thought, by teaching staff, to be restricting themselves, both in their choice of destination and in their choice of course. While young people in the 11-16 schools were generally more appreciative of the careers education and guidance activities that they had undertaken (compiling CVs and application forms, for example, were seen as having direct relevance to their stage in life), staff clearly felt that many had what one careers coordinator described as '*naïve*' views of post-16 opportunities. Limited employment opportunities for 16 year olds, and the relatively limited availability of Apprenticeships were said not to be always understood by Year 11 students, who '*don't appreciate how hard it is to get a Modern Apprenticeship*'.

All seven schools provided some form of post-16 options event, at which they could talk to post-16 providers (sixth form staff from schools, FE and sixth form college staff, training providers and employers) alongside a programme of careers education and guidance activities. The story across the seven 11-16 schools was not the same, however, with some differences emerging in the attitudes and behaviour of the young people in the urban, suburban and rural schools.

Students in the three urban schools were said to have a wide choice of post-16 institutions to choose from, including academic school sixth forms and large FE colleges and sixth form colleges. However, while attainment levels (at Key Stage 3 and 4) in all three schools were similar (in the bottom quintiles for the country), the staying in learning rate in only two of these (Hawke Comprehensive and Darnley Comprehensive) was high (around 80 per cent). The rate in the third school, Raleigh High, was low (around 40 per cent). Staff perceptions were that this low rate was to do with the relatively buoyant local youth labour market (25 per cent of leavers elected to enter employment, with or without training), but also to do with a misconception about the accessibility of apprenticeships[26]: '*They are subject to availability and that really confuses young people. They put it down as their only option and won't consider college. Apprenticeships let them down because there isn't one available and then they end up not in education or training*'.

The differences between these three urban schools cannot be put down to significant differences in the quality of the careers education and guidance programmes. Young people in all three schools had access to relatively comprehensive, structured programmes and nearly all of the interviewees were enthusiastic about the support they received, whether in terms of information ('*we were given different prospectuses for different colleges and information on Modern Apprenticeships or to go to different colleges or get a job or whatever*'), experiences ('*ever since Year 9, we've had careers lessons and they've always brought people in from colleges and universities and they've*

---

[26]   Students' perceptions on the availability of apprenticeships is discussed in Section 2.4.

done activities with us and made us familiar with colleges. We've had loads of trips out and speaking to teachers about different routes') or individual support (with one young person suggesting that her application to college would not have happened without the intervention of the visiting Personal Adviser). This suggests, that, for young people in Raleigh High, where careers action planning began in Year 10, factors *other* than the careers education and guidance programme must have been at work to attract young people towards employment, or to push them away from education.

The situation in the two suburban schools, Drake High and Haig, was dissimilar. In both schools, staying-on rates were high (over 80 per cent), although the extent of local post-16 provision was quite different. Students from Drake High had access to several FE and sixth form colleges, one of which had a strong academic reputation and operated a selective intake. Heavy competition for such places meant that young people were encouraged, according to interviewees, to begin the decision-making process at an early stage. Staff suggested, however, that young people who were not intending to take up an A level course tended to postpone a consideration of their choices until the careers fair event during Year 11. This might explain the lack of satisfaction expressed by one young person who suggested that *'other years are fine, but when it comes to Year 11 and our choices, school doesn't given enough help'*.

Young people from Haig School, by contrast, had little local access to post-16 provision, other than to school sixth forms in the independent sector. However, staff at the school were concerned that young people tended to '*follow the bandwagon*' to FE colleges, rather than to consider academic sixth forms or sixth form colleges: as the Connexions advisor to the school suggested, '*some Year 11s have very pre-conceived ideas about post-16 provision and think that in a sixth form they will be treated like babies*'.[27] In order to address this concern, the school had tried to ensure that young people made informed decisions through individual one-to-one '*professional half hour interviews*' for all students.[28]

This view - that young people tended to opt unthinkingly for courses in FE colleges rather than considering another school sixth form or a sixth form college – was shared by some staff in other 11-16 schools. However, there was little concrete evidence amongst the young people who were interviewed that this was indeed the case. Among the five interviewees from the suburban school, for example, three had gone to a sixth form college in a neighbouring borough (*'it has a very good reputation, excellent grades and calm*

---

[27] This perception provided an interesting contrast to students in 11-18 schools, who tended to take the opposite view.

[28] The school, which had a high proportion of students eligible for free school meals and who spoke English as an additional language, had a relatively high caseload allocation from Connexions and so were able to support this strategy.

atmosphere'); one had gone to a local independent school following discussions with her mother ('*she thinks it's better for me to study and get good grades and if I go to college I won't do as well*') and the fifth student had gone to an FE college. Many of the young people in the 11-16 schools also suggested that they had carried out some individual research in selecting their post-16 options, exploring websites in order to compare school and college results and looking specifically at the results for the subjects they were interested in taking.[29]

There is, nonetheless, an indication that sixth form colleges were sometimes perceived by young people from 11-16 schools in the same way that students in 11-18 schools felt towards their own sixth forms - that they were the 'safe' option, where there would be high academic standards ('*A Level results are better than in FE* colleges') and a supportive environment. FE colleges, by contrast, were seen as more appropriate for vocational courses. This was expressed most clearly by the student who said she had made a point of visiting both the sixth form and FE college and liked the facilities in both, but the FE college was '*more courses like hairdressing and building, whereas X* [sixth form] *college was like A Levels and that's what I want to do'*. Indeed, when actual destinations were explored, it appeared that students from 11-16 schools following academic routes were most likely to have chosen to do so at a sixth form college or school sixth form, while those following vocational courses tended to opt for an FE college.

Not all Year 11 students however, had the choice of several institutions within easy travelling distance. The two rural 11-16 schools had to consider problems of isolation, with both reliant on public transport links to colleges. One had easier access to sixth form colleges and school sixth forms, but the second was not only without such access, but was also based in an area with little or no employment opportunities for young people and a very limited availability of apprenticeships. The FE college to which most were applying also involved a long journey, so that the young people in this area had a very restricted choice compared to those in other areas.

Although the process of considering post-16 options was said to be given priority in both of these rural schools, with an emphasis on independent decision-making, young people's views of the value on the support they were given was mixed. Indeed, in one school, students reported a feeling of being left unsupported ('*we were just given a sheet, but then sort of left*') and of not being guided by staff ('*no-one offers an opinion...we were left to it on our own really. I thought if we'd had a bit more help, it would have been easier*'). Here the criticism was not of a lack of information, but of a lack of mediation of that information, a view also expressed by young people (and their parents)

---

[29] This belief that young people tended to consider results was backed up by a staff interviewee from a sixth form college, who said that they had no difficulty attracting students, because '*we have a 98 per cent pass rate for A Levels and a good reputation built up over the years*'

at the second school. Parents of young people from this school pinpointed a need for greater input, not only in the decision-making process, but in helping young people understand the outcomes of their choices, with one parent saying that her daughter had *'no feedback on the implications of her decision'*.

The post-16 offer therefore depended not only on the type of school but on the local educational and transport infrastructure. Post-16 options for some young people were, in effect, restricted by both historical and socio-economic structures, a limiting factor that may only be partly addressed through the collaborative work that underpins the development of area prospectuses. To what extent is there evidence amongst the young people in the sample that such potential barriers (or aids) to post-16 learning affected them?

2.3   Post-16 destinations

Table 2.2 indicates that, in the summer of their final year of compulsory education, only a minority of Year 11 students were not planning to stay in full-time education or training post-16.

Table 2.2   Planned post-16 destinations

Planned post-16 destinations	N of Boys	N of girls	Total N
Full-time college (FE)	13	17	30
Full-time school sixth form (current school)	8	10	18
Full-time sixth form college	9	8	17
Apprenticeship	6	-	6
Full-time school sixth form (a different school)	1	3	4
Job with training	1	-	1
Something else (for example, travel)	1	1	2
Don't know	1	1	2
N =	**40**	**40**	**80**

Subsequent interviews revealed that most students (48 of the 57 who were contacted in their post-compulsory destinations) were following their planned routes (see Table A6 in Appendix A).[30] More had opted to stay in their own school than had originally declared their intention to do so (21 compared to 17). Of these, two had previously thought they would move to an FE college,

---

[30]   Although most students were studying at the institution they had anticipated, some changes were made to the courses they were studying, as discussed in Chapter 4.

one had thought to take up an Apprenticeship, but had decided that *'A levels give you more options for life'*,[31] and one had not made a decision.

The numbers planning and transferring to a sixth form college (nine) or a sixth form in a different school (three), by contrast, were the same, suggesting that such decisions had been relatively firm at the time of the initial interview,[32] whilst the numbers stating an intention and subsequently entering an FE college were largely unchanged between the two waves of interviews (20 had stated an intention to take up a place in a college, 18 had done so, one of whom had hope to follow the Apprenticeship route).

Only a minority had *not* stayed in full-time education or training post-16. Of these, three (all boys) were in jobs without training,[33] all of whom appeared to be relatively low attainers (with GCSE scores ranging from 118 points to 254 points) but none of whom had initially envisaged going down this path. For two, the job appeared to be an interim measure, undertaken while they sought other routes, but in at least one case, the decision might have been different had he received higher levels of support and guidance, pre-16.

> *I'm working for a sign company. I got better grades than I expected, so I think I could have got a better job. I am hopefully going to do an apprenticeship in the new year.* [I got my job] *through work experience…but it's not what I expected.* [I heard about apprenticeships] *through my friend…he got one last year, so he's getting me an application form.* [I wish I had] *worked harder in my exams and got even better grades…instead of sticking in the lower ones…to get an even better job. They* [the school] *could have given me better information on different types of jobs…I didn't have enough information…but at the time I wasn't really bothered, I just wanted to leave school and earn money quickly, so I took the first job…I took the easy route.*

For a third boy, this choice of a job-without-training appeared, by contrast to be more a consequence of parental influence and the desire for future security. He had followed in his father's footsteps as a roofer, and saw it as *'a job for life'*. *'I just jumped in the deep end and went straight into it…it was the first thing that came up.'* He was not critical of the level of support he had received from the school, but had clearly decided that factors other than continuing education were important to him.

---

[31] Only one of the three young people who had hoped to follow an Apprenticeship route had done so, with reasons for not following this route primarily related to a lack of placement opportunities.

[32] Students from 11-16 schools most often went to sixth form colleges if they were pursuing academic courses or to FE colleges if they were studying vocational courses.

[33] The proportion of students in the sample not staying in full time education or training was not representative of the national picture. This might reflect the selection of students; despite being asked to select students who represented different ability ranges, the sample was skewed towards those with higher attainment.

3. School context

Summary of the School Context

- Half of the 14 case-study schools appeared to have a school-centred focus, with emphasis on student performance and achievement (reflecting Foskett's research findings (Foskett et al., 2004), all but one of these schools had sixth forms)

- Five of the seven 11-16 schools seemed to have a student-centred focus, with more emphasis on giving students support, advice and guidance.

- Four schools were characterised as being particularly 'effective' in relation to 'soft' indicators of effectiveness (including school leadership, ethos, curriculum management and provision of careers education and guidance); three of these schools were 11-16 schools which gave emphasis to student support. However, these 'effective schools' were not all in the highest bands for Key Stage 3 and 4 performance, suggesting, possibly, that not all 'effective' schools are high achieving schools and that some of the high achieving schools may not have been the most effective in supporting decision-making.

- Seven schools were considered to be relatively effective based on 'soft' indicators.

- Three schools were considered to be less effective in relation to overall support for young people (two were 11-18 schools).

The previous chapter explored the range of decisions young people may make in Year 9 and Year 11 – but in what types of schools are these decisions being made? This chapter looks at how the school context was characterised and gives details of the profile of the case-study schools.

3.1 Characterising the school context

As discussed in Chapter 1, the 14 case-study schools were chosen to reflect a wide variety of secondary school types and a diverse range of settings (full details are given in Appendix A). In order to set young people's decision-making processes in an educational context (as well as a personal context), data relating to the schools was examined in order to ascertain the extent to which they could be regarded as student or attainment centred, the extent to which they could be regarded as effective (across a range of 'hard' and 'soft' measures) and the extent to which they provided a comprehensive and impartial programme of careers education and guidance (Appendix A provides a overview of the profile of the schools). Each of these analyses was based on models derived from previous research studies.

The first of these was based on the concept of **school focus**, derived from the study undertaken by Foskett *et al* (2004). According to the Foskett typology, schools demonstrate four broad orientations of school focus: *school-centred; student-centred; functional; and policy focused.* Institutions with a *school-centred focus* are said to focus primarily on what the school can offer to young people (in terms of their curriculum and their ethos). Those with a *student-centred focus*, by contrast, tend to emphasise the need to focus on the needs of the individual student. Schools with a predominantly *functional focus* appear to place greater emphasis on operational management procedures and the roles to be played by specific groups or individuals, while the key feature of schools dominated by a *policy-focus* is their apparent awareness and responsiveness to changing external policy.

Under the Foskett *et al.* typology, a school can have both a primary focus (its main emphasis) and a secondary focus (which is given emphasis but to a lesser degree) and the authors suggested that there may be associations between different types of school and their focus. Seven of the eight schools that were characterised as school-centred institutions in their study, for instance, were those with sixth forms, and the prevailing expectation was that students would continue at school post-16. Most appeared to have a culture of high achievement, a strong academic tradition and a focus on university entrance and appeared to make limited provision of information and advice on alternative post-16 routes. Student-centred schools, by contrast, tended to be primarily 11-16 schools and did not appear to promote any specific post-16 option in preference to any other.

Interview and documentary data from the 14 schools in the current study were analysed in order to build a picture of the primary and secondary focus of the case-study schools, in order to contextualise young people's decision-making and to explore further the relative impact of the apparent associations that Foskett *et al.* found between school focus and school type.

The second strategy that was adopted for characterising the schools was that based on a number of the **correlates of school effectiveness** that have previously been identified by researchers in the field, including Sammons *et al.*(1995). These 'soft' indicators of school effectiveness were used alongside 'hard' indicators of student performance, based primarily on attainment data (see Appendix A), in order to provide an overview of the relative 'effectiveness' of the schools in the study and their current capacity for change. The 'soft' indicators that were included in this study were broad measures of:

- **School leadership** – the quality of leadership has consistently been identified as a major factor in the overall effectiveness of a school and the broad features of this leadership (including the level of consensus that

emerged amongst interviewees) were outlined, as far as possible, for each school, using documentary and interview evidence.

- **Ethos** – the school's cultural background was examined, especially in terms of whether staff and students had a shared vision and whether the school was seen as pastoral, academic, or workplace oriented for example, or a combination of these.

- **Expectations of staff** – the relevant factors here included the extent to which staff had high expectations, both of work and behaviour, for students at all ability levels and how they reinforced the various systems for student support and encouragement.

- **Attitudes of students** – this included consideration of the students' attitudes to academic performance, behaviour and responsibility for their work and their perceptions of school support and whether the school was preparing them for adult and working life.

- **Curriculum management** – this correlate looked particularly at the coherence of approach and planning, levels of liaison across departments and the breadth of choice for students.

- **External partnerships** – this measure included an overview of links with parents, employers and other role models for students and how these were included and promoted within the school.

Each school was analysed according to the six dimensions listed above, in order to distinguish between those schools that appeared to be particularly effective within the sample and those that appeared less effective. These 'soft' indicators of 'effectiveness' were compared with the 'hard' indicators (such as performance data) to give an overall picture of school effectiveness.

The third area under scrutiny was that of **careers education and guidance programmes and the general support structures** in the school, based on work by Morris *et al.* (2001) were examined. The analysis took into consideration things such as:

- the level of staff commitment to careers education and guidance

- the status of the careers coordinator within the school

- the level of careers education and guidance related training for staff

- the extent of external involvement in careers programmes

- provision for monitoring and evaluation

- the school's relationship with the local Connexions service.

Based on an analysis of staff and student interviews, where these various issues had been explored, an assessment was made about the quality of careers education and guidance and levels of support in the case-study schools.

The profile of the case-study schools across these various dimensions (focus, effectiveness and careers education and guidance provision) is discussed in the following section.

3.2 Profile of the case-study schools

Figure 3.1 summarises the primary and secondary focus for each of the 14 case-study schools. It shows that, as Foskett *et al.* identified, the predominant model amongst the 11-18 schools was that of a school-centred primary focus. The secondary focus tended to be split between a student-centred focus (suggesting that although their main emphasis appeared to be on student achievement, they were offering significant support to young people) and a policy-centred secondary focus (suggesting that concerns about overall performance and being responsiveness to policy changes may have dominated any support they gave to students). In contrast, the majority of the 11-16 schools (five of the seven) appeared to be primarily student-focused with a secondary focus ranging from an emphasis on overall school performance (three schools) to that focused on policy or functional concerns.

Figure 3.1   School focus

Primary focus		Secondary focus			
		School centred	*Student centred*	*Policy focused*	*Functional*
	School centred		Nelson Grammar (11-18) Marlborough Secondary (11-18) Cromwell School (11-18) Darnley Comprehensive (11-16)	Wellington Secondary Modern (11-18) Anson School (11-18) Montgomery School (11-18)	
	Student Centred	Haig School (11-16) Essex School (11-16) Raleigh High School (11-16)		Hawke Comprehensive (11-16)	Sidney School (11-16)
	Policy focused		Frobisher School (11-18)		
	Functional	Drake High School (11-16)			

Figure 3.2 below explores the apparent relationship (for these 14 schools) that emerged by comparing their primary focus with correlates of effectiveness.

Figure 3.2   School effectiveness ('soft' indicators)

Primary focus	'Very effective'	'Effective'	'Less effective'
School-centred	Nelson Grammar School (11-18)	Wellington Secondary (11-18) Marlborough Secondary Modern (11-18) Darnley Comprehensive (11-16) Anson School (11-18) Montgomery School (11-18)	Cromwell School (11-18)
Student-centred	Hawke Comprehensive (11-16) Haig School (11-16) The Essex School (11-16)	Sidney School (11-16) Raleigh High School (11-16)	
Policy-centred			Frobisher School (11-18)
Functional			Drake High School (11-16)

As can be seen from the figure, none of the 'less effective' schools in the sample (according to 'soft' indicators) appeared to be student-centred. However, three of the four 'very effective' schools had a student-centred focus. Those four schools that seemed to be particularly effective, however, were in other respects entirely different. One (Nelson) was a medium sized 11-18 selective school, with low levels of socio-economic deprivation and based in an area with high levels of local employment in managerial and professional occupations. Attainment was in the top 20 per cent band at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (see Appendix A), thus appearing to be an effective school (as suggested by 'hard' indicators) and with the capacity to remain an effective school (as implied by the 'soft' indicators). The remaining three (Hawke, Haig and Essex) of the 'very effective' schools were 11-16 comprehensives, ranging in size from small to large, with different levels of attainment and socio-economic deprivation and with different ethnic profiles. Despite their different nature, focus and localities, however, all four schools appeared to display an emphasis on responding to the needs of their individual students through cohesive curriculum management and pastoral care.

Figure 3.3 provides an overview of the extent to which there was a link between the soft indicators of effectiveness and other measures of performance.

Figure 3.3   Correlates of effectiveness and school performance

Performance measures	Correlates of Effectiveness (soft indicators)		
	Very effective	**Effective**	**Less effective**
High performing	Nelson, Essex	Anson	Cromwell
Middle performance		Wellington, Malborough, Montgomery, Sidney	Drake
Low performing	Hawke, Haig	Raleigh	Frobisher
No data		Darnley	

This comparison suggests that while Nelson and Essex were effective on all measures, Hawke and Haig were both low-performing schools but, potentially, had the capacity to improve, given the other correlates of effectiveness. Frobisher (a policy-focused school), by contrast, appeared to be less effective on both hard and soft indicators. Can any relationship be identified between these various measures of effectiveness, school focus and the curriculum offer to young people? Were the more 'effective' schools providing a wider range of option choices or more tailored provision at Key Stage 4, for instance? Did the student support programmes differ between schools with differing levels of effectiveness? The following case-studies (and the discussions in Chapters 4 and 5) seek to explore some of these questions.

Nelson Grammar School

This was a medium sized, 11-18 selective school with a diverse ethnic mix. It is located on the edge of a large town, but with a catchment area that includes semi-rural areas. It has been categorised as a highly effective school in relation to all measures of effectiveness (based on soft and hard indicators, as discussed above). For instance, it was in the highest band for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 performance, and there was evidence of its effectiveness in relation to 'softer' indicators, such as leadership, expectations and the attitudes of students. It has been characterised as having a school-centred primary focus, with emphasis on academic achievement. There seemed to be a strong academic ethos, and high staff expectations in relation to achievement. There was an expectation that students would continue in education and training post-16. In fact, each year, it was estimated that between 70 and 80 per cent of Year 11 students enter the sixth form and for most it is seen as the natural progression: '*It's the environment, I know it, I'm happy with it, I don't really need to change*'.

The school had a 'traditional' academic curriculum (at Key Stages 4 and 5), with no vocational offer (except for one or two students who were thought to benefit from off-site vocational courses). Although the school was responsive to changing demands, offering new A Level and GCSE courses whenever possible, the courses offered were still academic. This was not considered to be a problem for students, as they seemed to thrive on the academic curriculum - there did not seem to be a demand for vocational courses. This suggests that in order to be considered effective, schools do not necessarily have to provide a wide range of different 'types' of curriculum offers (if the offer matches the demands and needs of the students).

Despite the strong primary academic focus, the school appeared to have a student-centred secondary focus, suggesting a relationship between overall effectiveness and a balance between performance and student support. There seemed to be strategies in place to support all students in their decision-making. There was a structured programme of careers education and guidance in Years 9, 10 and 11, and the coordinator was a member of the senior management team (suggesting careers education and guidance had status within the school). Students deciding not to stay in the school were supported too; they were considered to be the '*priority group*' for the careers coordinator and all had one-to-one interviews with the Connexions Adviser. Although *all* students were given the opportunity for one-to-one interviews, those staying on at the school sixth form may not have taken up this opportunity (possibly feeling they did not need advice) and thus the extent to which they were making fully-informed decisions about their future studies could be questioned. However, other careers-related activities took place, such as talks given by speakers and industry days, which were likely to support decision-making.

The above case-study gives an illustration of a school which was considered to be effective on all measures explored in the research (including soft and hard indicators, as explained above), even though its primary focus was school-centred. To what extent were there any differences in curriculum offer and the support available to young people in the effective schools that were deemed more student-centred? Haig school resembled Nelson Grammar in relation to

many social indicators (see Tables A3 and A5), but had a far higher proportion of economically disadvantaged pupils and was located in an area of greater deprivation.

Haig School

Haig was an 11-16 comprehensive school, with a very diverse social and ethnic mix. It had a high proportion of students who were eligible for free school meals (more than 24 per cent) as well as a high proportion of speakers of a first language other than English. The school was characterised as having a student-centred primary focus, and this was reflected by a pastoral, caring and supportive ethos.

The school was categorised as very effective in terms of 'soft' indicators, such as leadership, staff expectations, curriculum management and careers education and guidance, yet was a low performing school. Although the school had students who covered all ability ranges, it was in the lowest quintiles for performance at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, and was anxious to encourage all students to achieve their best as individuals. This was reflected in the school's secondary focus, which was characterised as school-centred; supporting students was the primary emphasis, but there was a strong emphasis on encouraging them to achieve. The school had in place a broad curriculum offer at Key Stage 4, which attempted to cater for all ability ranges. The most able students were entered for examinations early, which was said to have boosted their confidence, and there was a general consensus among all students that they had a wide range of choice. Every student had to undertake a vocational option at Key Stage 4, although they were then able to choose from a wide range of options (to which they were guided based on ability). This broad curriculum offer was coupled with staff determination to improve the school's overall performance (they argued that this was for the students' benefit, not just the school's benefit).

The school felt they could do yet more to improve their careers education and guidance provision (they intended to introduce it from Year 7) and there was strong senior management commitment as well as Connexions Service involvement in the current programme. All Year 11 students had an interview with a Connexions adviser, though younger students were thought to need more support than was currently available (the school was hoping to address this).

Given the overall effectiveness in relation to leadership, curriculum management and student support, for instance, the school appeared to have the capacity (and drive) to improve overall and to support young people in the decision-making process.

Not all schools in the sample appeared to have the capacity to improve to the extent that Haig School seemed to have. When an apparent lack of effectiveness was linked to a focus that was not student-centred, there was an indication that improvement was difficult and that the extent of support that could be made available to young people was poor. The socio-economic circumstances of Frobisher School (a policy-focused school) were challenging, although the proportion of young people in receipt of Free School

Meals was less than that in Haig. However, it seemed less capable of supporting decision-making among young people in the school than did Haig.

Frobisher School

Frobisher was a large 11-18 comprehensive school in an area of socio-economic deprivation. It had a relatively high proportion (between 14-19 per cent) of students eligible for free school meals and a high proportion with special educational needs statements (between 3-29 per cent). The school's primary focus was on responding to policy changes, and while there was mention of reorganisation of the curriculum offer to meet policy requirements there was no mention of whether this met students' needs. '*We re-jigged the curriculum to enable access to all students to meet statutory requirements, and this has had a knock on in terms of how many option blocks we were able to produce*'. Although the staff talked about the school having a caring ethos and the desire to support students (that is, a student-centred secondary focus), there seemed to be some challenges to fulfilling that desire.

The school was categorised as being less effective in relation to the 'soft' indicators of effectiveness. For instance, staff expectations seemed poor and encouragement for students seemed to be lacking (some staff admitted they needed to do more to raise student expectations). This was reflected in the poor attitudes that some students had towards school. Strong leadership seemed to be lacking, and there were disagreements amongst staff in relation to some school practices.

In addition, the school was less effective in relation to performance (it was in the second lowest bands for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 performance). The lack of aspirations amongst the students, and the issue of encouragement from staff, would make it seem as though the school did not have a strong capacity to improve. This was coupled with what was still a somewhat limited Key Stage 4 curriculum offer, despite the changes made. Students criticised the '*restricted choice*' as they were guided down certain pathways, which led to some disappointments ('*I wanted to do more than we were actually allowed*'). The curriculum was mainly academic, with vocational options limited to a very small minority of students who went to college as part of the Increased Flexibilities Programme. Staff admitted that the curriculum '*could be broader*' at Key Stages 4 and 5 (only a few vocational courses were available in the sixth form).

Strategies did not seem to be in place to support students' decision-making. Careers education and guidance had been 'consolidated' with a number of other curriculum areas within PSHE, but the integration did not appear effective. There seemed to be a reliance on the Connexions Adviser to support students. Staff interviewed students on a one-to-one basis, but the discussion appeared to be based solely on performance data and little else.

This chapter has outlined some of the differences between the schools in the study in terms of focus and effectiveness (in relation to soft indicators such as leadership, ethos, careers education and guidance, staff expectations, student support and curriculum management, as well as hard indicators such as performance data). To what extent do these factors impinge on student decision-making? This is explored in the following chapters.

4. Young people's perceptions of decision-making

> **Summary of Young People's Perceptions on Decision-Making**
>
> - Young people, in general, were influenced by their perception of a subject, both in terms of their enjoyment of it and its apparent worth, as well as their perception of their ability at a subject. However, where students were provided with a wide range of information, advice and guidance of an impartial nature, there was evidence that they had been influenced by structural factors (such as careers education and guidance and talks with teachers). In contrast, where that was not the case, students appeared more influenced by factors associated with agency, with young people turning to their friends, family and other external sources of influence.
>
> - Students in 'effective' schools (in relation to leadership, ethos, curriculum management and careers education and guidance, for instance) were less likely to change their minds about their choices and, on reflection, were more likely to be happy with their chosen route.
>
> - Year 11 students' decisions about post-16 destinations seemed more critical than Year 9 choices about Key Stage 4 subjects, although the general consensus amongst students was that both aspects of choice were important. In some schools, the Year 9 decision was not considered important by staff, which had a negative impact on the decisions made by some young people.
>
> - Most young people appeared to have thought through, and be aware of, the consequences of their decisions. Most had considered the impact of their choices on their futures, for example in relation to career opportunities.

Prior to a consideration of the mindsets that young people bring to the decision-making process, this chapter focuses on the influences on young people, their awareness of the consequences of their decisions and their reactions towards the choices they needed to make. Regard is also given to how school context, for example school effectiveness as discussed in Chapter 3, might affect such decisions. These findings are based on the student narratives in waves 1 and 2 of this research, as well as on discussions with staff and parents in wave 1.

4.1 Influences on decision-making

Before considering young people's awareness of the consequences of their decision-making, and the reactions to their choices, it is first important to consider the various influences (in addition to the curriculum offer and school

context outlined in Chapters 2 and 3) under which young people made their decisions.

Reflecting the findings in the recent literature reviews conducted by McCrone *et al.* (2006) and Payne (2003), the following sub-section explores the findings that emerged from interviews with staff, students and parents in wave 1,[34] and the 'circle of influence' activity (described in Appendix A), with respect to the relevant roles of structure and agency in the decision-making process.

4.1.1 Structural dimensions

Structural dimensions can broadly be identified as those specifically related to institutions and to particular support mechanisms. For the purposes of this report, these dimensions are also held to include the role played by teachers and those agencies (outside the family) providing information, advice and guidance. Although often regarded as a factor more related to agency (as part of the unique and complex array of influences on a student), their integral role in the presentation of the Key Stage 4 and post-16 offer and in the process of decision-making process in school would suggest that, in this instance, they should be discussed under the heading of structural dimensions, a view reinforced by the teacher who noted, with respect to young people in Year 9: '*students find it difficult to separate personalities from subjects'.*

The wider role of structure (in terms of institutional provision and ethos) was raised more often with respect to decisions about post-16 destinations than to decisions about Key Stage 4 options, although the central role of teachers was emphasised at both stages, particularly by students. For young people in Year 9, this was often with respect to '*who is teaching what'.* As the head of Year 9 at Essex school acknowledged, **teacher personality** was a '*strong factor'* in students' decisions: '*if they are enjoying a subject and who is teaching it* [then they are more likely to choose the subject] *… if they don't like the teacher then that influences them'.*

By Year 11, there appeared to have been a subtle shift in the way in which young people viewed the role of teachers. While personality was still an influential factor for some young people ('*it depends on the teacher whether the subject is interesting'* and '*…a lot of the subjects I haven't chosen, I don't like the teachers'*), there was also evidence of a more measured approach, with young people suggesting that they approached teachers for information on content (what the subject might cover at the advanced level), on their potential ability in the subject (and, in the case of form tutors), overall advice on what might be suitable for them ('*they've helped me, they know me pretty well'*).

---

[34] Wave 1 focussed on the influences on the young people. Wave 2 concentrated on their reflections on the decision-making process.

There was evidence in both age groups of a desire to avoid the 'hard sell' of teachers who '*just wanted me to take the subjects that* [s/he] *teaches'* and of a wish to make their own decisions (*'I didn't want other teachers to persuade me to do their subjects'*).This seemed to be happening primarily in the schools which appeared to be 'less effective' overall (as described in Chapter 3, where students also appeared to be less successful at making decisions (discussed in Chapter 5).

Approximately one-third of unprompted comments from Year 9 students centred on the role played by **careers-related advice**, although only a few teachers seemed to think that careers advice influenced Year 9 students**.** Many young people appreciated the options presentations, assemblies and open evenings they had experienced and suggested that opportunities to use careers libraries and the resources they provided (including computer packages such as KUDOS and internet facilities) had been valuable. The views of many are epitomised in the following comments from a Year 9 student at Montgomery school (an 11-18 comprehensive):

> *The library and internet were useful because I found information on being a policeman and decided that I didn't want to be that after all. I was taken to the library by a careers person and it was really useful. I spent two lessons there and looked up information on jobs like the qualifications needed and the potential money I could earn.*

These different staff and student perspectives on the role played by careers education and guidance were also in evidence in Year 11. With the exception of work experience (believed by many to be influential in helping young people '*realise that they don't want to do what they thought they did or ... confirm*[ing] *their choice or help*[ing] *to raise their aspirations'*), only a few staff felt that Year 11 were substantially influenced by careers advice. This view contrasted with the many young people (in both 11-16 and 11-18 schools) who clearly felt that careers guidance was a valuable source of help, referring to the influential part played by Personal Advisers, open evenings and presentations, the careers office and library, careers fairs (*'I had no idea what I wanted to do until I went to the careers fair'*), computer packages, leaflets and the internet, in helping them make their post-16 decisions. A few students also mentioned being influenced by Aimhigher, which, according to some students *'had made me think seriously about HE'*. Indeed, in wave 2, when reflecting on the support they had received, and regardless of the type of school attended, many young people indicated their appreciation of impartial careers advice.

Positive views were not universal, however, and careers education and guidance was sometimes mentioned more in relation to its absence or perceived poor quality, rather than in terms of its contribution to decision-making. As one young person complained, *'you get told by everyone you have*

to do your own research, but if you don't know where to get it from it's not very helpful'. In Drake High School and the Cromwell School, where the perception of careers education and guidance was that it was largely ineffective, there was evidence that young people were not as effective at decision-making (see Chapter 5).

Amongst those who had access to **Connexions** Personal Advisers, reference was made both to their value in terms of helping Year 9 students to choose their options (*'Connexions were very helpful as, at first, I did not know what to choose'*) and in terms of helping them through what for some was a stressful time (*'Connexions gave me support when I felt under pressure'*). For those in Year 11, the careers-related element appeared to have come more to the fore, either in terms of assistance in identifying potential careers (*'I asked how my options matched my future career plans, and she gave me advice, gave me the use of books and told me that I was on track really*) or accessing careers (*'she helped me to* [complete] *forms, sending letters off to companies'*), as well as in terms of in finding out more about courses and pathways (*'Connexions explained A Level subjects to me which was useful for psychology').* Not all young people believed that Connexions had been helpful: *'I would like the careers people to give us a bit more information and tell us how to go forward, like what colleges are good for certain things, and what courses will help us to achieve our goals'*. When given the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences of decision-making, many young people remained critical of the advice they received. This view was sometimes shared by teaching staff, who suggested that the input from Connexions did not always address the needs of their students.

Consideration of the role of the institution was most evident in the recognition of the attraction that a **known environment** had for many of the students in 11-18 schools, even when this attraction was not necessarily in a young person's best interests. As staff suggested *'a lot of them stay on in the sixth form because they feel safe and secure and don't like to experience change... as a result some stay but they're not sure what they want to do or why they're staying on'*. While some teachers specifically suggested that, despite selling their reputation to their students, they had no wish to *'just* [get] *bums on seats',* it was telling that there was little or no mention of alternative post-16 provision by the young people in three of the seven 11-18 schools in the study.

What became apparent was that, for young people in the four 11-18 schools where young people were considering an alternative post-16 provider, the institution had to offer something that they were particularly looking for in order to overcome the strong attraction to the known. For some this was simply in terms of young people who *'wanted a change'* with some suggesting that *'I just wanted to get out of school...get a job and start my life'*. Wave 2 confirmed that for many this was the right decision. Others suggested that a different post-16 provider gave them the opportunity to access a wider

curriculum and a better chance of success: *'they have better subject choice and get better grades'*. For others, a relationship with the alternative provider that had built up during the years prior to post-16 had alerted them to different courses and had increased their confidence in their ability to succeed in a new area. For yet other students, family experiences provided the impetus to change direction. One boy, for instance, had been influenced by the experience of his older siblings and wanted to follow in their footsteps.

In the case of young people from 11-16 schools, the possibility of staying in a known environment was not an option. These students, as well as those from 11-18 schools, appeared to be influenced by five main factors in deciding upon their post-16 destination. An institution's **reputation** in the local community was important, as were its **specialisms** (whether academic courses or '*hairdressing and building*', as one student characterised her local providers). Visits to post-16 providers appeared to be highly influential in helping young people make decisions *'because they told me everything that the college expected....and the interviewer at the college helped by outlining the courses',* giving them insights into the **environment** and the atmosphere: *'it was quite friendly and seemed to have a nice atmosphere'*. The question of **location** was highlighted by many staff who felt that many young people would only consider a post-16 institution that was *'conveniently located',* with a Personal Adviser suggesting that '*even if they had a career goal, the college choice would be more down to location than course'*. This view was not always overtly shared by young people (*'I* [would] *have to travel 45 minutes from where I live but I don't think that would really sway my choice'*), although there was evidence that it was certainly part of their thinking ('[my own school sixth form] *would be easier and I'd finish a lot earlier...because everywhere else would involve additional travelling time'*) and was clearly recognised by some of the parents (*'I had to guide and persuade him to go to a college further away, as he wanted to stay at the local school because it would mean another hour in bed'*).

The final structural factor that seemed to influence post-16 decisions was linked to **finance**, both in terms of potential income (*'they are influenced by money, they ask "how much am I going to get" which is a deciding factor'*) and avoiding debt. According to staff, '*a major question* [about further and higher education] *for our students is always debt'*. The Educational Maintenance Grant was thought to have '*had an impact, they realise that with qualifications they can earn more and the EMA helps'*. However, this was thought to be something of a two edged sword:

> They are influenced by finance, even at a young age they are concerned about this, and the EMA has impacted here, you can get young people to do anything if they get a reward and in this case it was money. My fear is that many will come to over rely on the EMA.

4.1.2 The dimension of agency

The recent literature review on young people's decision-making in Year 9 (McCrone *et al.,* 2006) suggested that the following factors shaped young people's subject choice.

Students' **perceptions of a subject**, both in terms of its intrinsic, inherent value, manifested itself as enjoyment of and/or interest in a subject, and its perceived extrinsic value in terms of usefulness to a future job or career.[35] Subject enjoyment was identified as a significant factor in option choices for Year 9 students by staff in half the schools, with teachers indicating that they generally directed students to '*chose a subject that you enjoy doing, that you think you can be successful at and maintains your interest and consider what you might like to be doing in a few years time'*. Significant numbers of both Year 9 and 11 students reported that they chose their subjects primarily because they liked and enjoyed them. Teachers suggested that, in Year 11, extrinsic value tended to dominate, as it prompted post-16 choices that '*are sometimes career driven'* or that were linked to longer-term plans '*in Year 11 I think they would choose the subjects that might lead on to what they want to do at university'*.

Students' **perception of their ability at a subject** was based on whether they believed themselves to be good at it. Staff in ten of the schools believed that young people in Year 9 chose the subjects that they '*perceive themselves to be good at, what they get the highest marks in'*, a view echoed by many students. Subject ability was also seen as a key influencing factor by students in Year 11; around one fifth of the respondents cited their perceived ability at a subject as a primary influence on whether they chose that subject to continue with at key stage 4.

The evidence suggests that the staff believed that the main influences on Year 9 students were **family, friends and teachers**. Young people largely concurred with this to the extent that family and teachers were seen as primary influencers, although generally alongside enjoyment of a subject and careers advice, rather than as a sole influence. Friends appeared to be valued as a secondary influence, although to what extent this reflects school adjurations not to be influenced by what their friends were doing is unclear. By Year 11, teachers felt the story was more complex, but still viewed the key influencers as family and friends, with teachers being, they thought, ousted by media influences.

The role of the **family** was held to be particularly influential, although not only in terms of parents. While aunts, uncles, and grandparents were also cited ('*I asked my uncles and aunties what they had picked and I looked at how they had turned out, if it had been good for them*), older siblings were

---

[35] See Appendix C for a detailed discussion of young people's attitudes to subjects.

thought to have '*a credibility that staff and parents don't have*' with access to '*inside information and experience*' a view endorsed by many young people ('*she's already been through the choices and I trust her*'). According to teachers, their role was even more marked in small schools, particularly for choosing subjects for Key Stage 4: '[the influence of older siblings] *will help them to decide to do or not to do a particular subject*'. Young people in Year 9 tended to cite their reliance on siblings' experiences less readily than students in Year 11, however, who often made reference to drawing on their experience of subjects and, more particularly, of locations. '*I know my brother's happy at college and he gets good grades*', reported one student, in explaining why s/he had selected to go to a college of further education, while another admitted that '*I'm going to go to* [N] *because my sister's been saying how nice the people are there, and she gets on with the teachers – my sister showed me around the college*'.

The parental role was identified by both staff and students. In most schools, staff appeared to believe that young people wanted their parents' opinion on their choices, seeking reassurance and affirmation as well as advice. While many suggested that the nature of such interactions was consultative in nature in Year 9 ('*…I think a lot of students will choose what their parents think are good options for them, but with discussion. It is not dictated to them*), others referred to '*parental pressure*', suggesting that '*parents have an important say, which is right, but sometimes can be overpowering*' and that '*some of our students have a lot of parental pressure on them to go down a particular route*'. This perception was echoed by a few young people in the study who sometimes admitted '*it was my parents making the decisions*'. This was sometimes to do with the subject ('[my mum] *had told me not to do history even though my teacher thought I should*') and sometimes the nature of the qualification. One young girl said her mother had influenced her '*by saying don't do things that won't help you, like NVQs*', a comment later endorsed by her mother who said '*M will not be doing anything vocational as she is very academic*'.

Most Year 9 students, however, indicated that their parents had acted as useful 'sounding boards' ('*I did have a discussion with my Dad about some of the stuff I was taking and he said that if it's what I want to do, to have a go at it and if I don't like it, change it*') or as sources of advice and guidance ('[my Dad had] *actually run through it with me and looked at what each teacher wrote about their subject, we looked at it thoroughly and chose from that*'). Some teachers believed that the influence of parents had declined ('*very few listen to parents. Parents are much more likely nowadays to say "it's your choice"*'), but there was little support for this view amongst young people either in Year 9 or in Year 11.

Indeed, in Year 11, there was a clear belief that '*at 16, family history plays a big role*' shaping expectations and influencing choices. This sometimes posed

a problem for schools, whether in terms of expectations that were too high, too limiting or too low:

> *A lot of students put down English and maths A Level because their parents think it is a good thing. There is a general issue about educating parents. In this area, there is a parental and peer thing that says you do A Levels, university then a job, that is the local culture, without really thinking about combining subjects and making them work.*

Young people recognised this issue *'there's only so much parents really know about A Levels as it was so long ago that they actually did them – it's difficult for them to be in our place now and see what the world wants'*. In some instances, they took a pragmatic stance; *'I'm prepared to take my parents' views into consideration but if they clash with my views I'll still do what I want because it is my decision'*. Others clearly continued to value parental input: *'The school has helped me, don't get me wrong, but my mum was the best person to talk to. She said "whatever you do I will be with you and will help you to get what you want"'*.

The role of **friends** was a more controversial point, with many teachers suggesting that they had to work hard to reduce the influence of peer pressure (*'We constantly remind the children not to pick a subject because their friends are doing it'*). In Year 9, this was sometimes thought to be related to a concern about the unknown (*'at the beginning what their friends do is important because of the panic of not being in the same class'*), with staff instigating strategies to reduce what were seen as irrational fears (*'for some who are lacking in security it tends to be their friends* [who influence them most]'):

> *We try to see them individually, and with their parents, and do a fair amount of discussion with them about why they have chosen things - and if we think they are choosing things because their friends are doing it (rather than it being the best one for them) we go back and talk to them again.*

This concern about peer influence was most marked when teachers were discussing young people who were seen as less able (*'the less intelligent students will go with their friends'*) or as disaffected (or potentially disaffected). This latter group were said to be *'influenced by their friends, it's very rare that anyone says "I'm going to do this because I want to do it"'*.

Discussions with young people downplayed the role of friends, however, with many young people suggesting that, while they talked about their choices with friends (over half suggested that they had discussed their options with their friends), they did not simply pick subjects that their friends were doing and few located their friends in the centre of their circle of influence.

> *We're all in the same class, we tell each other what we're doing and why....it helps to get along with each other. They're supportive as well as we're all going through it at the same time so they understand what I'm going through and I understand what they're going through.*

In some instances, it was evident, however, that the issue of security had come to the fore, as in the case of the Year 9 boy who noted that '*I asked them if they were going to do anything I was going to do so I wouldn't be on my own*'. For others, however, there was evidence of more mature thinking. As one girl commented: '*I spoke to my friends a bit...*[but] *I wasn't going to do an option just because my friends were doing it*'. Others showed evidence of clear insight: '*your friends aren't going to be there when you're sitting your GCSEs... they won't be there when you want to do your job*'.

The way in which young people approached decisions in Year 11, particularly in relation to post-16 location, indicated that the role of friends (at least in terms of choice of institution) might be stronger (and certainly more complex) than in Year 11. Staff in 11-16 schools made particular reference to this: '*Peer pressure is important in post-16 destinations, one college becomes very popular and everyone applies there*'. Others felt that this was not a matter for concern:

> *In terms of where they go, it depends on where their siblings went and where their friends are going, which is understandable, because they don't want to go to a new institution on their own and at a critical time in their education. There's nothing wrong with it.*

It is clear that some young people were influenced by the post-16 destination to which their friends were going. However, while most acknowledged that it would be good to '*have someone I know with me',* many emphasised the point that they had made an independent choice: '*most of my friends are going to the same college that I'm going to, which helps, but even if they didn't I'd still want to go to college'*. For some, it was clear that their choice was more truly independent ('*I think the course is more important and I'm going to a different college to my friends'*) particularly when '*none of them were interested in the same things'*. Some, indeed, displayed an independence of mind, with one young girl reporting that she had decided to go to a different college from her friends, as she recognised that she and her friends talked too much when together, and she felt she needed to be apart from them if she was to progress with her chosen course.

Nonetheless, the common view was that, while friends were helpful in discussing which colleges, schools or subjects were best, they were less helpful for actual decision-making ('*I think most of the people this year haven't really focused on their friends, they have more or less focussed on what they want to do'.*) Interestingly, a number thought *other* young people were influenced by peers, even when they themselves claimed not to be:

It wasn't as if I was thinking I've got to go to this college because that's where all my friends are. Some people probably would have done that because it's just something that teenagers do isn't it?

Some displayed deeper insights into the role that friends played in their lives and the choices they made, with one Year 11 girl in an academic school, for example, suggesting that friends were important because of shared experiences rather then being influential in terms of the final decision: '*they stick by you in whatever you choose to do, they know what you're like and how it's going to be*'.

The strength of friends' influence varied from individual to individual and there appeared to be no particular pattern by school type (see Section 4.1.3), although it was evident amongst schools with their own sixth forms that conversations were dominated by subject choice, whereas, at schools with no sixth forms, the choice of institution as well as subjects were discussed.

Preconceptions of **subject appropriateness** by, for example, gender or ability, in terms of vocational and academic focus also helped to shape young people's choice. Teaching staff made frequent references to the influence of the **media,** claiming that young people, particularly in Year 9 '*were motivated by money and glamour*'. As one Head of Year opined: '*TV influences them hugely, everything they watch does. They'll watch 'Bad Girls' and want to be a prison officer – it's even alright to be a footballer's wife now!'*

Others were concerned about the lack of realism: '*The glamour of TV and the media give a very superficial view of what is involved in a career like medicine or law and no idea of the hard work and qualifications that are needed*'. However, few students shared their view of television's influence, with only seven references (five in one school) to the power of the images they saw. One student claimed to be influenced by Jamie Oliver, for instance, while another said that TV documentaries had inspired his interest in law '*TV's a great influence.... TV makes you think of things even though sometimes it's a bit over the top*'. A third student said his choice of career had been influenced by the Discovery Channel and a fourth by newspapers which were '*more descriptive than TV*'.[36]

It is possible, of course, that young people are not always aware of the subliminal influence that various media sources have on their lives. Teachers, by contrast had a '*strong feeling that the media and role models are an influence',* particularly in terms of gender-stereotypical careers: '*for example, science is portrayed in the media as men in white coats, which doesn't persuade girls to do science'.*

---

[36] The issue of whether young people were realistic when making decisions is touched upon in Chapter 5.

Students' awareness (or lack of awareness) of the **alternatives open to them,** not only at 14 years old but also in subsequent years, also influenced young people. There was evidence that the variety and nature of the courses open to them influenced young people. There was an indication that some young people were narrow-minded in their approach to decision-making because they were set on a goal and either ignored alternatives or were not given information on all options (this is examined further in Chapter 5).

4.1.3 Key influences and the types of schools

Having explored the key influences on young people's decision-making, the research team looked at whether certain influences were particularly prominent, or lacking, in any of the case-study schools, and then explored the context of those schools to investigate whether any patterns emerged. Each of the key influences, and whether there were any noticeable links with types of school, is discussed in turn below.

Friends

The relationship between the influence of friends, the focus of the school and the level of apparent effectiveness of the school (as described in Chapter 3) was not clear. Young people cited their friends as a primary influence in different types of schools. The role of friends tended to differ between year groups (in no school were friends identified as a primary influence in both Year 9 and Year 11). However, there was some indication that a perceived lack of school-level support might go some way towards explaining why young people suggested that their friends were particularly influential.

None of the Year 9 students at Malborough or Anson, for example, mentioned school-level support mechanisms during interviews. In fact, students in these two schools were generally critical of the support they had been given by their school, whilst there was a perception amongst their parents that their children had not been given long enough to make their choices. A similar picture was evident in the schools where Year 11 students mentioned friends as highly influential. In Raleigh High School, there was a sense from the students that the school had not been sufficiently supportive in their decision-making and that there had been gaps in the information they had received. As a girl in Year 9 said:

> *I think that we didn't get enough information on what to choose, like, we had a few days just to pick. It would have been nice to have been given more information or more time to choose. If you had plenty of time to talk to maybe a careers adviser or something like that, that would have been good.*

There was a view that support in this school was not focused on young people's individual needs, but was too broad brush.

Similarly, in Drake High and Sidney School, where friends were identified by a number of students as a secondary influence, support appeared to be lacking. Students in Year 11 at Drake High either did not mention school-level factors during interviews or were critical of them: '*some teachers just told me I need to get really good grades in some subjects, but that's about it*' and '*I spoke to a careers person at school, but that was a while ago before I had decided to go to college, and it wasn't that useful*'. Students at Sidney school were also critical of the support they were given in Year 11, and suggested it was more informal than formal. As one boy in Year 11 noted:

> *…the teachers will just say 'so, what are you doing?' No-one offers an opinion…they're not that supportive in school. They could pay more interest…if you're going on to do a specific subject they could…it depends who they are really.*

The perceived lack of in-school support experienced by the interviewees in these schools, which was also reflected in their follow-up interviews, could well explain why students reported relying on friends to assist them with their decision-making.

Careers education and guidance

The careers coordinator and the careers education and guidance package were cited as particular influences on students in one school in particular – Hawke Comprehensive School (a student-focused school). This was an 11-16 school which had a comprehensive support package in place to inform students about post-16 options from Year 9 onwards. On the whole, and especially in the area of careers advice and guidance, the school was seen to be effective. The careers coordinator, who had a diploma in careers guidance, was the designated careers education and guidance teacher. She had arranged for a number of external agencies, such as colleges, universities and employers, to visit the school in Year 9, 10 and 11. There seemed to be a lot of formal support in place, as well as *ad hoc* informal advice and information from staff including the careers coordinator. The school was also praised by students as being very supportive; as one boy in Year 11 said:

> *The careers teacher has been helpful, she's been pointing us in the right direction. She's been telling us what college does certain stuff…she's got everything you need to know really, so if you need anything knowing about careers, just go to her.*

A girl in Year 11 at the same school commented:

Ever since Year 9 we've had careers lessons and they've always brought people in from colleges and students from universities, and we've had loads of trips out to different colleges and universities. They [the staff] *do a lot to make sure you're comfortable...they bring in a range of different people...they give you different options and if you've got any questions then they're really nice to talk to.*

There was some evidence that a school's geographical location also influenced young people, with those in more urban areas apparently less influenced by the local job market, a view shared by teachers ('*we are in a better area than most for employment opportunities*'). Overall, however, there appeared to be a lack of knowledge about local job markets, even though there was a general perception that such information might be useful in the future. The lack of unprompted comments made by students suggests that this may not have been regularly covered in their careers education and guidance. Students admitted that they were just thinking about the next immediate step for them, which for most students was further education, rather than thinking about jobs they might apply for in the future. Many students said they had considered what career path they might take, but had evidently not considered the availability of jobs in that pathway and many confined their comments on work to part-time/Saturday jobs when asked about their thoughts on the labour market.

However, in one rural case-study area, where employment opportunities were '*extremely limited*' awareness of labour market issues appeared greater. There was a perception that students thought seasonal jobs were '*low paid and demeaning*' and young people talked about moving away from the area in order to pursue career plans. Comments from students included, '*I'm not really interested in the local job situation...I'll be moving out of X anyway*' and '[knowing about the local labour market] *isn't really important to me as I plan to continue my studies outside X anyway*'.

Connexions Personal Advisers

Connexions Personal Advisers appeared to have been particularly influential in three schools: Darnley (in Year 9); Cromwell (in Year 11); and Drake (in Year 11), schools where students felt moderately well-supported and, with the exception of Cromwell, where they were ultimately happy with their choices.

School staff at Darnley Comprehensive School, in which the primary focus appeared to be on the school, acknowledged that the support that the school gave Year 9 students to make their option choices was not comprehensive. Some students reported that they had been confused by the options available and criticised the restricted choice at Key Stage 4. This view remained in the follow-up interviews when a few young people maintained that they had not felt well supported through the process. In these instances, it seemed that the

students turned to the Connexions Adviser for the support they were not getting from school staff. As one boy in Year 9 said:

> *When I first saw the options I got a bit muddled up with which ones I wanted to do, and I got in touch with the Connexions adviser...I was saying that I felt frustrated by the subjects that have got to be chosen, and would you be able to give me some advice.*

This student did not mention any other school input as helpful. A second boy noted:

> *We had a visit at the school from Connexions...when they came in and talked about it the week before we didn't have much of an idea of what to choose, because we were a bit confused on each subject and what we could choose. They* [the teachers] *didn't really talk about it until the last minute...they didn't really talk much about it, to give us more time to think.*

This latter point, that the teachers may have wanted to give the students time to think, may have been in an effort to adopt an impartial approach, so that subjects were not being 'sold' to students. Staff did not maintain a completely 'hands-off' approach to advice and guidance, however. A number of students mentioned individual teachers as a source of secondary influence on their decisions, although it seemed that such support had been informal, with most formal support appearing to have come from the Connexions Personal Adviser.

Similarly, it appeared that the careers coordinator at Drake High (a school with a functional focus and one that appeared to be less effective on a number of correlates of effectiveness, as described in Chapter 3) relied upon the Connexions Personal Advisers to provide support: '*We would not survive without them*'. The careers coordinator reported that everyone in Year 11 could have an interview with a Personal Adviser if they chose to, and Connexions advisers did group work sessions in PSHE lessons in Year 11. In interviews, young people in the school tended to overlook any school input or to be critical of it.

In Cromwell (one of the high performing schools in the sample, but with fewer of the 'softer' correlates of an effective school), there appeared to have been a significant amount of input from Connexions Personal Adviser. However, this support (both for young people seeking placements for college courses or apprenticeships and for those seeking to follow the university route) did not appear to be in place of teachers' support, but an adjunct to it. As one student said, '*the school offers it, if you'd like to speak to anyone*'.

Teachers

Teachers had been particularly influential on young people's decision-making at Nelson Grammar, Malborough Secondary Modern and Darnley Comprehensive, and, for some students, in Drake High School (even though many other students were critical of the support they received). Formal meetings or interviews with teachers were not mentioned in the latter three schools. Rather it appears that it was the more informal support from teachers in these schools which had proved useful for students. As one boy in Year 9 at Malborough Secondary said, for instance, '*Art I love...the teachers were saying I could do it*', while a second commented, '*I've spoken to a couple of teachers...the subjects that I've chosen...basically I've spoken to those teachers and got advice from them*'.

In Nelson Grammar School, however, a mixture of informal and formal support had been given by teachers. When explored in more detail, it seemed that the informal support, again, had been more influential. Students had frequently looked to teachers for reassurance that they had made the right decisions: '*to check I'm going the right direction*' or '*to make sure*'.

Finances/money

Only four students mentioned money as an influence on their post-16 choice, three of them from one school, Hawke Comprehensive School (an 11-16 school with a high proportion of young people in receipt of Free School Meals). This school was located in an area in which there were very few people in managerial/professional work and the preferred destinations of the three young people (in trade related industries) appeared to reflect local circumstances. Two students, for example, said they were leaving school to do an apprenticeship in plumbing ('*because it's good money*'),[37] and the other was going to do a college course (possibly to train as an electrician). One had sought information on the salary associated with being an electrician, and when asked why he had chosen that route he said, '*mainly the pay and that*'.

Ability

Compared with other schools, students at Nelson Grammar School were most likely to have mentioned being influenced in their subject choice by what they are good at. This is perhaps to be expected, given that it is a grammar school with an emphasis on academic achievement. The school focused on further education in its presentation of the post-16 offer; advice was designed to encourage students to stay in the school sixth form or, if not, in further education elsewhere. Moreover, there was a perception among staff that

---

[37] One of these students was unsuccessful in his search for a placement and had taken up a place at a local FE college.

students were under pressure from parents to stay in education, particularly to do A Levels. Comments from students included:

> *I based my choice on the subjects I would be good at, so I would have an easier time at A Level. I know I'm good at them so I wouldn't have too much trouble doing A Level, and therefore when I go to university...I'll be able to get a good degree in probably medicine, with biology and chemistry.*

> *I looked at my mock results to see what I got for them and to see whether I would have a chance of getting the grades at GCSE for the subjects at A Level. I've got to get the grades and go to university and I knew I definitely wanted that when I picked my A Levels.*

4.2 Consequences of decision-making

As indicated in Chapter 2, the decisions that need to be made by young people at age 16 and at age 14, and the importance attached to those decisions, may vary in scale depending on the focus and structural organisation in their particular school and the way in which their options were presented to them. Do young people consider the consequences of their decisions? In wave 1 (in spring 2006) some young people regarded Year 9 options as crucial, others considered them to be incidental. Year 11 students generally regarded their choices as more critical, although some young people saw them as of little real importance. In wave 2 (autumn 2006), given the opportunity to reflect on the consequences of their decisions, nearly all young people considered that the decisions they had made were important. This section considers the perceived importance of decision-making and, where appropriate, discusses the school factors which appeared to have an impact on such decisions, such as whether or not it has a sixth form, its primary and secondary focus and its apparent 'effectiveness' across a range of indicators (as described in Chapter 3).

4.2.1 Young people and decision-making

In wave 1, opinion was divided amongst staff as to the importance that young people attached to the decisions they made at age 14, with some of those in senior management positions suggesting that a number of Year 9 students regarded it as a relatively unimportant decision (made *'on a whim, for them the choice is not critical'*). Other teachers, including Heads of Year, were more apt to believe that young people (and their parents) saw it as a significant decision. Nonetheless, while the minority of teachers implied that their students treated the option process as an irrelevance (*'they're not really worried because they still have two years left – they just tick a box!'*), most were of the opinion that young people (and their parents) believed that the decisions they made in Year 9 were important for their future (*'the vast*

majority take the choices very seriously') a view that appeared to be shared by the students themselves. While not all saw it in the terms of one young interviewee at Anson ('*It's a really big step...these choices might influence my entire life'*), most suggested that it was important that they made the 'right' decision about their options.

When young people were asked to reflect, after half a term, on the importance of their Year 9 decisions nearly all considered that they had been significant, regardless of school context, in order '*to get on in the future', 'because you need good grades at GCSE for a good job',* and choices were seen to be '*a massive influence on your job'.* Others reflected that '*you need to choose wisely'* in order to '*get into HE'* or '*because you want to enjoy the subject and do well in it'.* A student at Hawke School, demonstrated a belief that subject selection suggested a longer-term commitment to a particular career path.

> *It was an important decision because you can't just say I'll pick that and that because then you haven't any idea what you're going to do afterwards. You can't pick something you're not going to be good at because obviously you won't get a good grade. You can't pick things that you're not going to try and find out about – I couldn't pick engineering, I'm going to be an engineer or electronics as I'm not going to be an electrician.*

Young people's approach to their decisions and their confidence in making them appeared partly to be influenced by the ways in which the option decision had been presented (see chapter 2). Teachers, in wave 1, spoke about strategies used to reassure young people and to encourage them to take advantage of the Key Stage 4 opportunities available, as at Montgomery School:

> *They are presented with a package and they are told they will get a reasonably broad education whatever, which tends to allay their fears about making a decision...they need general reassurance. For the majority it is quite exciting for them to be able to choose what they want to do and finally get rid of the lessons they hate.*

It became apparent in wave 1 that for some, however, the efforts of their teachers to downplay the potentially critical nature of the decision proved stressful when living through the process. In Raleigh High School, for instance, where staff indicated that '*we build up the aspect of choice for the students',* in an effort to emphasise the positive aspect of decision-making, one young person readily acknowledged that teachers had tried to make the option process part of the routine of school life: '*from a teacher's point of view of course it's important, but they didn't talk about it as if it was important. It was just like an ordinary thing that had to be done'.* For her, however, this matter of fact approach to option choices appeared to have led to increased concerns

about the decision she needed to make and seemed to have contributed to her indecisiveness about something that '*has a big impact on your life'*.

This highlights a particular dilemma for teachers and suggests that a single school policy emphasis (whether on stressing choice, raising awareness of potential career paths or highlighting the concept of decision-making) may not address the needs of all young people when they are making their option decisions. Many young people seemed to want teachers to acknowledge the fact that the option decisions were important. As one interviewee suggested, the decision was one that she could not '*afford to get....wrong because if I had chosen music I would have felt that I wasn't good enough to do it'.* At the same time, many wanted reassurance that the choices were not critical, hoping that the curriculum would be broad enough to enable them to change direction later if they so wished.

During wave 1 interviews, teaching staff tended to suggest that young people took the decisions they made at 16 '*very seriously...Most of them are keyed into the future in terms of jobs and education and whichever route they are thinking of taking'.* Although a few students in one or two 11-16 schools in wave 1 were reported as not approaching decisions in a sufficiently serious manner, elsewhere, however, and including staff in both 11-16 and 11-18 schools, there was a general belief that the decision about post-16 destinations '*can become a really big issue and probably the biggest decision* [young people] *feel they will have made at that point in their lives'.*

The view that the decision was important was widely shared by the Year 11 students, in waves 1 and 2, with few suggesting that it was either unimportant or lacked major implications for future careers. Some in wave 1, including those who were still undecided about their post-16 courses, said, in unprompted comments, that they did not see it as a big issue. Most, often in the same schools, expressed very different views. One reported having '*sleepless nights thinking about it, it was a critical decision for the future'* and another said '*I was more or less crying because of the pressure'.* The perceived significance of the decision was summarised by one boy who noted:

> *It is quite important isn't it? Because it chooses what you're going to do...it determines what jobs you can get when you're older and I don't want to get a job that I don't enjoy because it'll just be a chore. I want to do a job I enjoy.*

Wave 2 revealed that, given the chance to reflect on the decision-making process, it was as meaningful, if not more so, for the Year 12 students, albeit for slightly different reasons, as for their younger peers. For them, it was not just decisions about subjects, '*if you don't like the subject you won't work so well and you won't achieve as much',* but also destinations '*I wanted to stay at school because it's familiar and I like the teachers'* and '*it was important to*

either stay at school or go to a college with a good reputation'. For others, it was a decision as to whether to stay on in education *'or else I would just be lazing around now'* or get a job *'it's important to get it right as it's a job for life'.* The following example illustrates the interplay of different aspects of the decision-making process and how important it was.

Previous Year 11 student at Darnley Comprehensive School

The Year 11 decision was important to me and I'm pleased in the end that I chose somewhere that suits me – I'm doing well. I have to travel one hour and fifteen minutes to get to college, and that is a drawback, but it's worth it because the college is so good. Going to this college will have an impact on my future. Not only do I hope to get good A Levels but the college is helping me to develop my own personality and to become more independent.

This young person was willing to cope with short-term inconveniences in order to achieve his long-term goal.

Nearly all of the young people, when given the opportunity to reflect on the significance of their decisions, said they were important, although not all felt that they had been adequately supported in making them. In wave 1, many young people seemed to want teachers to acknowledge the fact that the Year 9 options and post-16 decisions were important. As one interviewee suggested, the decision was one that she could not *'afford to get ... wrong because if I had chosen music I would have felt that I wasn't good enough to do it'.* At the same time they wanted reassurance that the choices they made were not, however, critical, hoping that the curriculum would be broad enough to enable them to change direction later if they so wished. In wave 2 it was apparent that they not only wanted teachers to acknowledge the importance of the decisions but they also wanted information to ensure they were going in the right direction or at least were definitely keeping their options open. Regardless of the type of school the young people found themselves in, whether it was rural or urban, school- or student-centred, young people wanted more information on course content and potential careers.

Nevertheless there were a handful of students who, given the chance to reflect on the decision-making process, gave qualified responses when questioned about the consequences of their decisions. One or two felt it was significant because *'the school implied it was important'.* One Year 9 student, from a student-centred rural school, who wanted to become a music teacher in wave 1, and remained determined to do so in wave 2, chose music GCSE because of her ambition, but when asked whether any of the other subjects had a bearing on her future, simply responded *'I don't think they really matter apart from music'*, suggesting that, while she was single-minded, she may nonetheless have been lacking sufficient and appropriate information to make sure that she could follow her career path.

The potential role that the school can play in limiting young people's access to different routeways to a career is indicated in the example that follows. In October 2005, Katy was doing five AS Levels in a range of arts and performing arts-related subjects but was experiencing a degree of turmoil over the whole decision-making process and its implications. In this instance the school context was significant, as it was an academic 11-18 school where students appeared not to have been given impartial advice about post-16 courses or destinations. Katy said *'the school butters you up for sixth form',* that no one had explained where the courses were leading, and that she had only found out about a BTEC in drama since being in Year 12, a course that she felt would have been more appropriate for her. As a result she was now questioning her decision to remain in education:

> *My Dad didn't go to college, yet he's on £50,000 a year in an accountancy job – he just fell into it. He saw a job application and they took him on and now he earns that much money. I'm just thinking if I didn't do this I could do drama part-time and a job and fall into something…*

At the same time, she clearly recognised the value of education ('*doing AS Levels is secure – it will get you somewhere and I've always said I would go to university one day'*) but was no longer sure of where she wanted to be ('*I'm a very determined person when I have a goal, I'm just not sure what that goal is at the moment'*).

Overall, when students were asked to reflect on what impact their choices may or may not have on their future, a considerable proportion made comments which suggested they thought their decisions would have an impact. For instance, there was a general perception that choices in Years 9 and 11 would open up certain opportunities in the future and '*help me when I'm older*'. There was a perception that the choices made at these ages would influence the job they would get in the future, and that this had been a consideration when making decisions. Few students said they had not considered the impact of their choice on their future, suggesting they were thinking through the consequences of their choices.

What has emerged is that young people, on the whole, were aware of the consequences of their decisions, to the extent that the majority had considered their alternatives to a greater or lesser degree. They were broadly aware of the importance of the decisions they had made regardless of the type of school they attended. For some this importance came with reflection, for others an awareness of the consequences of their decisions appeared to come earlier in the process. The next section explores their reactions to their choice whilst examining levels of support experienced.

4.3　Reactions to choice

In wave 2 the young people had had time to reflect on the decisions they had made and to reflect on their choices. As outlined in the previous section, they considered their decisions to be important, but to what extent had they changed their minds? Were they ultimately happy with the courses they had chosen and with the level of support they had experienced?

Between waves 1 and 2, just under one third of the Year 10 students and just under half of the young people post-16 had changed their minds about the decisions they had made, either with regard to the subjects they were taking, the types of courses or employment in which they were engaged, or the institution in which they were studying. The reasons for these changes were many. Some of the changes in Year 10 related to timetable alterations, either because of the removal or imposition of restrictions due to numbers on courses, or, post-16, because the young person had exceeded or not met GCSE expectations.

As far as school context was concerned, more young people in 11-18 schools changed their minds than in the 11-16 schools. Were these alterations happening because the young people were reconsidering their future, having been sufficiently informed about all their options, or because they felt unsupported and had received inadequate advice and guidance earlier in the year? Some evidence emerged that, in the schools that appeared to be more effective across a range of indicators (as described in Chapter 3), the proportion of young people who had changed their minds was less and those who had made changes appeared to have done so in an informed and positive way.

> Jack, from **Hawke Comprehensive School** (a student-focussed 11-16 school), had originally wanted to do a plumbing apprenticeship but one had not been available so he had changed to a vocational course at college which included plumbing skills. Although he hoped, next year, to get an apprenticeship, he was satisfied with the college course. He thought the careers advice and guidance at school had been good. They had lots of visits out to careers fairs and had experienced many talks at school from external speakers. He believed his teachers had been helpful and had assisted with letter writing. Jack had been forced to reconsider his options and had found the school supportive, which had enabled him to make an informed choice. He was happy with his decision.

However, in less supportive schools where the careers advice seemed to be not as comprehensive and was not considered to be impartial, young people appeared to be changing their minds as a result of inadequate advice in the previous year, as the following example illustrates.

Edward attended **Anson school**, an 11-18 school seen as school-centred and as relatively effective (based on 'soft' indicators – see Chapter 3). Here approximately half the young people from Years 9 and 11 had changed their minds about some element of their choice between waves 1 and 2. Many of the students claimed to have had some school support but offered caveats with regard to the degree of support and advice experienced. Edward had dropped law and had taken up further maths, primarily on the advice of his teacher (who evidently knew him well) and Edward was happy with the support and the outcome. However, when questioned about colleges he said *'That's something I wish I had done. If I went through the process again I would go and have a look at the colleges'.* He found out about college from his friends and liked the way they were treated more as adults and, although he was happy at school, he felt he was treated as a *'school child'.* In addition he did not find the Connexions Adviser helpful *'she only said what you were already thinking, she didn't give you any other advice or other things to think about'.*

In the schools deemed to be less effective overall (as described in Chapter 3) more young people reported feeling unsupported and many had changed their minds about their decisions for reasons often associated with (but not exclusively associated with) that lack of guidance. In Mary's case it is also suggested that her mindset (see Chapter 5) was important as a moderating influence on the school context.

Mary, a Year 12 student at **Malborough Secondary Modern School**, was studying three AS Levels in October 2005. She said she had to drop a language option at the last minute because of low numbers and she also wished that she was doing Drama, but said she had thought about it too late. Although she did talk to a Connexions Adviser, she said she would have appreciated more guidance from the Service and any help at all from school. She felt that she had received no advice about her decisions *'I just chose my AS Levels myself, no one gave me any advice. I just picked the ones I thought were best for me'.* However she maintained she was happy at the school and was glad she had stayed, *'I'm comfortable here because I know everyone in this school. If I went to another school I would have had to get used to the teachers and teaching, but I understand everything here'.*

Whether they had changed their minds or not and whether they had felt supported or not, nearly all young people reported themselves as being ultimately happy with their decisions, even though a number had some reservations. However, there was a minority of students, from eight schools, who were still not happy with their decisions by the time of the follow-up interviews in wave 2. These schools were at both ends of the effectiveness spectrum, suggesting that school effectiveness alone was not an indicator of good decision-making amongst students ('effectiveness' criteria are discussed in Chapter 3). Is there any indication of a link between the institutional focus and decision-making? Were young people more likely to change their minds in school-centred or student-centred schools? In the examples given above, both Malborough and Anson were school centred, Hawke was student centred.

Amongst the schools in which young people indicated unhappiness with their decisions, only two were student-centred. Instead they tended to be primarily school-centred or to focus on policy or function.

At **Montgomery school**, a school viewed as only relatively effective in relation to soft indicators described in Chapter 3 and with a school-centred focus, none of the young people felt that they had received adequate support and guidance, a view shared by some parents (*'The school should know what the right choice is for Eleanor, I think it is up to the teachers to guide her and I feel they didn't do that'*). Half of the young people had changed their minds about their courses between wave 1 and 2 of the interviews. One of these, Elizabeth, a Year 12 student in Montgomery school, said she had been very confused in Year 11. She wanted to be a nurse but felt she had little guidance and had been given incorrect advice. She had been told that she needed biology GCSE for nursing, so had tried to take it up but had found it too difficult and had dropped it. Subsequently she established that she did not need it as health and social care GCSE was adequate. Elizabeth went to see the Careers Adviser but found him unhelpful *'he said I had to research it myself, he was no help at all really'.* Her advice to current Year 11 students was to start thinking about the whole decision-making process earlier in the year. *'It's scary when you get into Year 11, you are thinking about what you are going to do for the rest of your life, so I think support is the main thing you need. Careers Advisers should play a large part in it. I was scared not knowing what to do and I asked them, but they didn't help me at all, so I realised I just had to do it all myself'.*

The students in Year 9 in the school had felt similarly unsupported. Joe explained*, 'I would have liked more information on subjects, new subjects because some of it is a lot different. In science there is a lot different, like more practical and I would have liked to know about that.'* Tim said that he received most of his advice from friends and family and felt the school could have done more to help*, 'teachers could give more advice on grades, so if you're interested in media studies, they could say whether they think you could get a good enough grade at GCSE for it'.* Both boys had changed their minds about their courses between waves 1 and 2 and felt they would have benefited from more guidance.

The issue in this school seemed to be linked to a Year 9 options and post-16 decision-making process that appeared to be overly restricted and regulated, with limited choices in a pathways system. The support system seemed poor and not focused on identifying or meeting individual's needs. The common cry was for '*wider choice, lots and lots of wider choices of what's available when you leave school'*. In the words of one student interviewee, who said she was following an AS course because she *'did not know any different...I don't think we really got that much advice or information, it was just figure it out for yourself really....a lot of people are dropping out and changing their minds because they didn't get the advice'.*

Overall, the evidence suggests that teachers and students did not always agree as to the ways in which individual factors acted and interacted in the decision-making process. It was apparent from the young people's voice, when given

the chance to reflect on their decisions, that they were open to a myriad of influences both from outside the school environment and from within the different school contexts. There is evidence, however, that young people appeared to feel better supported in schools deemed to be more effective in terms of leadership, ethos, expectations, attitude and careers education and guidance. There was also evidence that more student-focused schools appeared to more effective in helping young people to select their options and courses. Young people in schools where they felt better supported appeared to make more effective decisions, were less likely to change their minds and were ultimately happier with their chosen route.

However, it was also clear that all young people, regardless of the school they attended, would benefit from more individualised, impartial careers advice and guidance and a more flexible system. These factors alone do not fully explain how young people make their choices. What became evident during the course of the analysis was that young people responded to different influences and information and support mechanisms in very different ways. Why do young people exposed to the same school environment appear to make decisions in different ways? Can these responses be explained by differences in the mindsets young people bring to the decision-making process? Or to what extent do different school contexts 'create' different types of decision-making in relation to young people's mindsets? These issues are discussed in the following chapter.

5. Educational mindsets and decision-making

<div style="border:1px solid #000;">

Summary of Educational Mindsets and Decision-Making

- There appeared to be a link between schools which were particularly 'effective' (in relation to staff expectations, leadership, curriculum management) and students who were making arguably the most effective and thought through decisions (the most 'positive' mindsets were clustered in such schools).

- Where such support was lacking, young people either appeared to be making ineffective decisions (for example, not rational, thought through decisions), or there was evidence of both 'effective' and 'ineffective' decision-makers (suggesting that some young people needed more support than others). Moreover, most fluctuation in young people's mindsets was found in the 'less effective' schools.

- Some of the 'positive' mindsets (such as the 'determined realists') did not remain stable over time; some students' initial decisions changed, and thus their future plans were not as clear as they initially seemed. This suggests that even young people who appeared to have made a decision would have benefited from further support to ensure their choices are fully informed. Emphasis seemed to be more on the *outcome* of decision-making, rather than on the *process*.

</div>

As indicated in earlier chapters, the decisions young people have made in relation to their future courses or destinations were not always straightforward. The links between decision-making and school context have been explored in the previous chapter, but are other factors important to the decision-making process, and to what extent do factors influencing decisions overlap? For instance, to what extent might students' educational mindsets have an impact on decision-making, and does this vary across different types of school contexts? To investigate this, analysis was undertaken exploring the extent to which it is possible to identify the educational mindsets that the young people might be demonstrating, drawing on research carried out for the DfES by SHM.

This chapter gives a brief introduction to the SHM model of educational mindsets (further details of the SHM work in developing the model on educational mindsets can be found in Appendix B), and explores any relationships between mindsets and decision-making evident from the analysis of young people's stories. After wave 1 of the research, each young person's narrative was analysed in order to see whether they could be characterised according to a particular mindset. Following wave 2, young people's mindsets were explored further; had they remained the same or changed over time? Did

there appear to be links between mindsets and decision-making? The relationships between school 'type' and mindsets were also revisited.

It could be hypothesised that if particular mindsets are clustered in certain 'types' of schools, then there is a link between decision-making and school context. Young people with certain mindsets in different 'types' of school might need particular individual support to make choices. Recognising how young people with different mindsets make decisions might help to understand where there is a need for leverage. A discussion of educational mindsets and any links to decision-making might also raise the question of the need for individualised support for young people.

5.1   A profile of students' educational mindsets

This section introduces the SHM model of educational mindsets and explores the mindsets which appeared to exist across the students taking part in the research. It should be noted that the narrative eliciting techniques that were used with young people in this study were not designed to isolate the educational mindsets. Rather, they were designed to capture young people's perceptions of the ways in which they made their decisions, to highlight the relative importance (to them) of the various factors involved and to ascertain, as far as possible, how these factors interact. It was not anticipated, therefore, that it would be possible to categorise all of the young people according to the SHM model.

5.1.1 What is an educational mindset?

During their work in the months preceding this study, SHM identified eight educational mindsets amongst adolescent students, each of which was 'built' on four dimensions. The four dimensions they defined as:

- **Orientation**: determined by where a young person's focus is when making a decision (for example, whether the focus was on the future, the present or the past)

- **Outlook**: determined by a young person's view of the future (for example, whether they have a clear picture of their future and whether they are optimistic about how things will turn out for them)

- **Risk tolerance**: determined by how 'safe' a young person wants to be when making decisions (for example, whether they build on what they are good at and stay with the familiar, or whether they look for new challenges in new places)

- **Theory of success**: determined by how they think success comes about (for example, as a result of luck, climbing the ladder or having intuition).

An individual's 'position' on each of the four dimensions determined their education mindset, ranging from young people who would be identified as 'confident aspirationals' to 'indecisive worriers'. The eight mindsets are summarised overleaf in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1.   Educational Mindset Dimensions (based on SHM analysis)

Dimensions	The Eight Educational Mindsets							
	Confident Aspirational	**Determined Realist**	**Long-term preparers**	**Indecisive worrier**	**Short-term conformist**	**Unrealistic dreamers**	**Comfort seeker**	**Defeated Copers**
Orientation	Future	Future	Future	Future (short-term)	Future (short-term)	Present	Present	Past
Outlook	No clear picture Optimistic	Clear picture Optimistic	No clear picture Optimistic	No clear picture Anxious	No clear picture Optimistic	Clear picture Optimistic	No clear picture Optimistic	Clear picture Pessimistic
Risk Tolerance	Decision not critical New challenges New people/places	Decision is critical Build on what good at New people/places	Decision not critical New challenges New people/places	Decision not critical	Decision not critical Build on what good at New people/places	Decision not critical New people/places	Stay with the familiar	Decision is critical Build on what good at Stay with familiar
Theory of Success	Intuition Can change course Success = hard work	Need clear picture Climb ladder Success = hard work	Need clear picture Climb ladder Success = hard work	Need clear picture Success = hard work	Climb ladder Success = hard work	Can change course Success = luck	N/A	Climb the ladder Success = hard work

The SHM model suggested ways in which young people with different educational mindsets could be supported in making decisions. For instance, according to the model, 'determined realists' could find it helpful to receive practical advice on how to overcome any obstacles which might get in their way of reaching their career goal, and 'defeated copers' might benefit from support in relation to building their confidence and self esteem in order to make effective decisions.

5.1.2 The mindsets across the sample

Tables in Appendix B give details on the educational mindsets found across the sample in both waves of the research. Across the whole sample of 165 students included in the study in wave 1, it was possible to identify the SHM educational mindsets of a total of 129 young people (78 per cent). Among the 129 students categorised, there was a similar proportion of Year 9 (66) and Year 11 (63) students. The individual mindsets are discussed in separate sections below.

For 19 students in Year 9 and 17 students in Year 11, it was not possible to identify mindsets, although in the second wave, only 12 of the 127 students overall were not categorised (ten of the original Year 9s and two of the Year 11s). If students were not categorised, this was primarily because their narratives suggested significant overlaps between two or three different groups. This was particularly evident with respect to young people's '**orientation'** (whether their choices and decision-making was focused on the future, present or past). Aspects of their story, for instance, may have reflected plans they had for the *future*, yet the way they decided upon their subject choices for key stage 4 may have suggested that decisions were based primarily on what they enjoyed at *present*. Furthermore, regarding the '**outlook'** dimension, a young person may have had *some* idea (or, more likely, ideas) of what they might do in the future, but just not be fully decided, so that they could not be categorised as having a very clear or unclear future outlook (thus they fit somewhere in the middle). When it was not possible to categorise young people across a number of dimensions, the decision was taken to omit them from the final model. It is worth noting that few young people's narratives gave any clear insights into SHM's '**theory of success**' dimension, so that, for many, there were some gaps in the information required to 'build' a mindset.

It should be noted that, for a number of students who were not characterised in wave 1, it was possible to characterise their mindsets after the follow-up interview in wave 2. Most appeared, by this stage, to be long-term preparers or determined realists; their stories in wave 2 suggested they were clearer about their plans. Others in wave 2 were characterised as short-term conformists who were keen to stay in the education system (at least in the immediate future), but with no clear career goal. It could be the case that

these students had traits relating to these mindsets during wave 1, but that they were unclear from the stories elicited via the narrative interviews. The greater ease with which they were identified in wave, 2, however, could have been due to intervening experiences. A minority of students that were not categorised in wave 1 appeared, in wave 2, to be defeated copers or comfort seekers and were still vague in their decision-making.

Nonetheless, the fact that some students remained uncategorised, even after wave 2 interviews, raises some critical issues. It could be argued that not being able to categorise some students at all challenges the usefulness of the mindset model. Or, perhaps, it tells us something about the decision-making skills among this group? There appeared to be a link with school context, and particularly the support such students perceived they were receiving when making decisions. In particular, Year 9 students at Cromwell School were vague about their choices, and the ways in which they were approaching their decisions, making it difficult to characterise them according to any particular mindset (those that *were* defined were predominantly comfort seekers or defeated copers). Cromwell was characterised as less effective school in relation to a series of correlates of effectiveness (including leadership, curriculum management and students' attitudes), and their provision of careers education and guidance appeared weak. The link between support and decision-making was explored in detail in Chapter 4, but this reiterates the point that the school context may well have been a factor in decision-making.

The following sub-sections provide an overview of the various mindsets that were identified, largely in order of apparent frequency, and provides some vignettes illustrating young people's stories across the two phases of the research. This is followed by a discussion on any links between mindsets, decision-making and school context.

5.1.3 The determined realists

Overall, as shown in the tables in Appendix B, both Year 9 and Year 11 students were most commonly categorised as determined realists in both wave 1 and wave 2. These are examples of young people who, from the stories they told, appeared to have a clear picture about their future and who were optimistic about reaching their goals. All had decided what they wanted to do in the future, whether this was the immediate or long-term future. According to the SHM research, determined realists are likely to be more rational in their decision-making, thinking through their decision and what they need to do to reach their goal.

However, there were issues relating to whether students fitted the definition of a determined realist exactly. For example, it was possible to categorise a Year 9 student as a determined realist if their stories suggested that their choice of Key Stage 4 subjects was clearly linked to a specified career goal. However, it

was perfectly possible that the young person in question had only decided a career route in the few weeks prior to the interview and that their explanation of their choice of subjects was as much a result of *post-hoc* rationalisation (fitting their decision into some career goal based on matching it to careers information, perhaps) as of a realistic evaluation of what they had decided to do prior to making their subject decisions. In other words, their story might have been coloured by their desire to present their decision as a clearly thought out, rational decision, even though that had not been the case at the time the decision was made. To what extent do students' responses reflect a 'learned rhetoric'; have they simply learned that their responses about decision-making should indicate that they have made a firm choice, even if they have not? Moreover, it is possible that these young people might change their minds in the future. While this does not preclude them being a determined realist, it is equally possible that the goals they identified so confidently might be short-term only and subject to change.

Given these challenges with the definition, it might be more appropriate to re-define determined realists as '**decided planners**'; what we can say about them is that at the point when we interviewed them they appeared to have *decided* what they wanted to do in the future and they were *planning* for it based on the information available to them at that time. Therefore, we have referred to 'decided planners' from this point on throughout the report.

To explore these issues further, students characterised as 'decided planners' in wave 1 were reviewed again after their follow-up interview to explore:

- their level of *determination*: Were they happy with the choices they had made? Did they still appear to be working towards the same goals, or had they changed their minds, and thus less determined than it seemed?

- their level of *realism*: Did students make comments about whether they felt they could actually reach their goals? Did their level of attainment suggest they were being realistic?

- their level of *open-mindedness*: Did 'decided planners' have a blinkered, narrow-minded view of their futures, determined to only follow one path, or were they thinking through alternative options as 'back-up'? A narrow-minded 'decided planner' may well think they have made a mistake if their goal does not end up being as expected, for example.

A total of 27 Year 9 students who were characterised as 'decided planners' in wave 1 were followed up in Wave 2, as were 25 Year 11 students in this category. About half (13) of the Year 9 students and two-thirds (16) of the Year 11 students were re-characterised as 'decided planners' in wave 2. From their stories, they were happy with the choices they had made and still appeared to be pursuing the career goals they had previously mentioned. By looking at their attainment levels, a limited assessment of their realism could be carried out. An example is given below.

Year 11 girl, Hawke Comprehensive School, 'Decided Planner'

The following extracts from initial and follow-up interviews illustrate that this student was determined to become a teacher. Her GCSE results (six grade A*, one grade B and one grade C), and the fact that she had consulted teachers about her goal, suggest it may be a realistic plan.

Wave 1 interview: '*I decided to take the academic route because I want to be a teacher. I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I've been asking loads of teachers about it at school, about the best way to go about it, and that's it really. I want to be an English teacher. I've always had a talent in English so I just followed it on. I'm really interested in everything to do with it…ever since the beginning of Year 7. I've been researching potential courses and how I'd get teaching on top of it. I'm thinking about doing an English degree and then building on top of it so I can teach.*'

Wave 2 interview: Claire was '*entirely happy*' with her decision to stay in education and then become a teacher. '*I knew exactly what I needed to do. I was not interested in anything other than doing A Levels and higher education. I want to specialise in English and be a teacher. I will give up psychology* [at the end of Year 12] *and concentrate on the writing subjects*'.

However, not all of the students who remained 'decided' over time appeared to be 'realistic', which again raises issues with the definition of a 'determined realist' in the SHM model. One example is given below.

Year 11 boy, Wellington Secondary Modern, 'Decided Planner'?

In wave 1, David had decided to join the Marines. However, when revisited in wave 2, his application to join them had been turned down, as he had failed the psychometric entrance tests and did not achieve an acceptable grade in mathematics GCSE. At the time of the wave 2 interview, David was working, temporarily, for his grandfather's business before reapplying for the Marines. '*I have always wanted to join the Marines ever since I can remember; I've never really considered doing anything else*'. David was hoping to get some extra support with his mathematics, but had not yet done so. To what extent was he following a realistic pathway?

Among the 'decided planners', 23 of the wave 2 sample (14 originally in Year 9 and 9 in Year 11) no longer appeared to be so decided, which suggests that the mindset could relate to one moment in time when a young person's career goal appears to coincide with their education-related choices. This raises the question that young people might be being 'pushed' into having a goal and making a decision, or may simply have learned the rhetoric of decision-making. For those whose mindset changed from a 'decided planner', most appeared, in wave 2, to be more like short-term conformists (staying in the education system for the immediate future, although now with no clear long-term goal) or long-term preparers (still with ambition to succeed, yet their career ideas had changed).

As suggested above, some students' career goals had indeed changed, possibly as a result of examining whether they were realistic, as illustrated by the following example.

> **Year 10 girl, Wellington Secondary Modern**
> **'Decided planner' wave 1, Short-Term Conformist wave 2**
>
> Karen was in Year 9 when first interviewed in wave 1. She intended to choose drama as an option subject, as she appeared 'determined' (at least at the time of the interview) to be an actor in films in the future. However, having thought it through, she changed her mind. Although still studying drama, and enjoying it, she was thinking through alternative options for future careers. She said, '*I have been thinking about it more and more…drama…being in films…it is not always a guaranteed job so I have been thinking about it more… I like design…I might be a graphic designer. It is not a guaranteed job, so I would like to do something to fall back on.*' Karen was planning to stay in education and go to college, but was being **realistic** and **open-minded** about where the future might take her in relation to her career.

This particular student was thinking through the reality of her choices, although this did not seem to be the case with all students, for a variety of reasons. For instance, there were examples of students who seemed from their stories to have decided on a specific career goal, yet other parts of their narratives suggested this might not be the most realistic route for them. For instance, Laura at Montgomery School was very keen to pursue a career as an orthodontist ('*that's what I want to be*'). She was taking three sciences at GCSE and had spoken to her own orthodontist to find out more about it, yet she said she had dismissed an idea of becoming a nurse as she didn't like needles.

Of the 52 'decided planners' from wave 1 who were re-interviewed in wave 2, just under half (25; 14 originally in Year 9 and 11 in Year 11) appeared to have a very 'blinkered', narrow minded view about their future choices. They seemed to have settled on one goal and were not thinking of other options. This had a negative impact on some students, who had become disappointed with their chosen path and did not have a back-up plan, as the following example illustrates.

> **Year 11 boy, Cromwell School**
> **'Decided Planner' wave 1, long-term planner wave 2**
>
> When interviewed in wave 1, James had decided to go to college to do a catering course and train to be a chef. He had not considered other options at the time. He had indeed followed that route, but was unhappy with his choice and no longer wanted to be a chef. He had left college and was re-sitting examinations and was involved in a Youth Inclusion Project instead, but was not particularly happy. '*I went to college…until October…one month. You know when you just realise you don't want to be that* [a chef]*. I didn't think it was going to be that. In school I thought it would be very different. I couldn't imagine myself to be like that for the rest of my life. I just put my mind straight on to that* [becoming a chef]*…I didn't think about anything else. I just had my head focused on one thing really. Maybe if I did find out more information from school about other things, I would have probably chosen something different or more things to do. I couldn't force myself to enjoy it though…there was no point.*' James was disappointed that his career goal had not turned out as expected, and regretted not having considered other options. He did not feel well-informed about other options, and it appeared as though he would have benefited from more advice and guidance when making decisions about the future. James was still determined to succeed in life, and was staying in education to get '*useful qualifications*' to help him in the future (possibly in youth work).

There were students who appeared to have been given information and advice on other options but 'rejected' it once they had a clear goal, and others who did not seem to have been well informed about alternative routes (there were no clear links with school context). This evidence suggests that *all* students (including those who appear to have clear goals) need support when making decisions, particularly in relation to being well-informed about all options available to them, so they are making informed choices. Perhaps the issue of whether schools (and advisers) focus too much on the *outcome* of decision-making (young people's decisions), rather than on the *process* of decision-making (young people's decision-making skills) should be questioned? In the example above, the focus had clearly been on outcome rather than process, which had consequences for the student's future.

As mentioned earlier, the SHM model of educational mindsets suggests that 'decided planners' should be given practical advice and help to overcome any obstacles they might face when trying to reach their goal. This may be sufficient for those who are not going to change their minds, but it should be considered that wider support in relation to the *process* of decision-making and information on alternatives would be beneficial for all students.

This section has indicated that some students' decisions about future plans seemed fixed and that their goals seemed realistic. For others, there had been changes in decisions between waves 1 and 2, either because they had considered the reality of their choices or because they had not made informed choices.

5.1.4 The comfort seekers

In wave 1, the second most frequently identified educational mindset among Year 9 students were the comfort seekers (16 students, or 19 per cent). According to the SHM model, when making decisions about what subjects to choose, this 'type' of young person would focus on the things that they enjoyed and that would not cause them pressure. They would have no clear picture of the future and thus would choose things which are familiar to them at the time of making their choices. Comfort seekers would be unlikely to feel that the choice they were making was important. SHM suggest that the support mechanisms in place in school are likely to be important for this group of young people, in order to raise their aspirations and expectations and equip them with the skills needed to make informed decisions.

In wave 2, seven Year 9 students and six Year 11 students who were originally characterised as comfort seekers were interviewed again; six of the Year 9 students and three of the Year 11 students were still considered to be comfort seekers (one example is given below), suggesting they had no more future focus than they did in wave 1.

Year 12 girl, Wellington Secondary Modern
Comfort seeker in wave 1 and 2

Julie (who achieved one A, six Bs and one C grade in her GCSEs) stayed on at her school sixth form to study A Levels. When asked to reflect on why she had made this choice, she replied '*I don't know really, I think I just ran out of time and thought it would be easier to stay here. I think I just couldn't be bothered*'. When asked why she picked particular subjects, she answered '*I just enjoy them*'.

Four comfort seekers (one now in Year 10 and three in Year 12) were characterised as short-term conformists in wave 2 (more positive about staying in education, although still with no long term career plans). For instance, one student said, '*I've got no definite plans, but I think I'll actually stay at sixth form or go to college*'. These students appeared to have become more confident in themselves. Seven students (one in Year 11 and six in Year 9) who were characterised as 'decided planners' in wave 1 were categorised as comfort seekers in wave 2, suggesting they had become much less clear about their plans.

> **Year 9 girl, Frobisher Community School**
> **Decided planner in wave 1, comfort seeker in wave 2**
>
> During wave 1, Emily discussed her subject choices for key stage 4: '*I chose health and social care because of what I want to do when I'm older…I really want to be a social worker, so I chose that. It's weird because you've been faced with subjects you have to do, then having to choose them for what you need…for your job*'. However, by wave 2, when asked whether she had any plans for after Year 11 Emily answered, '*no, not really…still got another year to go*' (there was no mention of becoming a social worker). She was not happy with all of her option subjects, as she found some difficult (for instance, '*there's too much pressure to understand it…it just doesn't fit into my brain*').

The above examples suggest that the variability of mindsets is dependent on the experiences faced by young people. Experiences of school could be a factor. For instance, students who had changed from being 'decided planner' to 'comfort seekers' were clustered in five schools, all of which were categorised as either school- or policy-focused (rather than student-focused), and none of them were characterised as having the correlates of highly effective schools (including leadership, curriculum management, staff expectations and student attitudes).

5.1.5 The short-term conformists

The SHM model suggests that this group of young people would have been thinking more about the short-term future (rather than long-term possibilities) when making their key stage 4 subject or post-16 choices. When they made their choices, they would have been thinking about the next step in the education system, without necessarily being clear about where it would take them in the longer-term future of a career, or whether there were options that would take them into a different environment.

Over time, there appeared to be more short-term conformists in both year groups. Five students interviewed in both waves (two originally in Year 9 and three in Year 11) were still short-term conformists. Four students (two from each year group) had changed from being described as comfort seekers to being short-term conformists, suggesting they were thinking more about the short term future than they had been in wave 1. For example, a student at Darnley School (with an academic ethos) felt her school had low expectations of her ability: '*the school told me I wouldn't get good results, but actually they were better than they thought...*' Although this student was of below average ability, she was pleased with her results (she had passed eight GCSEs, achieving one D grade, one E grade, four F grades and two G grades), despite being given little encouragement from the school (and hence was initially a 'comfort seeker'). This suggests that school context can be a factor in 'creating' mindsets. The SHM model of educational mindsets suggests that 'comfort seekers' should be given the tools to think about the future and the consequences of their present actions. However, this example suggests that

schools themselves could be a factor in 'developing' such mindsets in the first place.

Three students interviewed in wave 2 had originally been characterised as short-term conformists, but now seemed more like long-term preparers (no specific career goal, but with more confidence about long-term education being a route to success). Five 'decided planners' from wave 1 had become uncertain about their original career goals, but were keen to stay in education for the immediate future (hence they had become short-term conformists).

5.1.6 The confident aspirationals

This group is defined by SHM as being very confident and optimistic about the future, but perhaps slightly over-ambitious, without having a clear picture of what their future will look like and without considering the consequences of their decisions. This 'type' of young person could potentially bypass the education system because they think their ambition and hard work will help them to succeed regardless of their level of education. Nevertheless, confident aspirationals are likely to have ambition, drive and high expectations of what they can achieve.

Only four students in Year 9 and in Year 11 were categorised as confident aspirationals in wave 1. Six of them were then interviewed again in wave 2, with only one still being characterised according to that mindset. Over time, this group of young people had either become decided planners (with more of a clear picture of a career goal) or had made comments about the benefits of long-term education impacting on their future success, as illustrated in the following example.

> **Year 10 boy, Nelson Grammar School**
> **Confident Aspirational in wave 1, long-term preparer in wave 2**
>
> Jamie is studying for a range of GCSEs, including three sciences. When asked about his future, he said '*I'll definitely go to university but I don't know where yet…it depends on which subjects I need…I don't know what A Levels I'll do really….I'll probably do maths, I'm quite good at maths. I think if you do A Levels you earn more…I'll have to do it*'.

5.1.7 The long-term planners

None of the Year 9 students and only four of the Year 11 students were categorised as long-term preparers in wave 1 – defined by SHM as those who might not have a clear idea of their long-term future, yet stay in education as they think it is the best route to success. This is not entirely unexpected in Year 9; few young people aged 14 might be thinking ahead to that extent.

By wave 2, there was some evidence that a small number of students (now in Year 10 and 12) who were vague about their decisions in wave 1 were in fact now making plans to stay in education long-term (two defeated copers, two short-term conformist and seven students who did not meet the criteria of any particular mindset).

Some students (four in Year 10 and three in Year 12) who had been defined as decided planners in wave 1, no longer had firm career goals by wave 2, although could still see the benefits of staying in education long-term. As discussed above in Section 5.1.6, some students who were originally categorised as confident aspirationals were thinking more like long-term preparers in wave 2.

5.1.8 The defeated copers, indecisive worriers and unrealistic dreamers

Very few students were categorised according to the mindsets that appeared to be least favourable: the defeated copers, the indecisive worriers and unrealistic dreamers. These mindsets, particularly the defeated copers, were slightly more common amongst Year 9 and 10 students than Year 11 and 12 (or equivalent), suggesting that they may be related either to levels of maturity or, possibly, to a lack of appropriately targeted information or support during the decision-making process. These mindsets were also less likely to change between waves 1 and 2 of the research, particularly amongst the Year 9/10 sample of students. An example is given below.

> **Year 11 boy at Raleigh High School in wave 1, in a job without training in wave 2**
> **Defeated coper both waves**
>
> Graham had decided to leave school after Year 11 and go straight into employment. At the time of the wave 2 interview, he was working as a roofer. When asked about his choice he said, '*It* [the job] *was on offer so I just took it*'. Graham thought it was '*a job for life…until I retire*'. He didn't see the need for formal training. When asked about the possibility of going to college he said, '*I didn't think it applied to me…I just wanted to get on my feet, leaving school like…I got a job…the first thing that came up… I didn't know if I wanted to do it but I'm happy where I am now*'.

5.1.9 Summary of mindsets

This section has focused on the educational mindsets of the young people in the study. What it has shown is that, for some young people, their mindsets remained stable between waves 1 and 2 of the research. However, some students' mindsets changed over time. In some cases, students who were categorised according to what could be described as the most 'positive' mindsets, such as 'decided planners', became less certain about their futures.

In contrast, some students who were vaguer or who lacked interest in wave 1 had made firmer plans by wave 2. This suggests that the variability in a young person's mindset is dependent on their experiences over time (some of which may be related to the school context).

The following section explores any links between the mindsets discussed above and decision-making. For example, do the same types of decision makers (those with the same mindsets) make decisions in similar or different ways? The final section in this chapter seeks to make links between mindsets, decision-making and the school context? For instance, are certain education mindsets clustered in particular school contexts? Are mindsets most stable or most changeable (whether in a positive or negative sense) in certain types of schools?

5.2   Mindsets and decision-making

Having characterised students according to educational mindsets, analysis was undertaken to see whether students with the same educational mindsets made decisions in similar or different ways. The particular mindsets explored were: confident aspirationals, decided planners, comfort seekers and defeated copers, since these reflected the majority of young people in the study.

5.2.1 Confident aspirationals

What was noticeable about the eight students characterised in wave 1 as confident aspirationals was that they all mentioned a number of key influences on their decisions; they were seeking a wide range of advice and information in order to support their decisions. However, it was clear that for most of these students, their *main* influence had been their family/parents. Being influenced by parental experiences, including parental occupations, was common among this group. For instance, one boy in Year 9 at Nelson Grammar highlighted the likely impact of family occupations on his choice of career: '*At first I was chatting to my mum...my mum's a scientist...that was probably my most likely career...lots of my family are scientists*'. It was evident that the students identified as confident aspirationals were getting inspiration from their parents, and that their parents had high expectations. A boy in Year 9 at Malborough Secondary Modern School said his parents '*were very helpful because they know what's best for me*'. A girl in Year 9 at Haig School spoke of parental encouragement to run her own business in the future: '*I'd like to start a business of my own, once I've got enough money, and my parents have agreed to...my parents, they're willing to help...*' It seemed that parents had influenced the confident aspirationals in a positive way, rather than an intimidating, pressurised way.

Decisions made by students characterised as confident aspirationals had also been influenced by older siblings and friends who were experiencing the life that the students aspired to. For instance, one boy in Year 11 at Frobisher Community School said he had been influenced by his sister who was doing well at college and said, '*I'll follow in her footsteps*'. Some of the students defined as confident aspirationals were also influenced by college or university visits, careers fairs and open evenings, evidently inspired by the information they had been given and what they had seen. For example, a boy in Year 9 at Malborough Secondary Modern said, '*We had an options evening where we had a speech that told us about options and further education and so on…and there were lots of stalls set up on different subjects*'.

As the definition of the mindset suggests, confident aspirationals appeared confident, ambitious, optimistic and determined. Although they had sought advice from a range of sources, they were independent in their decision-making.

As discussed in 5.1.6 above, six of the eight confident aspirationals from wave 1 were re-interviewed in wave 2, but only one of them still appeared to 'fit' that mindset (making decisions in a similar way as described here).

5.2.2 Decided planners

In wave 1, students characterised as 'decided planners' appeared to have been affected by a *range* of influences; they tended to have mentioned a number of primary and secondary influences on their decisions, rather than relying on one or two key sources. Although the most common influence was reported to be parents, other key sources were siblings, friends, teachers and Connexions Personal Advisers, as well as visits to colleges and careers fairs.

In wave 1, students categorised as 'decided planners' *appeared* to have sought advice and information from a wide range of sources in order to inform their decisions. It seemed, from the student narratives, that this group of young people were weighing up the advice they were given, and were thinking their decisions through maturely. Although they were influenced by a wide range of sources, it appeared that their final decisions were made independently. Thus, it would seem that 'decided planners' were generally rational in their decision-making.

There were a number of examples in wave 1 of 'decided planners' *researching* options in order to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages for themselves, for instance through use of the internet or documentation. A boy in Year 11 at Darnley Comprehensive School said:

> *I wanted to continue in education, so I started looking at it on the internet and things…I went on it in my own time…I found most*

information on colleges on the internet websites, and I picked out three colleges. I looked at courses and where they were situated compared to me...and the best standards. I just basically listed in my head what everyone was saying to me [about the colleges], *and then I'd go on the website and look at it...I had to do it for myself.*

It should be noted that, of the 'decided planners' from wave 1 who were re-interviewed in wave 2, half who were in Year 9 and two-thirds who were in Year 11 who were still categorised according to that mindset, on reflection, appeared to have made, or to be making, mature, rational decisions. However, this means that a considerable proportion of 'decided planners' were no longer categorised as being 'decided' by wave 2 (see Section 5.1.3). Therefore, the decisions they had made had changed and they were no longer planning for the career path mentioned in wave 1.

It became clear, in retrospect, that a number of them appeared to have narrow-minded, blinkered views of the decisions they were making, and that they were not thinking through alternative options or 'back-up' plans. Some students were also reassessing how realistic their decisions had been. On the surface, it may appear that they are certain about their decisions, and therefore do not need support to make them, yet this may not be the case. Looking back at the example of the Year 11 boy who initially seemed determined to become a chef, it seems that too much emphasis had been put on the *outcome* (becoming a chef), rather than on the *process* of making that decision. In hindsight, he wished he had been given information on not only what it would be like to be a chef, but also on alternative careers, so his decision was more informed. His plans had been based on the information he had available to him at the time, although it subsequently appeared that this information had not been comprehensive. Schools should be aware that young people who seem clear about their decisions may also need support so that they can be sure that the choice is one that is properly informed.

5.2.3 Comfort seekers and defeated copers

Students characterised as comfort seekers or defeated copers appeared to make decisions in similar ways. Although their main influences varied, they were likely to be influenced by one or two people or sources, rather than a range. Some students in these groups reported that they had required more information and support, although others appeared to lack interest. It was apparent from their narratives that they were vaguer about their decisions, and lacked the maturity and confidence that was evident across the groups described above. Thus, they were perhaps more irrational in their decision-making. One example is given below.

Boy in Year 11 at Raleigh High School: Defeated Coper

Student: *I haven't really decided* [what to do after Year 11] *but it's really through family and friends what I decided to do. I don't know really… I just asked around if there was* [sic] *any jobs and* [his father's friend] *said yes, just wait until you leave school.*

Researcher: You said you spoke to a Careers Adviser. What sort of things did you talk about?

Student: *I don't know*

Researcher: Can you tell me about any times you felt supported when making your decision?

Student: *Unsupported, all the time…I don't know, I just was…it's hard to explain.*

It was common for these groups of young people to look for *reassurance* from family, friends and/or teachers, or to be more easily *persuaded* by, or *reliant* on, other people to help them make a decision. For example, one comfort seeker's decision about Key Stage 4 subjects was made '*to keep mum quiet*'. Another student said:

> *When I got back* [from the parents' evening] *my parents told me what they thought I should be doing. I had my interview with* [X] *and she sort of pointed me to what she thinks I should do.* (Girl, Year 9 at Frobisher).

Some comfort seekers seemed to lack interest in their decisions. For instance, one girl in Year 9 (at Raleigh) said '*I'm not really bothered*'.

5.3   Mindsets and school context

This final section explores evidence of any links between young people's educational mindsets and the school context.[38] Key questions include:

- How are young people making decisions within the school context?
- Do young people with particular mindsets appear to be clustered in certain contexts?
- Are young people's mindsets (and therefore decision-making) more or less stable in certain contexts?

It is worth noting that none of the schools had only one educational mindset represented across one year group or between year groups. This suggests that young people in all schools were making decisions in different ways. It

---

[38]   School context, and how we have categorised schools in relation to context, is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

should also be considered that only 12 students (six in Year 9/10 and 11/12), on average, were interviewed in each school, and that their mindsets might not be representative of all students within the schools. Nonetheless, some interesting patterns have emerged from the findings. Certain mindsets appeared to be more dominant than others within some schools, whereas some schools had a complete spectrum of mindsets. Moreover, mindsets appeared more stable in some schools than in others. To what extent can these patterns be linked to school context and overall school 'effectiveness' (in relation to, for instance, school focus, leadership, curriculum management, support and ethos)?

There appeared to be a link between the schools which were particularly effective in relation to staff expectations, curriculum management, leadership and careers education and guidance provision (Nelson Grammar, Hawke Comprehensive School, Haig School and The Essex School), and students who were categorised according to, arguably, the most positive mindsets (decided planners, long-term preparers and short-term conformists). Students in these schools generally either had career plans or could see the benefit of staying in education (at least in the short-term). An example is given in the case-study below.

Haig School [decided planners and long-term preparers]

Haig School is an 11-16 comprehensive school, and although socially deprived and in the lowest bands for key stage 3 and 4 performance, was characterised as one of the most effective schools in the sample in relation to school leadership, staff expectations, careers education and guidance provision and curriculum management. The school's results were improving after a period on special measures. It was categorised as a student-centred school, with focus on helping all students achieve to the best of their ability. Despite having a number of challenging students, there appeared to be a caring, pastoral ethos, with emphasis given to encouraging and supporting individuals.

Students felt that their decision-making had been supported and they were generally happy with the choices they had made (few students made any changes in their chosen courses). In relation to their mindsets, students in this school were characterised as either decided planners who had a clear career goal at the time of the interview, long-term planners who had no clear goal but were planning to stay in education long-term, or short-term conformists who, although they had no clear picture of their future, were at least planning to stay in education for the immediate future. Their mindsets appeared to be stable across the two periods of interview, although there were a few examples of students who had a clear career goal in wave 1, yet by wave 2 were more uncertain about their specific choice. Nonetheless they were still planning to stay in education long-term (changing from decided planners to long-term planners).

It could be the case that these 'effective' schools (like the one in the example above) had a homogeneous group of students who had inherently positive

mindsets. Or it could also be that the effectiveness of the school (and its support mechanisms) had contributed to the development of students' 'positive' mindsets and decision-making, and that students had made informed choices.

The way in which high expectations are mediated in schools, and how young people respond to them, are important in the decision-making process. Again, the decision itself (the outcome) should not be seen as more important than the process and the skills needed to make informed choices. There was evidence to suggest that staff with high (and possibly unrealistic) expectations of academic performance could, in fact, have a negative impact on students who were not particularly academic. For example, one student at Darnley Comprehensive School (described as having a school-centred focus and high teacher expectations) exhibited the mindset of a comfort seeker in wave 1, based on her reaction to what she saw as negative staff attitudes towards her ability. Her surprise at her results ('*the school told me I wouldn't get good results, but actually they were better than they thought*') had changed her attitude towards education, and she now exhibited the characteristics of a short-term conformist, seeking to follow a further education course, although she was still not sure of her career path. This suggests that school context can be a factor in 'creating' mindsets, though this may not always work in a positive way.

There was a particularly negative picture in relation to students' mindsets and decision-making in one school characterised as less effective (in relation to 'soft' correlates of school effectiveness, as described in Chapter 3) as illustrated in the case-study example below.

> **The Cromwell School [Defeated copers and comfort seekers]**
>
> The Cromwell School was a high performing 11-18 comprehensive and was characterised as being school-centred, with the emphasis given to academic achievement and a traditional approach to curriculum management. Although high performing, it was seen as one of the less effective schools in the sample in terms of curriculum planning and support structures. There appeared to be a sharp divide between the students planning to stay on in the school sixth form to follow a traditional academic route, and those who intended to leave after Year 11; there seemed to be little preparation for the world of work. More emphasis appeared to be given to the post-16 decision (with focus given to the school sixth form) than to Year 9 subject choices, which were not deemed as important to staff (even though they were to the students).
>
> Given this divide, therefore, it may not be surprising that a number of the more 'negative' mindsets were represented, particularly among the students in Year 9/10. During the interviews in wave 2, none of the students emerged as decided planners (while the one identified in wave 1 had proved ill-informed and had dropped out of his original post-16 destination). One student in Year 12 appeared to be a long-term preparer, planning to stay in education long-term, and another was focusing on the next step in the education system (a short-term conformist). However, seven students (all but one of whom were in Year 10) appeared to be either comfort seekers, defeated copers, or were so vague about their decisions that it was not possible to characterise their mindsets. Many of the interviewed students had changed their minds about courses and destinations between waves 1 and 2, suggesting their choices were not stable. Students' mindsets (if characterised) had stayed relatively stable over time, yet did not reflect a positive approach to decision-making. Across both waves of the research, most students remained were either negative or neutral, rather than positive, about the support they had received from school.

This example seems to suggest that less effective schools, particularly in relation to curriculum management and support structures) can 'create' less effective decision-makers. As outlined in Chapter 3, two other schools were characterised as less effective in relation to their school context (Drake High and Frobisher Community School). However, unlike The Cromwell School, students in these schools were not all characterised according to what were arguably the most 'negative' mindsets; rather, they were very mixed. Some of the sampled students (in both year groups) in these schools were characterised as decided planners, yet others were defeated copers and comfort seekers. The apparent link between the contexts of these schools and decision-making is illustrated in the following case-study school.

> **Frobisher School [mixed mindsets]**
>
> Frobisher is an 11-18 comprehensive school in an area of social deprivation. Staff commented on the low aspirations of students and their parents. Although it seemed to be a caring school, staff did not appear to have high expectations of the students. One member of staff admitted that '*expectations are too low and raising expectations is a constant battle*'. The focus of the school seemed to be on meeting policy objectives, rather than on individual students' needs. Leadership seemed weak, with disagreements between management and staff and a lack of dynamism. The curriculum offer was restricted by timetabling and staffing constraints. Careers education and guidance had been 'consolidated' with other aspects of the curriculum, but the integration did not appear to be effective and provision seemed poor. Ofsted described the advice and guidance given to students as '*inadequate*'. Students had mixed views on the support they were given by school, with some (particularly those choosing to leave school post-16) wanting more advice on the decisions they were making ('*It was mainly to do with staying on at Frobisher sixth form*'). These mixed views were reflected in decisions students had made; some students were happy with their choices, others were not and had made changes. These variations could explain why some students were characterised as decided planners and others as comfort seekers and defeated copers. It could be that factors external to the school were having an influence, or that the school was effective at supporting some students but not all.

The picture was much the same in Drake High School (another school characterised as less effective in relation to 'soft' indictors outlined in Chapter 3), which was a 'functional school' (with a focus on operations and management rather than the individual students). Although an 11-16 school, it had a strong academic ethos, although the leadership, careers education and guidance provision and curriculum management appeared to be less effective than in other schools in the sample. Although students' decisions remained stable over time, with none of the students having changed their choices, there were mixed views about the level of support received (particularly among Year 9/10 students). Students in Year 11 (in Year 12 in wave 2) were characterised as determined realists, whereas those in Year 9/10 were comfort seekers. This would suggest that the school was effective at supporting some students (those making post-16 choices) but not all (those making key stage 4 decisions). One boy staying at the sixth form said, '*I was happy with the advice I got*', whereas a boy in Year 10 reflected on the support the school had given him and said, '*nothing really*'. These examples given above of less effective schools suggest a possible link with less effective decision makers (at least in relation to some students in such schools).[39]

In terms of the stability of mindsets, students in the schools which seemed most 'effective' overall (as described in Chapter 3) either had stable mindsets

---

[39] Students in the schools which were characterised as being relatively effective appeared to include a range of educational mindsets that were more akin to the less effective than the more effective schools.

or had mindsets that changed in a positive sense (for example, from short-term conformists to long-term preparers). There was more fluctuation or evidence of vague decision-making in less 'effective' schools. These findings suggest a link between context and decision-making.

5.2.1 Summary of mindsets and school context

Some patterns have emerged. The most 'effective' schools in the sample in terms of the soft indicators as outlined in Chapter 3 seemed to have the most effective decision-makers (such as 'decided planners' and 'long-term preparers'). In contrast, schools which were deemed less effective, particularly in relation to the support mechanisms in place to inform decision-making, appeared to have the least effective decision-makers (for example, comfort seekers and defeated copers). Equally there appeared to be a link between student-centred schools and more effective decision-making. It is not possible, however, to talk about 'cause and effect' – we do not know whether mindsets are inherent or whether schools with correlates of effectiveness (as described in Chapter 3) 'create' effective mindsets. However, the evidence suggests that there is a likelihood that student-centred schools with comprehensive advice, guidance and support strategies in place have the best potential to develop more effective decision-making mindsets amongst their students (whatever their socio-economic or academic circumstances), which, in turn, may help them make effective decisions. Where such strategies were lacking, young people either appeared to be making ineffective decisions, or there was evidence of a range of 'positive' and 'negative' decision-makers (which suggests that the support may have been working for some students, but not for all).

The findings in this chapter suggest that young people's mindsets can change over time, and the variability relates to their individual experiences (some of which appear, given the evidence in this chapter, to relate to school context). The evidence indicates that schools should consider that *all* students need support with the *process* of decision-making – it is not necessarily the case that students who have made a decision will have made the right one. There is also evidence that there is often a need for personalised information, advice and guidance for young people, so that all needs are met.

6. Implications of the research

The research has identified a range of issues concerning pupil choice and decision-making that have implications across a number of policy areas, both in respect of the support needs of young people and in relation to the operation of particular policy initiatives. In particular, the analysis of young people's narratives and of the interviews with school and college staff and other providers raised issues related to the structure and nature of the curriculum on offer (both pre- and post-16) and of the provision of support for transition amongst young people. This chapter summarises the key issues and implications under those headings.

6.1 Structure and nature of the curriculum

Curriculum issues were raised concerning the level of choice at Key Stage 4, the provision of vocational courses, subject relevance and the impact on demand for subjects, and teaching collaborations and the impact on the provision of learning opportunities. These issues, and their implications, are discussed in turn.

6.1.1 Choice at Key Stage 4

Young people's experience of the pre-16 curriculum varied, both in terms of the type of subjects and courses to which they had access and the likelihood that they would be able to study them, even when courses were available. The structural organisation of the Key Stage 4 curriculum varied across schools (often dependent on pragmatic issues, such as the number of teachers available), with options made available through open choice, option blocks, identified pathways or compulsory elements. Whichever structure was available, however, young people tended to believe they had a **restricted choice**. For instance, even where an open choice was available, the number of subject choices was usually limited to two or three. There were also examples of young people being *guided* down certain pathways even if they had not been specifically *allocated* to a particular option route. Some young people, of course, may have benefited from being guided (for example, in relation to subjects they were good at). Therefore, while the policy emphasis is on increasing choices for young people, the reality was that choice was limited for many students in the study.

This raises issues in relation to the flexibility of the curriculum in schools (perceived in this research to be partly dependent on timetabling, staffing and

funding constraints), and the extent to which schools are able to offer young people their full entitlement of opportunities. The *14-19 Education and Skills* White Paper highlights the need for local collaboration amongst providers to ensure young people have access to the full range of opportunities. However, it was evident from this research that some challenges were faced by schools when collaborating with other providers, including other schools and colleges of further education (see Section 6.2).

Moreover, with such increased flexibility comes a need for individualised support and guidance for young people making choices. Many students wanted guidance on what subjects they were good at, or what vocational courses at college they might be best suited to, for instance. It was evident from the research that, in schools where young people were provided with the most comprehensive and individualised support mechanisms, they were making more effective decisions, were less likely to change their minds and were ultimately happier with their chosen route. However, to what extent do all schools have the capacity to provide such personalised support? The issue of support is discussed in more detail in Section 6.2.

6.1.2 Vocational courses

There appeared to be an issue with the parity of esteem given to vocational courses compared with traditional academic courses, and in some cases they did not count at all. Staff in some schools commented that not all post-16 institutions recognised the QCA equivalences for vocational qualifications, with the result that they were not seen as sufficient for entry to 'academic' courses such as A Levels. This could have a significant impact on students; studying vocational courses at Key Stage 4 could indeed restrict their post-16 and beyond. This is an important issue. Two schools in the sample (and quite possibly others across the country) had made vocational courses compulsory at Key Stage 4, yet despite being involved in the Pathfinder initiative (which encourages collaborative working between schools and colleges to enhance provision for young people aged 14-19), a senior manager in one of these schools complained that vocational qualifications were not seen by local partner FE colleges as adequate for entry to higher level courses.

There was also evidence that some sixth form colleges were not including point score equivalences for vocational courses in the same way that GCSEs were included (and indeed thought it was '*ludicrous*' to do so), with the result that vocational qualifications not being accepted when students applied for A Level courses. Some acknowledged that, as demand was high for places and they were over-subscribed, they accepted GCSEs only as entry for A Level courses.

An issue was also raised about parents' lack of knowledge of vocational courses and their equivalences. This may be restrictive for those students who

are highly influenced by their parents, as they may not 'approve' of them studying courses which are not traditionally academic. Thus, parents too need to be more aware of vocational courses and their equivalences. In all, this raises the issue as to what work needs to be done to raise awareness of, and to encourage the acceptance of, the QCA equivalences for these vocational qualifications amongst post-16 providers and the wider public.

Also as acceptance and demand for vocational courses rises, and with the trend of vocational provision shifting back to schools, it should be considered whether schools can meet the demand with appropriately trained teachers who have experience in the relevant vocational fields.

6.1.3 Language courses

The major issue concerning attitudes to core subjects that emerged from this study was in relation to Modern Foreign Languages. Some of the young people interviewed saw languages as less enjoyable or relevant to their future lives or careers (factors that generally influenced subject choice) compared to other key subjects such as English, maths and science. In the two schools that made languages compulsory, some students in fact perceived this to be a restriction on their choice, while one school in which only eight per cent of students had opted to study a language at Key Stage 4 had experienced problems in relation to accommodating small class sizes. Fewer students choosing to study a language at Key Stage 4 has implications in terms of the decreasing demand for language teachers, which is likely to have a knock on effect on what is available to study at A Level in schools with sixth forms.

There is an expectation, following Ministerial guidance in January 2006, that all schools should be working towards a benchmark of between 50 and 90 per cent of students following a language at Key Stage 4 (although this need not mean GCSE for all). However, students' feelings towards languages may be a barrier faced by schools trying to meet this target.

It is acknowledged that the National Languages Strategy seeks to address these issues. One potential solution suggested in the National Strategy, and also by some teachers participating in the research, is to encourage teaching of languages at an earlier age to help build young people's enthusiasm and aptitude. The Strategy emphasises the introduction, by 2010, of an entitlement to language learning for every student throughout key stage 2, and highlights work taking place to improve teaching and learning in languages at key stage 2, which particularly utilises e-learning. It may also be of value for schools to consider language courses that they could offer as alternatives to GCSE, which may encourage students who find languages difficult or uninteresting.

6.1.4 Collaboration between schools and post-16 providers

Curriculum provision through collaboration between pre-16 and post-16 institutions did not appear to be extensive and, in some cases, had been reduced, with vocational provision sometimes being brought back into school (even in some 14-19 Pathfinder areas, where models of good practice might be expected to be found). Issues of the quality and cost of provision, as well as logistic problems related to timetabling, were raised in schools. This collaboration issue has implications in relation to young people accessing the full entitlement of opportunities under the 14-19 agenda and of the need for schools to work in collaborative partnerships in order to offer young people their full range of entitlements.

All LAs and LLSCs will be jointly responsible for publishing a Prospectus of local 14-19 learning opportunities. Forthcoming guidance on the development of Prospectuses will emphasise that there is an expectation that, over time, young people will be making choices at the level of the course, not just the institution, which has implications for collaboration. While some models of effective collaborations exist (with agreed common timetables operating across institutions),[40] this raises a question as to the extent to which schools are aware of such models of practice, particularly in relation to ways that 14-19 partnerships have overcome any barriers to collaboration.

Even where effective partnerships between pre- and post-16 institutions are established, it was evident that not all young people are willing or able to travel distances to study courses not available to them in their own school. Those who were determined to reach a particular career goal were most likely to do whatever it took to reach that goal, although this appeared to apply to the minority and was more likely to be the case amongst students in Year 11 than those in Year 9. Most students appeared happier to remain in the 'known environment'. Again, this has implications for meeting the expectations of the 14-19 agenda.

6.2 Provision of support

The research has identified a range of issues to do with how young people are supported in making decisions, particularly in relation to the need for the development of decision-making skills, and in relation to the impact of 'effective' Information, Advice and Guidance.

6.2.1 Decision-making skills

Young people in the study did not always seem to have the necessary **skills** to make effective decisions. There were examples, for instance, of students who

---

[40]   See the evaluation of the 14-19 Pathfinder initiative (DfES Research Report 642, 2005).

appeared to be very decided about their post-16 routes, yet did not cope very well when faced with unanticipated changes to their plans. This was particularly the case in schools where support mechanisms were less well developed. It seemed to be the case that more emphasis was often given to the *outcome* of decision-making (the decision itself) rather than the **process** of making a choice.

Previous research[41] has highlighted the particular importance of careers-exploration skills (the skills needed to identify and use sources of information, whether paper-based, electronic or discussions with people) and the ability to apply self awareness to the decision-making process. This current study has demonstrated that young people do not all approach decision-making in the same way, and that their use of information (and sources of information) will vary according to the particular **mindsets** they adopt. A young person with a mindset much like a 'decided planner' (who has a clear career goal), for instance, is likely to make decisions differently from someone who has the characteristics of a 'comfort seeker' (who has no clear pathway and focuses on what they know they can cope with at a given time). A young person's decision, and use of information to inform that decision, will also vary according to the **contexts** in which they are operating. There was evidence of an association between schools in which young people felt supported through the careers education and guidance they received and schools in which young people appeared to have the most 'positive' mindsets and who made the most 'effective' decisions and were less likely to change their mind. Although young people's decision-making skills were not 'measured' in the study, there appeared to be a relationship between school context and effective decision-making.

Given the development of new routes through the 14-19 qualification system, including the development of National Diplomas, the growth of the Apprenticeship route, as well as the complexities of the post-16 academic, vocational and occupational world, there is a need to ensure that young people not only have information but the skills to make best use of that information. Therefore, emphasis should be shifted from the outcome of decision-making to the process.

The *Education and Skills* White Paper acknowledges that young people need the skills to make good choices, with particular mention of thinking and learning skills (including decision-making skills), which are said to be '*essential for…dealing with a range of real world problems*' and particularly important for delivering the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda.[42] Following the White Paper, the QCA is in the process of developing a framework of Personal Learning and Thinking Skills, which is expected to

---

[41] For instance, Morris *et al*. (1999).
[42] See paragraphs 5.22 and 5.24 on page 41of the *14-19 Education and Skills* White Paper.

include reference to decision-making skills. However, filling this gap in decision-making skills is likely to have significant implications for the local provision of PSHE, careers education and other areas of the curriculum. What is the capacity of schools to support the development of such skills across the curriculum? Indeed, some of the schools in the small sample included in this study did not appear to have such capacity. Local authorities (and existing Connexions Services) should question how they could best assist schools to enhance their strategies to support young people's skills development.

It should be noted however that the development of decision-making skills should not come at the detriment of **guidance and assistance** which will still be required for some, if not all, young people when making choices. Moreover, practitioners need to make **explicit links** between decision-making skills and the decisions that are being made by young people as there was evidence to suggest that young people were not seeing the **associations** between activities in careers education and guidance lessons and the choices they were making.

6.2.2 Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Information required

As suggested above, much of the current relevant policy appears to be focused on ensuring young people have the information they need to make decisions. But to what extent are young people getting the information they require to make informed choices? There was a general perception amongst young people in the study that they needed more detailed information on subject options for Key Stage 4 (this is increasingly likely to apply in relation to courses offered both within school and in other institutions). The level of information given to students varied, even within schools, and was not always impartial (there was evidence of teachers 'selling' their subjects in order to achieve viable teaching groups). In particular, young people wanted detailed information on subject content (modules and topics covered, for instance), coursework requirements and possible pathways associated with subjects (such as career routes). It could be argued that young people may benefit from standardised, impartial information on courses. The aim of the 14-19 Prospectus is to provide such standardised information, although the current focus of existing Prospectuses appears to be on post-16 rather than pre-16 courses (this should change in the future with the publication of guidance on the development of 14-19 Prospectuses).

Mediation of IAG

Even if such information is available via sources such as the 14-19 Prospectus, a question remains as to how information is mediated to young people. The

training needs of professionals (such as teachers and Personal Advisers) who help young people to make use of information such as the Prospectus should be considered. There was evidence, in the research, of teachers providing apparently impartial information about post-16 opportunities, although their level of knowledge of post-16 qualifications was not always comprehensive. Therefore, to what extent are they able to give students *informed advice* on post-16 routes? In contrast, teachers in 11-18 schools often had the knowledge and understanding of post-16 routes, yet there is evidence to suggest they are less impartial in giving this. This is likely to impact on young people's decision-making. Therefore, would information be more appropriately provided by impartial external experts? The evidence from young people's stories suggests that young people valued the individual support they received from teachers who knew them well. This suggests that the training needs of teachers should be considered, rather than relying solely on external experts to mediate information.

Even in schools offering good levels of support and careers education and guidance activities, students were not connecting these with the decisions they were making about the future (despite the emphasis in the *Youth Matters* Green Paper on the link between careers education and guidance and other areas such as work experience). This may say something about the way in which the decisions were presented in schools.

Personalised support

There is evidence from the research that young people would benefit from personalised support. Young people were making decisions in different ways (even within schools) and their mindsets were changing over time depending on their experiences (even amongst young people who at first seemed decided on a particular pathway). Young people bring different mindsets to the decision-making process, and, therefore, individuals need varying levels and types of support. Again, who should provide such individualised support? It is likely that teachers know students best, yet, as discussed, teachers might not have the knowledge to provide the information, advice and impartiality required at an individual level. It should be noted that initiatives such as Extended Schools may offer increased opportunities for professionals to give personalised support to young people. As responsibility for Information, Advice and Guidance has been devolved to local authorities, as outlined in *Youth Matters*, it should be considered how they can be assisted in assessing the extent and quality of individualised support.

The quality of IAG

The quality of careers education and guidance (or Information, Advice and Guidance) varied among the schools in the study. For instance, one school

101

said they had 'down-sized' and 'consolidated' their provision due to other curriculum priorities, and there were examples of schools which did not appear to have effective support strategies in place. Other schools seemed to offer more effective careers education and guidance and support. One 11-16 school delivered careers education and guidance in dedicated lessons from Year 9, taught jointly by a trained careers education and guidance teacher and a Connexions Personal Adviser. In this school, all students were involved in one-to-one discussions about their choices. A range of visitors, including college and university staff and students, went into the school to talk to students in Years 9, 10 and 11, and students were given the opportunity to visit FE and HE institutions.

There appeared to be an association between schools in which effective support mechanisms were in place and the schools in which young people appeared to have made the most effective decisions. That is, they were making rational and thought through decisions, were less likely to change their mind and tended to remain happy with their choices six months later. Such issues suggest a need to ensure that, with the move to Children's Trusts, local authorities are in a position to be able to identify and support the quality of local guidance provision, in order for schools to build their capacity to support young people's decision-making.

It should be noted that, in *Youth Matters*, the DfES proposed exploring how to give further impetus to the quality and impartiality of Information, Advice and Guidance through the use of quality standards. Quality standards are currently being developed that will cover all aspects of the commissioning and delivery of Information, Advice and Guidance, stipulate the minimum standards to which Information, Advice and Guidance must be delivered, and encourage the driving up of standards beyond the minimum.

This chapter has drawn attention to the key implications of the research, particularly in relation to meeting the requirements of the 14-19 agenda, in terms of young people having the information, advice and guidance, the skills, and the support they need to make effective choices at a time when policy emphasis is on increased choice and individualised pathways. A number of key messages for policy makers (at all levels) and practitioners have emerged from the research. In particular, account should be taken of what information is given to young people, by whom, and how it is mediated. Attention should be given to the development of decision-making skills, so that young people are able to process the information they are given about choices. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that young people adopt different approaches to decision-making, which will often depend on their own experiences, their thought processes and the context in which they are making choices, which highlights the importance of personalised support for all young people.

References

Arvai, J. L., Campbell, V. E. A., Baird, A. and Rivers, L. (2004) 'Teaching Students to Make Better Decisions About the Environment: Lessons from the Decision Sciences'. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, **36**, 1, 33-44

Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, G. V., and Pastorelli, C. (2001). 'Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories'. *Child Development* **72,** 1, 187-206.

Brophy, J. (1999). 'Toward a model of the value aspects of motivation in education: developing appreciation for particular learning domains and activities', *Educational Psychologist*, **34**, 75–85.

Coffield, F., Moseley, D., Hall, E. and Ecclestone, K (2004). *Should We Be Using Learning Styles? What Research has to say to Practice.* London. LSRC.

Dawes, R. (1988) *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Department for Education and Skills (2005). *Youth Matters* (Cm 6629). London: The Stationery Office.

Foskett, N., Dyke, M. and Maringe, F. (2004). *The Influence of the School in the Decision to Participate in Learning Post-16* (DfES Research Report RR538).London: DfES.

Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons (2005). *14-19 Education and Skills* (Cm. 6476). London: The Stationery Office.

Higham, J. and Yeomans, D. (2005). *Collaborative Approaches to 14-19 Provision: an Evaluation of the Second Year of the 14-19 Pathfinder Initiative.* (DfES Research Report RR642) London: DfES

Hodkinson, P and Sparkes, A. C. (1993) 'Young people's career choices and careers guidance action planning: a case-study of Training Credits in action' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, **21,** 3, 246-261.

Holland, J.L. (1985). *Making Vocational Choices: a Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments.* Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Lent, R.W., Brown, S.D. and Larkin, K.C. (1987). 'Comparison of three theoretically derived variables in predicting career and academic behaviour: self-efficacy, interest congruence, and consequence thinking', *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, **33**, 265–9.

McCrone, T., Morris, M. and Walker, M. (2006). *Student Choices at Key Stage 3 – Literature Review*. (DfES Research Report RW68). London: DfES

Miller, D. C., and Byrnes, J. P. (2001) 'To achieve or not to achieve: self-regulation perspective on adolescent's academic decision-making'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. **93**, 4, 677-685.

Morris, M., Golden, S. and Lines, A. (1999). *The Impact of Careers Education and Guidance on Transition at 16* (DfEE Research Report RD21). London: DfEE.

Morris, M., Rickinson, M. and Davies D. (2001) *The Delivery of Careers Education and Guidance in Schools*. London: DfES.

Payne, J. (2003). *Choice at the end of Compulsory Schooling: A Research Review* (DfES Research Report RR414). London: DfES.

Roberts, K. (1984) *School Leavers and Their Prospects: Youth and the Labour Market in the 1980s*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Sammons, P., Hillman, J. and Mortimore, P. (1995) *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A Review of School Effectiveness Research,* London, OFSTED/Institute of Education

SHM (2006) *Mindset Profiles: Segmenting Decision-Makers at Ages 14 and 16*. (DfES Research Report RW67). London: DfES

Wheeler, K.G. (1983). 'Comparisons of self-efficacy and expectancy models of occupational preferences for college males and females', *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, **56**, 73–8.

Wigfield, A. and Eccles, J.S. (1992). 'The development of achievement task values: a theoretical analysis', *Development Review*, **12**, 265–310.

Wigfield, A., Harold, R., Eccles, J., Aberbach, A., Freedman-Doan, K. and Yoon, K.S. (1990). 'Children's ability perceptions and values during the elementary school years.' Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA.

Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004). *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform.* London: DfES.

Appendix A.   Methodological approach

This appendix provides details of the methodological approach adopted for the study of how young people make decisions at ages 14 and 16. As described in Chapter 1, in order to explore the interplay between young people's decision-making and the context within which they make decisions, a primarily qualitative approach was adopted.

In-depth research was conducted in 14 case studies across seven local education authorities (LEAs). The selection of LEAs and schools, and the research activity which took place in schools, is described in detail below.

The selection of the case-study areas

Seven Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England were selected to provide coverage of different geographical regions, socio-economic backgrounds and urban/rural settings. They were also selected on the basis of involvement in the Increased Flexibilities[43] and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programmes[44] (or not) so that schools involved in these initiatives could be sampled. The profile of the participating LEAs is illustrated in Table A1.

The selection of the case-study schools

It should be noted that the evaluation began in February 2005, and it was necessary to complete the wave 1 visits by the beginning of May 2005 in order for Year 11 students to participate before they went on study leave prior to their examinations. Therefore, the timescale for sampling and recruiting schools, and conducting visits, was extremely tight. It was also anticipated that the timing would be difficult for schools, as the research team sought to interview Year 9 students around the time of their Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). Therefore, it was necessary to over-sample schools in order to achieve an appropriate number of case studies.

From the outset, six schools were selected from all maintained schools in each of the sampled LEAs (two first choice schools and two reserves for each, matched by school criteria). Prior to contacting the schools directly, the list of

---

[43] The Increased Flexibilities Programme aims to create enhanced vocational and work-related learning opportunities for 14-16 year olds. It involves partnerships between schools and external providers, such as FE colleges.

[44] The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme is aimed at increasing and widening participating in higher education among students from poorer backgrounds. Funds are used to deliver a range of activities for students, including summer schools, visits to colleges, universities and employers, and a range of events aimed at disseminating information, advice and guidance on higher education.

sampled schools was approved by the NFER liaison officer in each of the LEAs; a letter was sent to each officer asking if there was any known reason why any school should be removed from the sample.

School selection criteria

In selecting first choice and reserve schools, careful consideration was given to the following school criteria, in order for a range of schools to be included in the final achieved sample:

- Presence or absence of a sixth form
- Percentage of students eligible to free school means (FSM), as an indicator for the socio-economic status of the school catchment
- Size of school
- School type (whether the school is comprehensive, selective or secondary modern)
- Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 performance
- Involvement in school initiatives, such as Increased Flexibilities Programme and Aimhigher.

In February 2005, letters were sent to headteachers of the first choice and reserve schools, inviting them to participate. First choice schools were then contacted by telephone, and reserve schools only contacted when a refusal was received. Two exceptions occurred. Reserve schools, who had received the letter, telephoned NFER directly to express an interest and were therefore substituted for the first choice schools who had not responded.

Table A1:   The Profile of the Participating Local Education Authorities

LEA	Geographical region	LEA Type	Socio-economic status (FSM-level for authority)	Participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Initiative	Participation in Increased Flexibilities Programme	Number of case-study schools achieved*
1	London	London	24-100%	Yes	Yes	1
2	London	London	10-13%	No	No	1
3	Yorkshire and the Humber	Metropolitan	14-19%	Yes	Yes	2
4	South East	Counties	1-9%	No	No	3
5	East midlands	English Unitary Authority	24-100%	Yes	Yes	3
6	West midlands	Counties	1-9%	No	No	2
7	South West	Counties	10-13%	No	No	2

* The aim was for two schools to be sampled in each LEA. However, challenges were faced in gaining agreement from a number of schools across some of the smaller sampled LEAs, which meant that an even distribution of schools across LEAs was not achieved. These issues are discussed further below.

Some difficulties were faced in recruiting schools. Partly because of timing (the research coincided with Year 9 SATs and Year 11 GCSEs), a number of schools refused to take part. Teachers were reluctant to release students for interviews at such crucial examination times, while they themselves were also under considerable pressure during the run up to examinations. In addition, a considerable number of schools were contacted on numerous occasions (by letter, telephone and fax) but did not respond and so were excluded from the study. The lack of response could also be due to time pressures, particularly towards the end of the recruiting period (which continued into May 2005).

In total, 88 schools were contacted, 34 (39 per cent) turned down the invitation to participate and 40 (45 per cent) did not respond despite considerable efforts from the research team to obtain a response.

Achieving a spread of different types of schools, in order to represent the above criteria, could have proved difficult. Careful selection of the initial sample, however, meant that different types of schools were included in the final sample of 14, as illustrated below. It should be noted, however, that an even spread of schools across the seven LEAs was not achieved. This was partly a factor of LEA size; the London LEAs sampled for the evaluation had a smaller numbers of schools which were all contacted (if these schools refused to take part or did not respond, further reserve schools were unavailable).

The profile of the participating case-study schools

The profile of the overall achieved sample of schools, based on these criteria, is illustrated in Table A2.

Table A2.   The profile of the case-study schools

	N (%)	National %
Percentage of students eligible for free school meals		
1-9%	4 (29)	41
10-11%	3 (21)	8
12-19%	2 (14)	21
20-24%	1 (7)	9
24+%	4 (29)	21
Percentage of students with SEN Statements[45]		
None	3 (21)	13
1-2%	5 (36)	25
3-29%	6 (43)	20
Percentage of students with EAL		
None	-	24
1-5%	10 (71)	50
6-49%	4 (29)	22
50%+	-	4
School size (number of students)		
650 and under (small)	1 (7)	14
651-1200 (medium)	8 (57)	57
1201+ (large)	5 (36)	29
School type		
Comprehensive to 16	7 (50)	43
Comprehensive to 18	4 (29)	51
Grammar (to 18)	1 (7)	2
Secondary Modern (to 18)	2 (14)	4
Key Stage 3 achievement band[46]		
Lowest 20%	3 (21)	24
2nd lowest 20%	1 (7)	22
Middle 20%	4 (29)	20
2nd highest 20%	3 (21)	19
Highest 20%	2 (14)	15
GCSE achievement band[47]		
Lowest 20%	2 (14)	24
2nd lowest 20%	3 (21)	23
Middle 20%	4 (29)	22
2nd highest 20%	2 (14)	20
Highest 20%	2 (14)	11

In addition, six of the 14 schools were involved in the Increased Flexibilities Programme[48] and seven were involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence

---

[45]   Missing national data on SEN, so percentages do not sum to 100.

[46]   Missing information from one school (data not received from school)

[47]   Missing information from one school (data not received from school)

Challenge initiative.[49] Twelve schools had Specialist Schools status. Six schools were in 14-19 Pathfinder areas (which is an initiative that encourages collaborative working between schools and colleges to enhance provision for young people aged 14-19).

As the study was primarily qualitative, focused on a small sample of case-study schools, it was not the intention for the sample to be nationally representative. The aim was for the sample to represent all of the different categories of schools, in order to explore the differences which may exist according to school context. Although the sampled schools are not proportionally representative of the national picture, it is positive to see that it is broadly similar. In relation to free school meals, the representation of schools at either end of the scale matches the national profile of schools, although schools in the middle band are under-represented in the sample. Regarding school size, small schools are slightly under-represented, whereas large schools are over-represented slightly. Missing performance data for two of the sampled schools makes it difficult to compare the performance of the case-study schools against the national picture. Similar, missing national data on SEN makes it difficult to compare the figures.

The individual profiles of the 14 case-study schools, in relation to these criteria, are shown in Table A3.

---

[48] NFER records originally suggested that nine schools were involved in IFP, but we learnt during visits to schools that one school was not involved in the programme. This is likely to be because lead partners provided NFER with information on the schools involved in the partnerships, not the schools themselves (and thus individual schools may well have become involved at a later stage).

[49] NFER records show that six of these schools were involved in the original Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. The additional school would have become involved in the integrated Aimhigher programme in the past year or may have had links with Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression.

Table A3:   The individual profile of the 14 case-study schools

School*	School Type	School Size	% students eligible for FSM	% students with SEN statement	% students with EAL	Key Stage 3 Band	Key Stage 4 Band
Nelson	Grammar	Medium	1-9%	None	6-49%	Highest 20%	Highest 20%
Frobisher	Comprehensive to 18	Large	14-19%	3-29%	1-5%	2nd lowest 20%	2nd lowest 20%
Wellington	Secondary modern	Large	1-9%	1-2%	1-5%	Middle 20%	Middle 20%
Raleigh	Comprehensive to 16	Medium	24+%	3-9%	1-5%	Lowest 20%	Lowest 20%
Hawke	Comprehensive to 16	Large	24+%	1-2%	1-5%	Lowest 20%	2nd lowest 20%
Darnley	Comprehensive to 16	Medium	24+%	None	1-5%	No data	No data
Malborough	Secondary modern	Medium	1-9%	3-29%	6-49%	2nd highest 20%	Middle 20%
Sidney	Comprehensive to 16	Medium	20-24%	3-29%	1-5%	2nd highest 20%	Middle 20%
Anson	Comprehensive to 18	Large	1-9%	1-2%	1-5%	Highest 20%	2nd highest 20%
Haig	Comprehensive to 16	Medium	24+%	1-2%	6-49%	Lowest 20%	Lowest 20%
The Essex	Comprehensive to 16	Small	10-13%	3-29%	1-5%	2nd highest 20%	2nd highest 20%
Drake	Comprehensive to 16	Medium	14-19%	3-29%	6-49%	Middle 20%	2nd lowest 20%
Montgomery	Comprehensive to 18	Large	10-13%	1-2%	1-5%	Middle 20%	Middle 20%
The Cromwell	Comprehensive to 18	Medium	10-13%	None	1-5%	Middle 20%	Highest 20%

* The school names have been changed to protect anonymity

Census data

Once the sample had been selected, the 2001 Census Data was used as a measure of the socio-economic environment from which a school's students come. As the census variables are calculated at student level (based on the postcode of the student), they relate specifically to the students of the school rather than the area in which the school itself is located. Thus, census data provides a wide socio-economic picture of a school's students, rather than relying solely on FSM eligibility data as a socio-economic measure. The following census variables were analysed in relation to the 14 case-study schools:

- Mean percentage of people who are white

- Mean percentage of people aged 16-74 with Level 2 and Level 4/5 qualifications

- Mean percentage of people aged 16-74 in managerial or professional occupations

- Mean percentage of households that are owner occupied

- Mean percentage of households that have lone parents with dependent children

- Mean percentage of households not deprived in any dimension

- Mean percentage of households with the same address as they had one year ago.

The profile of the overall school sample, based on census variables, is illustrated in Table A4. Each of the variables has been banded into five bands (ranging from schools categorised as belonging to the highest 20 per cent of schools in England, to the lowest 20 per cent of schools).

The table illustrates that the case-study schools represent a broad spectrum in terms of socio-economic status, with all categories being represented to a degree. This is a positive in terms of being able to explore young people's decision-making within the context of different types of schools.

The profile of the individual 14 schools, in relation to Census variables, is illustrated in Table A5.

Table A4:   The Census Profile of the Schools

Census variable	Number of Schools				
	Lowest 20%	2nd lowest 20%	Middle 20%	2nd highest 20%	Highest 20%
Mean % of people who are white	5	5	1	1	2
Mean % of people aged 16-74 with Level 2 qualifications	3	4	1	4	2
Mean % of people aged 16-74 with Level 4/5 qualifications	2	2	4	3	3
Mean % of people aged 16-74 in managerial/professional occupations	4	1	3	2	4
Mean % of households that are owner occupied	3	2	5	3	1
Mean % of households not deprived in any dimension	4	2	3	1	4
Mean % of households with same address as they had one year ago	1	7	3	2	1

Table A5:   The Census profile of the 14 case-study schools (variables banded into 20% bands)

School	% White	% Level 2 Qualifications	% Level 4/5 Qualifications	% Managerial/ professional	% Owner occupied	% Lone parents	% Not deprived
Nelson Grammar	Lowest	2nd highest	2nd highest	Highest	2nd highest	Lowest	Highest
Frobisher Community	Highest	Middle	Lowest	Lowest	Middle	2nd highest	Lowest
Wellington Secondary	2nd lowest	2nd highest	Highest	Highest	2nd highest	Lowest	Highest
Raleigh High	2nd lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Highest	Lowest
Hawke Comprehensive	Lowest	2nd lowest	2nd lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Highest	2nd lowest
Darnley Comprehensive	2nd lowest	Lowest	Lowest	Lowest	2nd lowest	2nd highest	Lowest
Malborough Secondary	2nd lowest	Highest	2nd highest	Highest	Highest	Lowest	Highest
Sidney School	2nd highest	2nd highest	Middle	2nd lowest	2nd lowest	2nd highest	Lowest
Anson School	2nd lowest	Highest	2nd highest	2nd highest	Middle	2nd lowest	Highest
Haigh School	Lowest	Lowest	Highest	Highest	Lowest	Highest	2nd lowest
The Essex School	Highest	2nd highest	Middle	Middle	2nd highest	2nd lowest	Middle
Drake High School	Lowest	2nd lowest	Highest	Highest	Middle	Middle	2nd highest
Montgomery school	Middle	2nd lowest	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle
The Cromwell School	Lowest 20%	2nd lowest 20%	Middle	Middle	Middle	2nd highest	Middle

Note: the variables are described in full in Table A4.

114

The case-study research

The research activities which took place across the 14 case-study schools are outlined below.

Documentary analysis

In order to ensure that the interviews conducted with staff and students during visits reflected the school context and practice within the school, senior managers were asked to provide any available documentation (such as the school prospectus, options booklets and destination data). Researchers analysed these prior to the visit, whenever possible, and during the analysis phase.

Interviews with students

In wave 1 (February-May 2005), interviews were conducted with 85 students in Year 9, and 80 in Year 11 (an average of six per year group, per school), which is a total of **165 students**. Teachers were asked to select, in each of Year 9 and Year 11:

- three boys and three girls
- a mixture of ethnic backgrounds (where possible)
- two students in higher sets/high ability, two in middle sets and two in lower sets
- some students who were currently studying or planning to study vocational subjects, some not.

A fairly equal proportion of boys and girls were selected by teachers to participate in the study in wave 1. Of the 85 students interviewed in Year 9, 45 were boys and 38 were girls, and of the 80 Year 11 students, equal numbers of boys and girls were represented. Most students were white (60 in Year 9 and 59 in Year 11), although smaller numbers of students represented minority ethnic groups (the largest minority ethnic groups represented across the whole sample were Black Caribbean, Black African and white and Black Caribbean mixed race).

Once we had collected and analysed student performance data (2005 key stage 3 SATs levels for English, mathematics and science for Year 9 students and 2005 GCSE scores[50] for Year 11 students), we were able to explore the ability ranges of the students in the sample. Key Stage 3 data was obtained for 71 of the 85 students in Year 9. It should be noted that the Year 9 sample consisted of students who had mostly achieved levels 5 and 6 for science, levels 6 and 7

---

[50] The 'best eight' GCSE scores for each student were used to calculate their total and average scores. GCSE scores for grades A*-C, for instance, are as follows: A*, 58 points; A, 52 points; B, 46 points; and C, 40 points. The maximum total score is 464 (eight A* grades) and the maximum average score is 58 points.

for mathematics and levels 5 and 6 for English (very few students had achieved less than a level 5 for any subject). Regarding the Year 11 sample, 2005 GCSE data was received for 65 of the 80 students (some schools were unwilling to supply individual student level attainment data). The total GCSE score across the 65 students ranged from 118 (equivalent to no more than five GCSEs at grade F) to 452 points (equivalent to six GCSEs at grade A* and two at grade A). Overall, students with a range of abilities were represented, although the sample was skewed towards those with high ability. Two thirds of the students for whom data was received had achieved eight grades C and above. Most (92 per cent) had achieved five grades A*-C. In relation to total GCSE point scores, the overall mean, median and mode scores suggest that students in the sample were generally just above a C grade.

Each young person was asked for their agreement to participate (involvement was voluntary). Parental permission was also sought by the school for students to participate. Prior to participation, they were told that interviews would be conducted confidentially and reported anonymously.

Prior to the interview, each student was asked to complete a short **proforma**. Year 9 students were asked to indicate their expected subject choices for key stage 4, and Year 11 students were asked to indicate their choice of post-16 destination and any courses of post-16 study they were planning or hoping to undertake (Table A6 below illustrates planned and actual destinations). Students were also asked to comment on a number of school activities (such as careers education and guidance lessons, mock interviews and industry days) in terms of how helpful they had been in assisting them to make their choices. The proformas also contained a series of semantic differential questions to explore students' perceptions of specific subjects (mathematics, languages, science and English). These were largely based on the semantic differentials used in the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study (Harland *et al*., 2003).

A total of 83 of the 85 Year 9 students (98 per cent) and all 80 Year 11 students completed a proforma. Time limitations did not allow for three Year 9 students to complete proformas.

The interviews centred around **narrative eliciting questions**, which were designed to draw out student's own stories about the decision-making process, without prompting them unnecessarily or influencing their answers unduly; interviews were not designed to obtain answers to structured questions. A small number of unstructured narrative eliciting prompts were used by the researcher if required (for example, if the student found it difficult to tell their story freely without assistance). Essentially, after a broad opening question, students were asked to describe, in their own words, the choices they had made (whether subject choices for key stage 4 or post-16 destination choices) and what had been important in helping them to make those choices.

Students were asked to complete a **'circle of influence' activity**, either during the interview to stimulate further discussion, or towards the end. This activity sought to explore the level of importance and value that young people gave certain influences. During interviews, students may have mentioned some people (such as parents or a Connexions Personal Adviser) or things (such as a careers education lesson, radio advert or television programme) which may or may not have been useful in influencing their decision about what subjects to take in Years 10 and 11 or what to do after Year 11. The student's name was placed at the centre of the circle of influence, and they were asked to place other people or things which had a *big influence* on their decision in zone 1 of the circle (closest to them). People of things which had *some influence* were placed in zone 2, and those that had *little or no influence* were placed in zone 3. All 165 students completed a circle of influence activity.

The aim was for all students to be **re-interviewed during wave 2** (October-December 2005), face-to-face where possible, in order for them to reflect on the choices they had made. Follow-up interviews were successfully completed with **127** of the 165 students interviewed in wave 1 (**77 per cent**); 70 of the 85 students who were in Year 9 in wave 1 (82 per cent)[51] and 57 of the 80 who were in Year 11 (71 per cent).[52] As in wave 1, there were slightly more boys than girls from the original Year 9 sample who took part in wave 2, and the Year 11 sample was fairly evenly split by gender. The largest minority ethnic groups represented in wave 2 were White and Black Caribbean mixed race, Black African and Black Caribbean, although numbers were small.

Where the original Year 11 students were no longer in school they were interviewed by telephone. Table A6 below illustrates Year 11 students' planned and actual destinations. It shows that most students had followed planned routes, and that the majority had remained in education or training.

Each student interview (wave 1 and wave 2) lasted for up to 30 minutes, and was recorded (where possible), with the interviewees' permission, and then transcribed verbatim.

During the interview in wave 1, each student was given a letter to give to their parents, inviting them to take part in a telephone interview (see below).

---

[51] Attrition amongst the original Year 9 sample was mainly due to students being absent on the day of the follow-up interview.

[52] During interviews with Year 11 students in wave 1, they were asked for contact details (for example, home and/or mobile telephone numbers) so that if they were no longer attending school in wave 2, researchers could contact them by telephone to conduct a follow-up interview. Attrition was due to the fact that a minority of students did not give their contact details, or that the contact details had changed by wave 2, or because some students did not return researchers' telephone calls.

Table A6   Year 11 Students' Planned and Actual Post-16 Destinations

Planned Destination	Actual Destination	No. of Boys	No. of Girls	Total
Full-time sixth form (current school)	Full-time sixth form (current school)	6	11	17
Don't know	Full-time sixth form (current school)	1	-	1
Full-time FE	Full-time sixth form (current school)	2	-	2
Apprenticeship	Full-time sixth form (current school)	1	-	1
Total at current school sixth form		**10**	**11**	**21**
Full-time FE	Full-time FE	6	11	17
Apprenticeship	Full-time FE	1	-	1
Total in FE		**7**	**11**	**18**
Full-time sixth form college	**Full-time sixth form college**	**5**	**4**	**9**
Full-time sixth form (a different school)	**Full-time sixth form (a different school)**	**1**	**2**	**3**
Full-time FE	**Other (Youth Inclusion Project)**	**1**	**-**	**1**
Apprenticeship	**Apprenticeship**	**1**	**-**	**1**
Don't know	Job without training	2	-	2
Other	Job without training	1	-	1
Total in job without training		**3**	**-**	**3**
Job with training	**Job with training**	**1**	**-**	**1**
Total		**29**	**28**	**57**

Interviews with staff

Across the 14 schools, a total of 67 key members of staff were interviewed in wave 1 of the research in order to gain an understanding of the school context and the strategies adopted to support their students' choices. The following members of staff were interviewed face-to-face during visits to schools:

- Seventeen Senior Managers (usually deputy headteachers with responsibility for curriculum)
- Eleven Careers Coordinators/teachers with responsibility for careers education and guidance
- Ten Heads of Year 11

- Nine Heads of Year 9

- Nine Connexions Personal Advisers

- Three Key Stage 3 Managers

- Three Key Stage 4 Managers

- Two Heads of Sixth Form

- Three others, including a Social Inclusion Coordinator, a mentor and a School Partnership Director.

On average, four members of staff were interviewed in each school.

During wave 2, follow-up interviews were carried out with a senior manager in each school, in order to investigate any changes in policy and practice which could have an impact on decision-making. In addition, the head of sixth form was interviewed in each 11-18 school, to get their perceptions on post-16 opportunities.

Interviews with post-16 providers

In order to gain an understanding of the post-16 choices available to young people in the case-study areas, which could have an impact on decision-making, interviews were carried out with post-16 providers in each area. Key personnel in **local FE colleges** (eight interviewees across five FE colleges) and **sixth form colleges** (three interviewees across three colleges) were included. In each area, a representative from the Local Learning and Skills Council (**LLSC**), most often the 14-19 Strategy Manager, was interviewed by telephone about their perspective on post-16 provision. They were asked to give details of local **training providers**, who were then interviewed by telephone to add context.

Interviews with parents

In order to explore the importance of parental influence on decision-making, and to triangulate the views of young people with those of their parents, telephone interviews were conducted with parents.

Each of the 165 students who participated in an interview during wave 1 of the research was given a letter for their parents, which invited them to take part in a telephone interview. A few weeks later, reminder letters were sent directly to the schools, and teachers were asked to distribute them to the students who had taken part, so that they could be passed to parents again.

A total of 47 responses were received and interviews were carried out (that is a 28 per cent response rate, which is higher than the 20 per cent response that was originally anticipated). Of the 47, 26 were parents or Year 9 students (representing 12 schools) and 21 were parents of Year 11 students (representing 11 schools). It should be noted that parents are represented to a

greater extent in some schools than others, which was borne in mind by the research team during analysis. In one school, no response was received from parents, despite reminder letters having been sent.

Appendix B. SHM Model of Educational Mindsets

In January 2005, consultants from SHM were commissioned by the DfES to undertake research exploring young people's educational mindsets[53]. In order to understand young people's educational mindsets, the research explored how young people see the world and their futures within that world, and how they see the choices they have to make. There were two main aims of the SHM research:

- To carry out stand-alone research to help DfES understand the mindsets of young people, in order to improve activities such as information, guidance and curriculum design

- To input into the major programme of research by NFER that is investigating the processes by which young people make decisions at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4.

SHM conducted two workshops, each in six secondary schools in different geographical locations across England. Overall, 58 young people took part in activities and discussions during workshops. The first workshops focused on exploring the choices open to young people and why they might make certain choices. This enabled the researchers to gain an insight into young people's possible educational mindsets, which they then 'tested' during the second workshops. Participants were asked to place themselves on the mindset dimensions identified in the first workshops and discuss their places. They were able to challenge and refine the dimensions by applying them to their own situations. The mindset dimensions were then amended based on the outcomes of the second workshops.

Eight educational mindsets were identified by SHM, each of which is 'built' on four dimensions. The four dimensions are:

- Orientation: determined by where a young person's focus is when making a decision (for example, focus on the future, present or past)

- Outlook: determined by a young person's view of the future (for example, whether they have a clear picture of their future and whether they are optimistic about how things will turn out for them)

- Risk tolerance: determined by how 'safe' a young person wants to be when making decisions (for example, whether they build on what they are good

---

[53] See DfES Research Report (RW67) *Mindset Profiles: Segmenting Decision-Makers at Ages 14 and 16, findings from exploratory research by SHM.*

at and stay with the familiar, or whether they look for new challenges in new places)

- Theory of success: determined by how they think success comes about (for example, as a result of luck, climbing the ladder or having intuition).

An individual's 'position' on each of the four dimensions determines their education mindset. The eight mindsets are illustrated in Table B1.

Use of the SHM educational mindsets as an analytical tool

As described in Appendix A, the interviews with young people were centred on narrative eliciting questions which enabled each young person to tell their own story freely. The aim was not to ask structured questions which related to the SHM dimensions and mindsets. Rather, the SHM outcomes were used as an analytical tool; each young person's story was analysed to investigate whether they could be categorised in the way described. The NFER research team analysed all student narratives to explore whether or not the young people could be categorised according to particular dimensions of the SHM mindset tool. We have looked closely at the dimensions to see whether a young person can be identified as a particular type. Examples of responses from young people in each dimension were produced by SHM, which helped the NFER research team analyse their own student interviews.

Through the analysis of wave 1 interviews, we were able to investigate whether educational mindsets could be identified among the sample of students. After follow-up interviews during wave 2, we were able to explore the SHM model further, investigating whether students' mindsets appeared to remain the same or change over time. Throughout the two phases of the research, we have explored whether similar mindsets are found in certain 'types' of school and whether young people with the same mindsets make decisions similarly or differently.

The mindsets found across the sample

Tables B1 and B2 below summarise the educational mindsets found across the samples of Year 9 and Year 11 students in both waves of the research (individual changes in mindsets, and any patterns emerging, are discussed later). The names given by SHM to the mindsets are used in the tables.

Table B1   **Educational Mindsets across Year 9 Students**

SHM Educational Mindset Categories	Wave 1 N	Wave 2 N
Determined Realists	28	18
Comfort Seekers	16	13
Short-term Conformists	9	12
Confident Aspirationals	4	-
Defeated Copers	5	5
Indecisive Worriers	3	1
Long-term Preparers	-	10
Unrealistic Dreamers	1	1
*Unable to categorise**	19	10
N =	**85**	**70**

Note: the numbers in wave 1 and wave 2 are not directly comparable as the overall response rate was lower in wave 2. Some students also moved between categories between waves, and this is discussed in the main report.

Table B2   **Educational Mindsets across Year 11 Students**

SHM Educational Mindset Categories	Wave 1 N	Wave 2 N
Determined Realists	37	18
Comfort Seekers	6	8
Short-term Conformists	8	11
Confident Aspirationals	4	1
Defeated Copers	2	2
Indecisive Worriers	2	1
Long-term Preparers	4	14
Unrealistic Dreamers	-	-
*Unable to categorise**	17	2
N =	**80**	**57**

Note: the numbers in wave 1 and wave 2 are not directly comparable as the overall response rate was lower in wave 2. Some students also moved between categories between waves, and this is discussed in the main report.

Table B1.   SHM Educational Mindset Dimensions

Dimensions	The Eight Educational Mindsets							
	Confident Aspirational	**Determined Realist**	**Long-term preparers**	**Indecisive worrier**	**Short-term conformist**	**Unrealistic dreamers**	**Comfort seeker**	**Defeated Copers**
Orientation	Future	Future	Future	Future (short-term)	Future (short-term)	Present	Present	Past
Outlook	No clear picture	Clear picture	No clear picture	No clear picture	No clear picture	Clear picture	No clear picture	Clear picture
	Optimistic	Optimistic	Optimistic	Anxious	Optimistic	Optimistic	Optimistic	Pessimistic
Risk Tolerance	Decision not critical	Decision is critical	Decision not critical	Decision not critical	Decision not critical	Decision not critical	Stay with the familiar	Decision is critical
	New challenges	Build on what good at	New challenges		Build on what good at	New people/places		Build on what good at
	New people/places	New people/places	New people/places		New people/places			Stay with familiar
Theory of Success	Intuition	Need clear picture	Need clear picture	Need clear picture	Climb ladder	Can change course	N/A	Climb the ladder
	Can change course	Climb ladder	Climb ladder	Success = hard work	Success = hard work	Success = luck		Success = hard work
	Success = hard work	Success = hard work	Success = hard work					

Appendix C. Students' attitudes to core subjects

In order to obtain some insights into young people's perceptions of core National Curriculum subjects of English, mathematics, science and modern foreign languages[54] and to elicit any emerging gender differences in attitudes that might ultimately affect young people's choice of courses or post-16 destinations, the proformas completed by young people in wave 1 included a series of subject-focused semantic differential items. These items were based upon work done by Harland *et al.* (2001)[55] in their longitudinal exploration of young people's attitudes to the curriculum in Northern Ireland and were designed to obtain insights into young people's perceptions of subject relevance (career and gender-related), manageability and enjoyment (as discussed in turn below). It should be noted that tests of statistical significance were not carried out at this stage, although some commentary on the different views of boys and girls is offered.

Relevance

Young people did not perceive the subjects under scrutiny as being particularly gender-biased, with the majority of both Year 9 and Year 11 students feeling that the subjects were equally relevant for both sexes. Amongst the Year 11 students , however, a few young people (less than one in ten of the students in each instance) indicated a belief that English and foreign languages were 'for girls' and that mathematics was 'for boys'. There were some marked divisions as to young people's attitudes towards the relevance of subjects both now and for their potential career and for wider adult life, however. While very few young people regarded mathematics or English as irrelevant, over one quarter of Year 11 students and nearly one-third of Year 9 students questioned the value of foreign languages both in their current school career and for adult life. Even more (over one-third of Year 11 and Year 9 students) suggested that such languages would not be important for their careers. These views correspond with those in the Northern Ireland study, where languages (along with expressive arts and RE) were consistently seen as least useful by young people in Key Stage 3 and 4. Views on science were more mixed, with young people in both year groups more likely to suggest

---

[54] Modern Foreign Languages are no longer part of the compulsory core at Key Stage 4, but are included in the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

[55] Harland, J., Moor, H, Kinder, K. and Ashworth, M. *Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study (key stage 3 phase).*

that, while it might be very important for the career they envisaged, it was less important for adult life in general.

Young people's beliefs about the value of subjects were not always reflected in their responses to questions about the amount of curriculum time spent on the subject. More than one in four of the Year 9 students, for instance, thought that too much time was spent on mathematics, a feeling they also shared about languages. While some Year 11 students expressed similar views, most felt that the amount of time that was spent was adequate, although some believed that even more time should be spent on mathematics (as on English).

Manageability

The proportions who reported finding the subjects hard were relatively low for English (less than one in ten and fewer girls than boys), mathematics (less than one in five and more girls than boys) and science (less than one in five) in Year 9, but nearly two fifths regarded languages as difficult. The proportions reporting difficulty were higher for all subject areas in Year 11, with one quarter finding English and science hard, just under one third finding mathematics hard and nearly half saying that languages were difficult.

In addition to the perceived difficulties of the subjects, there seemed to be an increasing concern about the manageability of the curriculum between young people in Year 9 and young people in Year 11. This was particularly evident in English and mathematics, where nearly half of the respondents in Year 11, compared to one in five in Year 9, felt that there was too much coursework. Any concerns about the amount of work expected in this subject in class were similar across both age groups (two thirds felt the balance was right, while just less than one in five in Year 9 and a quarter in Year 11 felt over-worked). This suggests that, while Year 11's perceptions of their ability to cope with work in class may have kept pace with the developing curriculum, the perceived burden of GCSE coursework in mathematics was greater than any they had experienced in their earlier school career.

Worries about coursework were also evident in English (45 per cent of the Year 11 students in the study complained about this), although more felt under-worked rather than over-worked in class. In science or languages, where around one in five of the Year 11 students reported concern, young people were less likely than they had been in English to express the view there was too much coursework. The numbers of Year 11 students in these subjects reporting being under-worked were similar to those reporting being worked too hard (less than one in five students). By contrast, few young people in Year 9 shared the Year 11 view that the coursework burden in any subject was too great, while the only subject in which notably more young people felt they were over-worked than under-worked was in languages.

Nonetheless, across all subject areas and even in those subjects where young people claimed to be feeling under pressure, more students reported that they were making good progress than poor progress. The exception to this was in English in Year 9, where marginally more young people (more than one quarter) felt their progress had been poor.

Enjoyment

Attitudes towards science and English suggested that young people in Year 9 were more likely to agree with the statement that the subject was 'fun' than to regard it as boring, in marked contrast to their views on mathematics; views on languages were more evenly spread across the spectrum. Amongst Year 11 students, however, the positive accolades tended to be for science alone, with a more even spread of views for English and languages. Mathematics was regarded as 'boring' by nearly half the students in this age group in the study. Enjoyment of the subject and views on its apparent level of interest, while similar, were not identical.

What may be more telling, however, is that there was no simple equation between young people's thoughts about subject difficulty and subject enjoyment, nor between a subject's interest to a student and their wish to abandon its study. While only 24 per cent of the Year 9 students regarded languages as 'easy', for example, more than one third of them (37 per cent) said they enjoyed doing the work. This story was repeated in Year 11, with 20 per cent finding the subject 'easy', but 32 per cent saying they enjoyed studying languages. Again, while 39 per cent of the Year 9 students said that mathematics was 'boring', only 21 per cent wished they were not studying it. Despite nearly half finding it dull, only 22 per cent of Year 11 students wished they did not have to follow a course in mathematics. However, it is of interest that, of the core GCSE subjects being studied by Year 11 students, science and English were clearly more popular than mathematics and languages with the majority of those young people in the study.

The following sections discuss students' attitudes towards individual subjects.

Year 9 students' attitudes towards individual subjects

Table C1 below illustrates Year 9 students' attitudes towards maths. Students were positive about maths in terms of its current usefulness and its importance for future job, career and adult life. They were neutral in their response to mathematics being for girls or boys, and regarding the amount of coursework. Students tended to be slightly more negative about their level of enjoyment of the subject and the progress they had made, although they recognised its importance. Exploring gender differences, boys were generally slightly more positive than girls. Boys were more likely than girls to find maths easy and to enjoy the subject. Boys were also slightly more likely to see maths as useful and important, and to be glad they were doing maths.

Table C1   Year 9 students' attitudes towards mathematics

Thinking about Maths…	1	2	3	4	5	
maths is hard	2	13	46	29	6	maths is easy
Maths is fun	5	23	21	27	12	maths is boring
maths is for girls	-	-	92	6	-	maths is for boys
I really enjoy maths	5	29	24	27	-	I really dislike maths
it is important for job/career	46	30	18	4	-	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	45	34	14	5	-	not needed for adult life
we do too much maths	4	22	66	4	1	we don't do enough maths
it is useful for me now	29	42	21	6	-	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	5	13	65	13	1	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	2	2	75	12	5	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing maths	15	28	35	16	5	I wish I wasn't doing maths
I've made poor progress	1	1	25	37	32	I've made good progress

N = 83. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

As shown in Table C2 below, students were either positive or neutral in their attitudes towards about English. They were more likely to think English was easy, fun and enjoyable than hard, boring and dislikeable. English was also considered important and useful. Most students were positive about their progress in English. Girls found English easier than boys, and they also enjoyed it more than boys. However, boys were more likely than girls to consider English to be important for their career and adult life (girls were more neutral than boys). Girls were more likely than boys to think they had made good progress in English.

Table C2   Year 9 students' attitudes towards English

Thinking about English…	1	2	3	4	5	
English is hard	1	7	40	42	7	English is easy
English is fun	10	34	29	22	4	English is boring
English is for girls	-	1	96	-	-	English is for boys
I really enjoy English	16	35	30	15	2	I really dislike English
it is important for job/career	51	29	12	6	-	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	46	35	15	2	-	not needed for adult life
we do too much English	2	11	76	7	1	we don't do enough English
it is useful for me now	39	34	24	1	-	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	-	6	81	11	-	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	5	5	71	16	-	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing English	24	33	29	12	-	I wish I wasn't doing English
I've made poor progress	2	25	48	22	-	I've made good progress

N = 83. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded.

There were generally more divided opinions about science, although more students found it fun than boring, and more enjoyed it than disliked it. Students tended to find science useful for them now and thought it was important for their future jobs/careers. Students had generally made good progress in science. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to find science easy and to enjoy it. A greater proportion of boys than girls thought science would be important for their future career and adult life.

Table C3   **Year 9 students' attitudes towards science**

Thinking about science…	1	2	3	4	5	
science is hard	2	16	36	34	10	science is easy
Science is fun	18	27	30	17	6	science is boring
science is for girls	-	-	96	1	-	science is for boys
I really enjoy science	16	28	28	23	-	I really dislike science
It is important for job/career	24	39	23	7	4	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	18	27	39	11	2	not needed for adult life
we do too much science	4	12	68	8	5	we don't do enough science
it is useful for me now	21	33	33	10	1	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	-	10	76	10	1	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	4	7	77	6	2	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing science	22	28	29	12	6	I wish I wasn't doing science
I've made poor progress	-	4	33	45	16	I've made good progress

N = 83. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

Regarding attitudes to languages, as shown below in Table C4, there was much more of a varied opinion among Year 9 students overall. Attitudes towards languages were generally more negative then they had been towards other subjects. There were mixed feelings about the usefulness and importance of languages, and the extent to which languages are enjoyable. Boys found languages harder than girls, and were less likely to think they had made good progress. Girls tended to be more neutral attitudes towards languages than boys.

Table C4   Year 9 students' attitudes towards languages

Thinking about languages..	1	2	3	4	5	
languages are hard	19	21	29	17	7	languages are easy
Languages are fun	10	25	16	12	30	languages are boring
languages are for girls	2	1	88	1	-	languages are for boys
I really enjoy languages	10	27	19	12	25	I really dislike languages
they are important for job/career	13	21	25	15	19	they are not needed for job/career
important for adult life	7	25	30	16	15	not needed for adult life
we do too much languages	18	8	49	12	4	we don't do enough languages
they are useful for me now	11	22	22	18	19	they are useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	7	11	65	7	1	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	2	4	71	6	8	There's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing languages	16	17	29	7	23	I wish I wasn't doing languages
I've made poor progress	8	2	31	31	18	I've made good progress

N = 83. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

Year 11 students' attitudes towards individual subjects

The attitudes of Year 11 students towards maths were broadly similar to those of Year 9 students, described above. Similar gender differences were observed as in Year 9; boys tended to find maths easier than girls and considered maths to be slightly more important for the future.

Table C5   Year 11 students' attitudes towards mathematics

Thinking about Maths…	1	2	3	4	5	
maths is hard	9	20	38	25	8	maths is easy
Maths is fun	5	19	31	29	15	maths is boring
maths is for girls	-	1	93	3	1	maths is for boys
I really enjoy maths	11	24	26	26	11	I really dislike maths
it is important for job/career	43	36	14	6	1	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	43	31	20	4	1	not needed for adult life
we do too much maths	6	15	63	14	1	we don't do enough maths
it is useful for me now	30	40	18	8	4	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	4	21	63	9	3	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	-	8	48	24	20	There's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing maths	21	25	31	14	8	I wish I wasn't doing maths
I've made poor progress	3	4	21	41	30	I've made good progress

N = 85. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

Students in Year 11 had found English easier than the students in Year 9, although Year 11 students were a little less positive about their level of enjoyment of English. As in Year 9, English was seen as important and useful, and students were generally glad they were doing English and were pleased with their progress. Similar gender patterns emerged. For instance, Year 11 girls found English easier than Year 11 boys, and they also enjoyed it more. Girls were also more confident than boys about their progress in English in Year 11, as was the case in Year 9.

Table C6   Year 11 students' attitudes towards English

Thinking about English…	1	2	3	4	5	
English is hard	4	19	25	36	15	English is easy
English is fun	14	29	20	28	9	English is boring
English is for girls	1	5	91	-	-	English is for boys
I really enjoy English	18	28	25	23	6	I really dislike English
it is important for job/career	59	28	10	3	1	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	49	36	13	-	1	not needed for adult life
we do too much English	8	10	61	13	8	we don't do enough English
it is useful for me now	41	26	28	3	1	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	4	13	60	19	4	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	1	1	51	31	14	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing English	30	30	25	8	6	I wish I wasn't doing English
I've made poor progress	1	11	15	41	30	I've made good progress

N = 85. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

As was the case among Year 9 students, attitudes towards science were divided, although attitudes were more positive and neutral than negative. In Year 11, boys still found science easier compared with girls, and found it more enjoyable. However, girls and boys attached similar levels of importance on science for future careers and adult life, which was not the case in Year 9 (boys thought science was more important).

Table C7   Year 11 students' attitudes towards science

Thinking about science…	1	2	3	4	5	
science is hard	10	14	38	28	10	science is easy
Science is fun	16	35	28	15	-	science is boring
science is for girls	1	1	90	5	-	science is for boys
I really enjoy science	19	36	25	14	5	I really dislike science
it is important for job/career	19	31	31	13	5	it is not needed for job/career
important for adult life	14	29	30	26	-	not needed for adult life
we do too much science	4	20	60	10	5	we don't do enough science
it is useful for me now	18	35	28	14	5	it is useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	1	18	60	15	5	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	-	9	70	13	8	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing science	23	34	30	5	8	I wish I wasn't doing science
I've made poor progress	1	4	28	43	24	I've made good progress

N = 85. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded

Attitudes towards languages were slightly more positive than they had been in Year 9, although opinions were still varied. Girls still found languages easier than boys in Year 11, and were still more likely to think they had made good progress.

134

Table C8   Year 11 students' attitudes towards languages

Thinking about languages..	1	2	3	4	5	
languages are hard	19	28	18	10	10	languages are easy
languages are fun	13	16	24	18	14	languages are boring
languages are for girls	4	3	76	-	-	languages are for boys
I really enjoy languages	18	14	13	26	15	I really dislike languages
they are important for job/career	13	21	15	21	14	they are not needed for job/career
important for adult life	10	24	21	15	13	not needed for adult life
we do too much languages	6	11	49	9	8	we don't do enough languages
they are useful for me now	15	10	29	11	18	they are useless for me now
I feel over worked in class	4	4	65	8	-	I feel under worked in class
there's not enough coursework	-	3	58	8	13	there's too much coursework
I'm really glad I'm doing languages	21	11	25	6	16	I wish I wasn't doing languages
I've made poor progress	6	6	29	26	18	I've made good progress

N = 85. Although numbers are small, percentages are given in the table for ease of comparison across subjects
If percentages do not sum to 100 this is because of rounding or because invalid or non-response are excluded