

RESEARCH

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Alternative Routes into and
Pathways through Higher Education

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Alternative Routes into and Pathways through Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study background

- 1.1 In December 2006 York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to undertake research into the experiences of students taking “alternative routes into and pathways through higher education”. Support for the work was continued by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The Department stated that the work will:

“inform our policies on widening participation, will focus on the use of routes into and through HE that are alternatives to direct entry from school or college with A-levels gained through full-time study and will, additionally, examine the relationship between these routes and disability, socio-economic group (SEG), age, gender and ethnic minorities”.

- 1.2 The bulk of this work involved conducting in-depth interviews with 334 students from a range of backgrounds, to better understand their motivations for entering higher education and their experiences of undertaking higher education study. In addition, York Consulting was requested to provide a broad overview of the patterns of students taking alternative routes into and pathways through higher education, based on available data from the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
- 1.3 The original brief for the study clearly communicated “an economic and social need to widen participation in higher education”. For example, the Leitch Review notes that of the 18 million jobs to be made vacant between 2004 and 2020, around one half will be in occupations requiring graduate level students. Furthermore, the Government’s White Paper “*The Future of Higher Education*” makes a clear commitment to “increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30” by 2010”. Gorard, in his review of widening participation research¹, refers to those “marginal learners from low participation backgrounds” for whom participation in higher education could generate “significantly higher economic returns than those with higher or lower probabilities of participating in HE”.
- 1.4 Widening participation will require enhancing existing, and developing new, routes **into** and pathways **through** higher education that are appropriate for and relevant to a broader range of students and not just those school leavers with A-level qualifications. In addition, there are challenges to overcome in terms of raising the attainment levels of those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to take part in HE.

¹ Gorard S et al (2006) review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. (A report to HEFCE by York University)

Definitions

- 1.5 The definitions for the study were based on the original brief set for the work; background research and consultation with other academic researchers. The final definitions for the study agreed by the Steering Group were as follows:
- **An alternative route into HE** - students accessing Higher Education with no qualifications; with a vocational qualification (e.g. Access qualifications, BTEC National Certificates, NVQ Level 3) and not more than one A Level qualification; or a mature student² accessing HE with any entrance qualification;
 - **An alternative pathway through HE** - students participating in alternative HE provision e.g. part-time learning; flexi-study; non-honours degree programmes such as Foundation Degrees, HNDs or Diplomas in HE; or any higher education undertaken at Further Education colleges; and
 - **Traditional routes into and pathways through HE** - students of school leaving age (below 21 years of age) from predominantly A Level backgrounds participating in full time degree course at a university institution.
- 1.6 From these definitions we defined four student typologies of interest to the study - see Figure 1.

² Defined as those students 21 or over on commencement of HE

Figure 1 - Student typologies

		Pathway through HE	
		Traditional	Alternative
Route into HE	Traditional	<p>Category 1:</p> <p>In: School leaver with predominantly A Level background</p> <p>Through: Full time degree course at a university institution</p>	<p>Category 3:</p> <p>In: School leaver with predominantly A Level background</p> <p>Through: Full time HE at an FE College; part-time learning or a non-degree level programme e.g. HND</p>
	Alternative	<p>Category 2:</p> <p>In: Predominantly vocational background and/or mature student</p> <p>Through: Full time degree course at a university institution</p>	<p>Category 4:</p> <p>In: Predominantly vocational background and/or mature student</p> <p>Through: Full time HE at an FE College; part-time learning or a non-degree level programme e.g. HND</p>

The quantitative study

1.7 Datasets provided by UCAS and HESA were analysed to assess the patterns of students taking alternatives routes into and pathways through HE. UCAS were able to provide the most comprehensive data on students, including a detailed breakdown of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, background qualifications, and socio-economic status. However, this data was available only for full time “accepted applicants” onto HE courses, and not students *per se*. UCAS were unable to provide data on part-time students and so this data was sourced from HESA. The data on part-time students was less granular, and as such we were only able to provide an aggregate view on this student group.

UCAS Data - Accepted applicants to full time courses

1.8 Based on the four typologies for the study defined earlier, Table 2 highlights the broad routes into and pathways through HE chosen by accepted applicants (referred to as applicants throughout the remainder of this document) to full time courses in 2006.

Table 2 - Routes into and pathways through HE for full time applicants (Source: UCAS)

		Pathway through HE		
		Traditional	Alternative	Total
Route into HE	Traditional	161,739 (57%)	22,831 (8%)	184,570 (65%)
	Alternative	66,935 (24%)	31,086 (11%)	98,021 (35%)
	Total	228,674 (81%)	53,917 (19%)	282,591 (100%)

1.9 Nearly two thirds (65%) of applicants to full time courses chose a traditional route into HE i.e. applicants of school leaving age with predominantly A-Levels as their background qualifications. The remaining 35% chose an alternative route into HE by dint of age or background qualification.

1.10 The large majority (81%) of full time applicants chose traditional pathways through HE i.e. an honours degree courses at a university institution. The remaining 19% of applicants chose alternative pathways through HE i.e. a non-honours degree level qualifications and / or studying HE at an FE institution.

1.11 Some of the key trends emerging from the data included:

Route into HE

- i. **Gender** - For both male and female groups, around one third of applicants chose alternative routes into HE and there was no substantive difference between the groups.
- ii. **Ethnicity** - There were marked differences in the route into HE when analysed by ethnic group. Applicants from black ethnic groupings were much more likely to choose an alternative route into HE - nearly two thirds (65%) of black students took an alternative route into HE versus an average of 35%. Students from Chinese backgrounds were the least likely to chose alternative routes into HE, only 23% of this group chose this route.

- iii. **Socio-economic background** - Applicants taking alternative routes into HE were more likely to come from backgrounds where parents work in routine or semi-routine employment - 31% of such applicants, compared with only 16% of applicants taking traditional routes into HE.
- iv. **Course studied** - Courses taken by alternative routes applicants were more clustered around specific subject areas than traditional routes applicants. For example, nearly one fifth of alternative routes applicants chose Business and Administration Studies courses, compared with only 10% of traditional routes applicants. Alternative routes applicants were most underrepresented in languages courses.
- v. **Pathway through HE** - Applicants choosing an alternative route into higher education were more likely to be taking an alternative pathway **through** HE than those students choosing a traditional route into HE - 32% and 12% of students, respectively.

Pathway through HE

- vi. **Ethnicity** - White applicants; Black Caribbean applicants; Black applicants of other background; and applicants of unknown ethnicity were all more likely to be taking alternative pathways through HE than the average. Applicants of White ethnicity were the most likely group to be applying to HE at either an HE or FE College - 17% of all white applicants. Noticeably fewer applicants from Asian backgrounds were applying to undertake HE at a college than the average - between 5% and 8% depending on the category compared with around 15% on average.
- vii. **Socio-economic background** - More than half (55%) of applicants taking traditional pathways through HE were from families where parents worked in higher or lower managerial professions, compared with only 35% of applicants choosing alternative pathways through HE. Students from higher managerial backgrounds were more likely to be applying to study at a Russell Group or Pre-1992 university than any other type of institution. Nearly 60% of such applicants were applying to Russell Group or Post-1992 institutions. This compares with only 28% of applicants who come from routine occupational backgrounds.

Part time students

- 1.12 Students studying part time do not apply through UCAS. The information on students taking part-time pathways through HE was provided by HESA and was not available to us at the same resolution as the UCAS data. In 2006, there were over 320,000 students in the first year of a part-time HE course - one fifth of this number already has an HE qualification. Direct comparison was not always possible with full time HE students, but there were some notable differences in areas such as the course area studied e.g. part time students are more likely to be studying courses such as Education.

The qualitative study

Study approach

1.13 The focus of the study was to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with 300 students taking alternative routes into and/or alternative pathways through higher education and 100 students taking traditional routes into and traditional pathways through higher education.

Student interviews

1.14 Seventeen institutions agreed to take part in the study and we would thank them for their cooperation with this work. Face to face and telephone interviews were completed with 334 students, fewer than the original 400 planned, but 84% of the expected number. This was the first time DIUS had conducted such in-depth research with such a large body of students and some valuable practical lessons were learnt for any future research in this area and this is reflected upon in Annex B of the main report.

1.15 Interviews with students lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and covered the following key areas:

- i. **Background information** e.g. gender; age; course; background education etc.
- ii. **Early educational experiences** with questions around early experiences of school; family background in HE; educational failure etc.
- iii. **The decision to go into higher education** including questions about motivations for undertaking HE; factors affecting institution and course; factors affecting the timing of the HE decision etc.
- iv. **Experiences of higher education** including questions about “readiness for higher education”; satisfaction with HE decision; key issues affecting performance etc.

Key findings

Students are heterogeneous - is the term ‘alternative’ appropriate?

1.16 With any research there is a temptation to create intellectual constructs such as an “alternative route” with the assumption that the target audience can be neatly categorised. In reality students are a heterogeneous group and often didn’t self identify as having taken an alternative route into or pathway through higher education. Indeed, the fact that alternative routes and pathways students didn’t generally perceive themselves to be different or a “special case” is one of the more positive outcomes from this study. Furthermore, while alternative routes and pathways could still technically be described as “alternative” in that students here represent a minority, 43% of all UCAS applicants in 2006 chose either an alternative route into or pathway through HE (see table 4.1 in the main report).

1.17 The main significant differences in HE experiences that we found were based around the age of entry, rather than, say a student’s background qualifications. As such, many of the findings in this report are couched around age, rather than the more specific route or pathway taken into HE.

1.18 Finally, this was principally a qualitative study and as such the findings should be seen as a contribution to a better understanding of the widening participation agenda and not a statistically robust survey. The quantitative estimates are provided to give an idea of the weight of view but may not be statistically significant given the small sample sizes involved.

Factors affecting the decision to go into HE

- **Early academic experiences are important.** Students who had poor early academic experiences were more likely to be taking alternative routes into higher education.
- **The influence of family is also important.** Traditional routes students were more likely to receive active family encouragement to go into HE. There was evidence that a small group of older mature students received active dissuasion from entering HE, an issue not recognised by younger students, perhaps reflecting generational changes in attitudes to HE.
- **The positive influence of school.** There was some limited evidence to suggest that traditional routes students get more of a “push” towards HE than their vocational peers. However, the difference between student groups was relatively small. There was certainly no evidence to suggest that students taking vocational courses were actively dissuaded by their schools from going on to HE.
- **HE straight out of school is just not the right choice for some.** The desire to earn money and/or disillusionment with education meant that for many mature students HE was not a viable option straight after school / FE. Only after a period of employment and reflection did students consider HE. We do not believe there is much that could be done to persuade / influence this group’s decisions aged 18, nor would it be productive to do so. However, there is potentially much to be gained from attracting more such students into HE in their early to mid 20s. The route into HE for such students was often not linear and there was a sense that some of this student group stumbled on HE by accident, as much by design. This presents a challenge for policy makers as to how market and present HE options to what is a disparate group of students.
- **Vocational qualifications are positively viewed by many taking them.** Many students were positive about the reasons for taking vocational background qualifications, with some choosing them over A-levels for career or academic reasons. However, there was a minority of vocational students for whom the choice of a vocational qualification was seen as inferior or the second best option having performed poorly at GCSE.

Factors affecting pathways through HE

- **Mature students’ HE choices are more limited than those of younger students.** Mature students’ HE choices, particularly pathways through, were very often constrained by personal and / or career commitments which require them to attend an institution close to their home. Furthermore, for some students supply side limitations meant they were further restricted in their HE choices e.g. universities unable to deliver evening courses. FE colleges and the Open University were the natural destinations for many such students, as they were often able to provide more flexible learning arrangements. This begs the question as to what more universities could do to deliver more flexible HE provision that meets the needs of mature students.

- **Little evidence that vocational students struggle to access HE.** The prevailing sense was that vocational background students were not facing any prejudice from admissions departments and / or a lack of understanding of their qualifications. In part this may be because students were applying for courses at institutions in the full knowledge that their qualifications will be recognised.
- **Other less tangible factors such as the “student welcome” can be important in HE decisions.** Certainly for some mature students who were nervous about returning to education the initial welcome to an institution was crucial in their decision about where to study, and potentially about whether to enter HE at all (although we didn’t speak with students not entering HE).
- **Course fees can affect HE choices.** There was emerging evidence that a number of students are making HE choices based on the levels of fees charged. These students chose to study at a university charging lower fee rates; take non-degree level qualifications at a college at a cheaper rate before topping up to a full degree later; or do distance learning via the OU. It remains to be seen whether the financial implications of HE study and / or the development of significant variations in the fees charged by institutions leads to more students choosing an HE institution based on financial factors.
- **Non honours degree level pathways not viewed as inferior.** Those students taking non honours degree level qualifications did so for various reasons. On the positive side, many did such courses for vocational reasons, with the expectation that they could top up to an honours degree course at a later date. There was little sense from students that this was felt to be an inferior HE pathway. Other students chose non honours degree level courses for financial reasons and / or in some cases because they preferred the more personal teaching environment at an FE college. For other students, the decision to take a non honours degree course was their lack of prior qualifications. However, many such students were positive about the opportunity to take an alternative pathway to getting a full honours degree.
- **But some concerns over sustainability of FE delivery.** Some students noted their FE college course sizes had diminished significantly, leading to concerns that some courses might be cancelled. However, many of the students taking HE at an FE college were very positive about the experience - attracting more students to study via such a pathway will require that students are confident that courses and provision are not cut or changed during the duration of the course.

Early experiences of undertaking HE

- **The A-level experience provides an easier transition to HE.** However, for the most part students from vocational backgrounds seem to cope with the transition to HE. There was some suggestion that in key areas such as exams or essay writing vocational background students were more likely to struggle than A-level students. It would be easy to suggest adding elements such as exams and / or essay writing to vocational courses, but often the reason students took vocational qualifications was because they were not overly academic, with less in the way of formal exams and / or essay writing. However, despite issues with academic skills, vocational students often reflected well on the more practical ‘hands-on’ skills they had learnt and the extent to which these prepared them for HE.

- **The early HE learning experience.** The large majority of students were positive about their HE learning experience and for some it had been a genuinely transformational life opportunity. For a minority of students, their expectations of HE had not been matched by the reality. Often these students reflected on a “lack of contact time” or observed that HE study was “too easy”. However, in many cases this view was the result of a student’s failure to get to grips with the demands and rigor required for independent, self directed study in a university setting, rather than a direct reflection on HE provision.
- **Mature students face specific challenges adapting to HE.** Mature students face a range of additional challenges adapting to HE. These can be cultural challenges, e.g. studying with and among younger students or practical challenges of undertaking HE to fit in around family and personal commitments. Cultural barriers were significant for younger mature students in their early 20s, as well as older mature students. Flexibility of provision and sensible timetabling are two areas where institutions could do more to help mature students with the practical challenges of undertaking HE. In terms of cultural challenges, one key intervention area might be helping mature students to overcome feelings of isolation while doing HE.
- **Concern among mature students about poor behaviour from younger students.** There was a low level of discontent among older students about the poor behaviour of younger students, for example mobile phones / talking in lectures and treating the library as a common room. We cannot determine whether this is a growing trend. However, it’s worth noting that this may be a generational issue with differing expectations as to what is productive study environment. Indeed, this reflects a wider debate in society around the role of libraries as places of study or more social meeting places.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In December 2006 York Consulting LLP was commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to undertake research into the experiences of students taking “alternative routes into and pathways through higher education”. Support for the work was continued by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The Department stated that the work will:

“inform our policies on widening participation, will focus on the use of routes into and through HE that are alternatives to direct entry from school or college with A-levels gained through full-time study and will, additionally, examine the relationship between these routes and disability, socio-economic group (SEG), age, gender and ethnic minorities”.

- 1.2 This report to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) represents our findings based on in-depth interviews with students completed between May 2007 and February 2008.

Background

- 1.3 The original brief for the study clearly communicated “an economic and social need to widen participation in higher education”. For example, the Leitch Review notes that of the 18 million jobs to be made vacant between 2004 and 2020, around one half will be in occupations requiring graduate level students. Furthermore, the Government’s White Paper *“The Future of Higher Education”* makes a clear commitment to “increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30” by 2010. Gorard, in his review of widening participation research³, refers to those “marginal learners from low participation backgrounds” to whom participation in higher education could generate “significantly higher economic returns than those with higher or lower probabilities of participating in HE”.
- 1.4 Widening participation will require enhancing existing and developing new routes **into** and pathways **through** higher education that are appropriate for and relevant to a broader range of students, not just those school leavers with A-level qualifications. In addition, there are challenges to overcome in terms of raising the attainment levels of those young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to take part in HE.

Aims and objectives of the study

Aims

- 1.5 The overarching aim for the study is to increase DIUS’s understanding of the experiences of those students taking alternative routes into and pathways through higher education. It is expected that this enhanced knowledge of student experiences will serve to:
- inform government policy development focussed on increasing and widening participation in higher education and improving completion rates; and
 - inform the 2009 review of student support.

³ Gorard S et al (2006) review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. (A report to HEFCE by York University)

Objectives

1.6 The objectives for the work as stated in the brief are as follows:

- develop a typology of students that includes as many alternative routes and pathways through HE experiences as possible and that informs the qualitative nature of the work;
- conduct a limited quantitative investigation that provides at least the magnitude of overall patterns and summary characteristics of alternative routes;
- construct an interview guide that addresses as many of the study hypotheses as possible (a list of the study hypothesis can be found in Annex A);
- identify a sampling frame for students on alternative routes or a method by which these students may be accessed and interviewed;
- conduct a qualitative investigation of a sufficient number of students drawn from the identified typologies to address the detailed hypothesis;
- provide a report on the analysis address to a policy audience with policy implications made explicit;
- provide a technical annex to the report in sufficient detail to allow the study to be replicated by others in future.

The remainder of this report

1.7 The remainder of this report is set out as follows:

- Section 2 - Study definitions and typology;
- Section 3 - Methodology and approach;
- Section 4 - Quantitative investigation;
- Section 5 - The interview sample;
- Section 6 - Key findings;
- Section 7 - Key messages and policy implications;
- Annex A - Study questionnaire;
- Annex B - Methodology technical annex; and
- Annex C - Data tables.

Acknowledgements

- 1.8 In undertaking this study we have relied heavily on the support and cooperation of the higher education institutions where interviews were conducted. In particular, we would like to thank Deborah Draws from Liverpool John Moores University where we conducted the pilot work for the study at short notice.
- 1.9 In addition, we would like to thank the following staff from participating HE institutions without whom the study would not have been possible: Stephen Boffey and Susan Deacon (University of Hertfordshire); Karen Willis, Margaret Wilson and Margaret Cartwright (University of Chester); Penelope Griffin (University of Nottingham); Sylvia Gibbs, Deborah Thornton and Neil Randerson (University of Huddersfield); Terri Sanderson (University of Winchester); Gail May (University of East London); Peter Jones (Staffordshire University); Victoria Trachy (Bath Spa University); Fiona McNeillis (Open University); Joy Kumar, Janice Priestly, Alison Price and Claire Burton (Leeds Metropolitan University); Marco Sarlotti (Leicester College); Peter Hymans (Doncaster College); Wendy Haslam (University of Gloucestershire); Katherine Hind (Newcastle University); Kevin Carroll (University of Northampton and Helen Kenwright (York College).
- 1.10 We would also like to thank the Steering Group for the study comprising Geoffrey Shoemsmith, Steve Ingham and Stijn Broecke (DIUS) and Kevin Whitston (HEFCE) for their valuable thoughts and contributions throughout this work.
- 1.11 We would also like to thank the York Consulting research team who worked tirelessly to complete student interviews under sometimes challenging circumstances and deadlines.
- 1.12 Finally, and most importantly, we would like to thank the students who took time out to complete the interviews for their cooperation and frankness, which was much appreciated.

2 STUDY DEFINITIONS AND TYPOLOGY

2.1 In this section we review the definitions for the study and the student typology used to select appropriate students to interview.

Definitions

2.2 One of the early challenges for the study was to define more clearly what was meant by an alternative route into, and an alternative pathway through, Higher Education (HE). In consultation with other academic partners and the study Steering Group, the following definitions were arrived at:

- **An alternative route into HE** - students accessing Higher Education with no qualifications; with a vocational qualification (e.g. Access qualifications, BTEC National Certificates, NVQ Level 3) and not more than one A Level qualification; or a mature student⁴ accessing HE for the first time and with any entrance qualification;
- **An alternative pathway through HE** - students participating in alternative HE provision e.g. part-time learning, flexi-study, non-honours degree programmes such as Foundation Degrees, HNDs or Diplomas in HE, or any higher education undertaken at Further Education colleges; and
- **Traditional routes into and pathways through HE** - students of school leaving age (below 21 years of age) from predominantly A Level backgrounds participating in full time degree courses at a university institution.

2.3 These definitions were deliberately prescriptive in order to avoid confusion, but even so, there were grey areas in the study sample. For example, a student with only 1 A Level and a BTEC National Diploma would be considered an alternative route into HE because the BTEC award is the predominant qualification. Conversely, a student with only one A Level, using the definitions above, would be considered a traditional pathway into HE because the student was from an A Level background. In reality, this example didn't prove to be an issue - all the students we interviewed with one A Level also had additional vocational qualifications. However, the example highlights the challenges in tightly defining student groups and throughout the study we were alert to possible anomalies.

2.4 The decision to include a comparison group of "traditional routes" was taken in light of the Gorrard Report⁵ which noted the "lack of suitable comparators" in many studies examining the barriers to participation in higher education.

2.5 Gorrard also noted a flaw in many study designs, namely the lack of comparative analysis into the experience of non-participants. In the case of this study, this might be those students who had considered HE study, but for whatever reason had chosen not to progress onto HE. This study doesn't seek to examine the experiences of non-participants, but we are aware that DIUS is undertaking separate research to this end.

⁴ A mature student is defined as a student 21 or over at the time of entry into HE.

⁵ Gorard S et al (2006) review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. (A report to HEFCE by York University)

Typology

2.6 From the three definitions above, four student typologies were defined for the study and are shown in Figure 4.2. They were;

- **Category 1 - Traditional route into HE and traditional route through HE** e.g. a student of school leaving age with two or more A Levels, taking a full time degree at a university.
- **Category 2 - Alternative route into HE and traditional pathway through HE** e.g. a mature student with 3 A Levels and taking a full time degree course at a university;
- **Category 3 - Traditional route into HE and alternative pathway through HE** e.g. a student of school leaving age with two A Levels, taking an HND course at a university;
- **Category 4 - Alternative route into HE and alternative pathway through HE** e.g. a student accessing HE with a BTEC National Certificate, taking a Foundation Degree at an FE College;

Figure 2.1 - Student typologies

		Pathway through HE	
		Traditional	Alternative
Route into HE	Traditional	<p>Category 1:</p> <p>In: School leaver with predominantly A Level background</p> <p>Through: Full time degree course at a university institution</p>	<p>Category 3:</p> <p>In: School leaver with predominantly A Level background</p> <p>Through: Full time HE at an FE College; part-time learning or a non-degree level programme e.g. HND</p>
	Alternative	<p>Category 2:</p> <p>In: Predominantly vocational background and/or mature student</p> <p>Through: Full time degree course at a university institution</p>	<p>Category 4:</p> <p>In: Predominantly vocational background and/or mature student</p> <p>Through: Full time HE at an FE College; part-time learning or a non-degree level programme e.g. HND</p>

3 OUTLINE STUDY METHODOLOGY

3.1 In this section we outline the methodology and approach to undertaking the survey element of the work. Annex B provides a full detailed review of the methodology used to conduct the study and some the challenges we faced during the work.

3.2 In summary, the methodology was as follows:

- **Developing the questionnaire, student typology and interview sample** - This was done in partnership with the study Steering Group and was based on evidence from elsewhere and our previous experience. The study questionnaire can be found in Annex A. The questionnaire was trialled during a pilot study at Liverpool John Moores University. The student typology comprising four main groups of interest is detailed in Section 2 and more information on the study sample can be found in Annex B.
- **Recruiting institutions to participate in the study** - An email was sent to the Widening Participation officers at all HEIs and a sample of FE Colleges. Twelve institutions were selected to take part in the study, initially. Subsequently, due to poor response rates at some institutions we recruited additional institutions to conduct interviews at. Table 3.1 shows the full list of participating universities.
- **Recruiting students for interview** - This was done by a mixture of email and web advertising which was variously successful. We also asked students participating in the study to help by recommending the study to friends. All students taking part in the study were paid between £10 and £15 per interview.
- **Completing the student interviews** - The expectation was that we would interview around 32 to 34 students at 12 institutions, but this proved to be a challenging target. In total, we interviewed 334 students at 17 participating institutions (four interviews were carried out with students from other institutions who had been signposted to the study by friends at the request of the study team) using a mixture of face to face and telephone interviews. Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, depending on the depth of information provided by students.

Table 3.1 - Participating institutions

Institution
Bath Spa University
Doncaster College
Leeds Metropolitan University
Leicester College
Liverpool John Moore's University
Newcastle University
Staffordshire University
The Open University
The University of Chester
The University of East London
The University of Gloucestershire
The University of Hertfordshire
The University of Huddersfield
The University of Northampton
The University of Nottingham
The University of Winchester
York College

- **Write up and analysis** - Interviews were transcribed into Word and the responses to key questions were entered into an Excel matrix. Qualitative data analysis was done using a combination of Word and Max QDA. Quantitative analysis was carried out using Excel.

4 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

- 4.1 In this section we provide a quantitative analysis of the numbers of students taking alternative routes into and through UK higher education institutions.

The datasets available

- 4.2 An analysis of the numbers of students taking alternative routes into and pathways through higher education requires detailed information, including the backgrounds of HE entrants including age; all background qualifications; study mode (full time and part-time) and university destination. The two main sources of student data are the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

UCAS data on full time applicants

- 4.3 UCAS provided comprehensive background data on **full time applicants accepted** into higher education in 2006. The background information available included: age; gender; ethnicity; socio-economic status; course type and student destination. The data provided by UCAS covered only English domiciled students taking **full time** higher education courses. UCAS are unable to provide data on part-time applicants.
- 4.4 To note, the data made available by UCAS is classified as non-verified status i.e. the applicant has indicated they have the background qualification, for example, and UCAS doesn't check these claims. The data was analysed in the form presented to us by UCAS and no efforts have been made to substantiate or corroborate the data provided.

HESA data on part-time students

- 4.5 HESA provided data on the numbers of students taking part-time courses for the academic year 2006/07. The data was provided in aggregate form and it wasn't possible to interrogate the data to the same level as was possible with UCAS data. Also, the HESA data on background qualifications covers only the highest qualification held, with Level 3 qualifications grouped together, so it was not possible to determine precisely which part-time students are taking traditional and alternative routes into HE. As such, we have only used this data to provide a broad view on the numbers of part time students in higher education. Finally, given the differences in granularity of the UCAS and HESA datasets, it has not been possible to provide a definitive view of the total numbers of students - full and part time - taking alternative routes into and pathways through higher education.

Data analysis

- 4.6 The data on full time applicants provided by UCAS came in the form of a tab separated csv file containing over 280,000 discrete lines of data. The dataset was too large to analyse in aggregate form which necessitated breaking the data down into six discrete datasets, each of which was analysed using SPSS and Excel.

- 4.7 Given the size of the dataset and the number of different background factors for which we had data, there was the possibility to cut the data a huge number of ways e.g. by taking account of each attribute of HE applicants with each background qualification type. However, the remit for the data analysis section of the study was to provide a broad view of the students taking alternative routes into and pathways through higher education and we have sought to reflect this in our analysis and reporting.
- 4.8 The UCAS dataset analysed was a record of all English domiciled applicants accepted on an undergraduate course in 2006. To note, all applicants with a previous degree level qualification were discounted from the analysis - applicants with prior experience of HE applying to take a second qualification were not of interest to the study.
- 4.9 HESA data on part time students was analysed using Excel.

UCAS data on full time applicants

Total numbers of applicants

- 4.10 Table 4.1 shows the overall numbers and proportions of full time English domiciled applicants for higher education in 2006, comprising both traditional and alternative routes and traditional and alternative pathways through HE.
- 4.11 The single largest group of applicants was the traditional route/traditional pathway i.e. those applicants of school leaving age, taking an undergraduate degree at a university. This group accounted for 57% of the total sample. The smallest group of applicants was the traditional route / alternative pathway - accounting for 8% of the total sample - i.e. those applicants of school leaving age and with an A-level background taking either a non honours degree HE qualification (e.g. a Foundation Degree or HND) and / or completing their course at an FE College.

Table 4.1 - Routes into and pathways through HE (Source: UCAS 2006)

		Pathway through		Total
		Traditional	Alternative	
Route into	Traditional	161,739 (57%)	22,831 (8%)	184,570 (65%)
	Alternative	66,935 (24%)	31,086 (11%)	98,021 (35%)
	Total	228,674 (81%)	53,917 (19%)	282,591 (100%)

- 4.12 More broadly, around two thirds of applicants took a traditional route into higher education, compared with one third taking an alternative route into HE (e.g. mature student or largely vocational background). In terms of pathways through HE, the large majority of full time applicants (81%) took traditional pathways, with the remaining 19% of applicants undertaking HE either at an FE College and/or taking a non-degree level qualification.
- 4.13 For practical purposes and ease of understanding, the remainder of the data analysis in this chapter is conducted along the broad delineators of route into and pathway through HE, rather than the 4 typologies noted above.

Characteristics of full time applicants taking alternative routes into HE

- 4.14 In this sub-section, we analyse the characteristics of those **full time** applicants taking alternative routes **into** higher education.

Gender

- 4.15 There was no substantive difference between the numbers of male and female applicants taking alternative routes into higher education - 34% of all female applicants and 36% of all male applicants took alternative routes into HE.

Background qualifications

- 4.16 Table 4.2 shows the background qualifications of the circa 98,000 full time applicants entering HE in 2006 via an alternative route. Of this total number, around 53,000 or 54% were mature applicants, with the remaining 46% of school leaving age.
- 4.17 Among mature applicants, around one third entered HE with an "Other" qualification as their principle background qualification. Other significant qualification groups included None (22%); Access only (18%) and BTEC only (11%).

Table 4.2 - Background qualifications of applicants taking alternative routes into higher education (Source: UCAS 2006)

Background qualification	Mature	%	School Leavers*	%	Total
Other qualification only	17,734	33%	7,517	17%	25,251
None	11,624	22%	11,448	26%	23,072
Access only	9,507	18%	906	2%	10,413
BTEC only	5,896	11%	18,519	41%	24,415
Mix of vocational qualifications	2,184	4%	1,158	3%	3,342
A Levels only	2,107	4%	-	-	2,107
Foundation Degree only	2,106	4%	1,457	3%	3,563
Vocational qualification and 0-1 A Level	1,055	2%	2,735	6%	3,790
GNVQ only	530	1%	21	0%	551
Baccalaureate only	388	1%	1,078	2%	1,466
Partial Degree Credit (PDC) only	47	0%	4	0%	51
Total	53,178	100%	44,843	100%	98,021

*By school leavers we mean below 21 years of age at the time of application

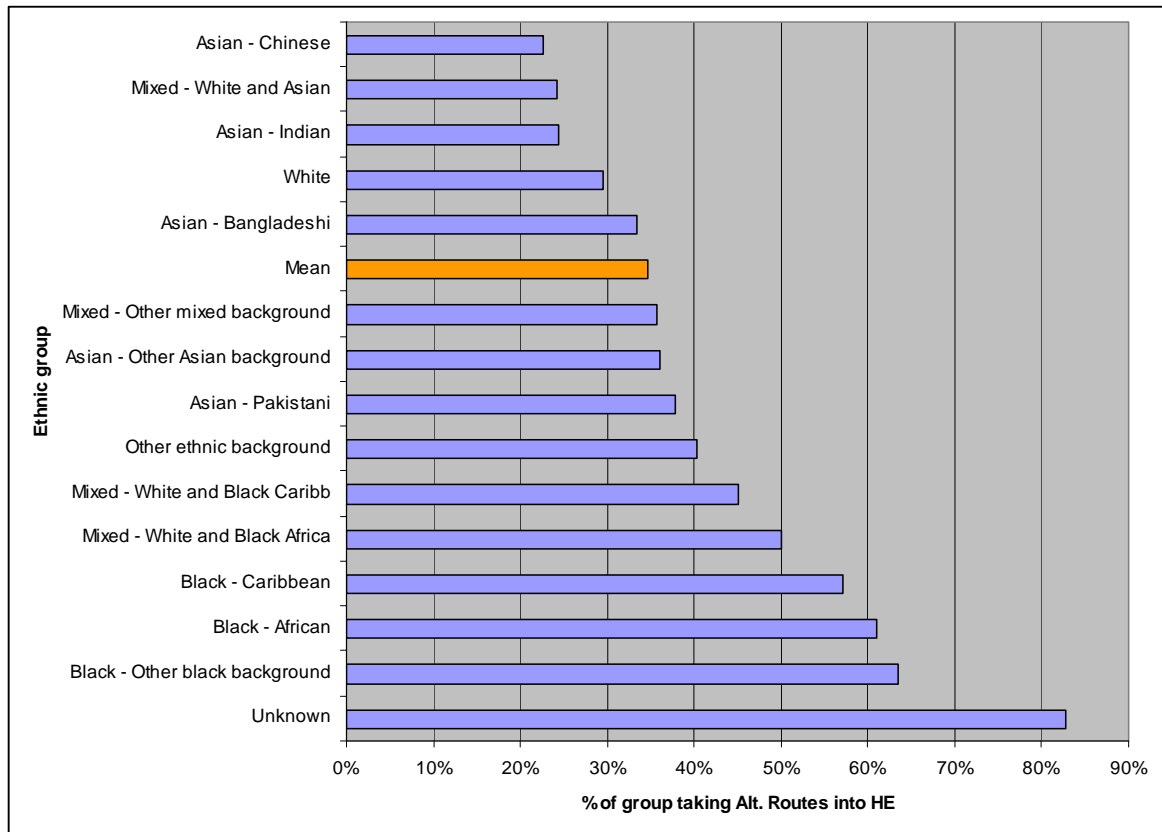
* NB - It should be noted that Foundation Degrees are technically a higher education qualification. However, in discussion with the Steering Group it was agreed that Foundation Degrees could technically be considered a route into doing a full honours degree and also an alternative pathway through HE. This anomaly is formally recognised.

- 4.18 Among applicants of school leaving age taking an alternative route into Higher Education, the largest group of applicants was those with a BTEC qualification (41% of this group). The next largest group was applicants with no qualifications - this appears anomalous, but as noted earlier we have made no attempts to adjust the data presented to us by UCAS. Only a small proportion of school leaving age applicants entered HE with a vocational qualification and an AS or A Level qualification - only 6% of this group of applicants.

Ethnicity

4.19 Figure 4.1 highlights the proportions of applicants taking an alternative route into higher education for different ethnic groups. As was noted earlier, across all ethnic groups the mean proportion of all applicants taking an alternative route into HE was 35%.

Figure 4.1 - Alternative route into HE based on ethnicity (Source: UCAS)*



4.20 As Figure 4.1 shows there was significant variation across ethnic groups. For example, less than one quarter (23%) of all Asian Chinese applicants took an alternative route through higher education. In contrast, over 60% of applicants from Black (Other black backgrounds) took alternative routes into higher education. Indeed, black applicants as a group were much more likely to have taken an alternative route into higher education than the average - 60% versus 35%.

Course area studied

4.21 Table 4.3 highlights the top five course areas studied by applicants taking traditional and alternative routes into higher education. In both applicant groups Business and Administration Studies was the most popular course area, with 19% of alternative route applicants and 10% of traditional routes applicants taking courses in this area.

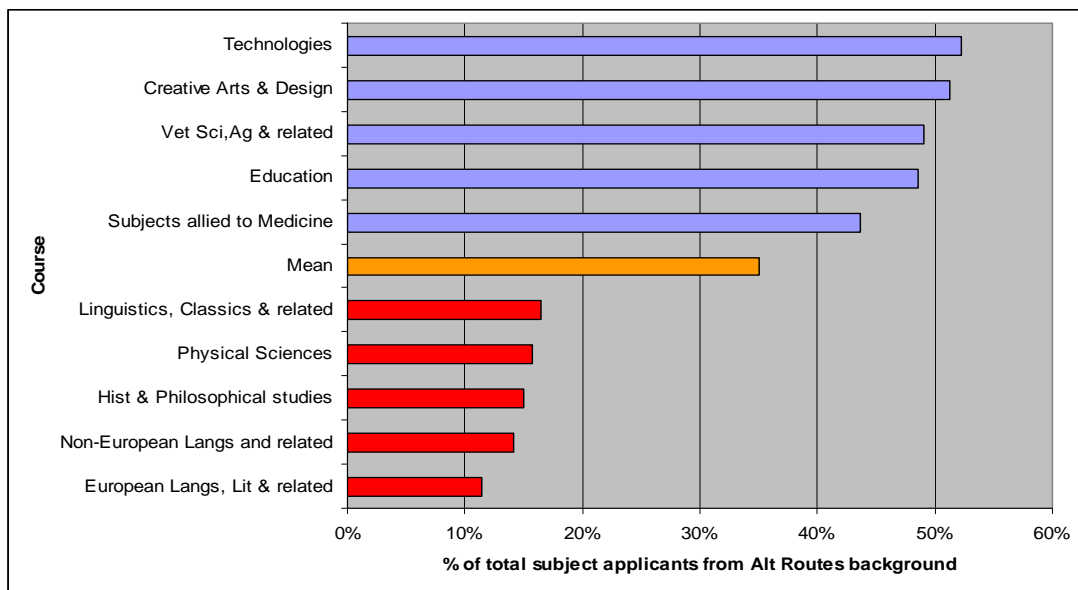
Table 4.3 - Course areas studied by applicant type (Source UCAS: 2006)

Traditional route into HE			Alternative route into		
Course area	No. of applicants	% of all Trad. route applicants	Course area	No. of applicants	% of all Alt. route applicants
Business & Admin studies	18,799	10%	Business & Admin studies	18,799	19%
Biological Sciences	17,286	9%	Creative Arts & Design	16,976	17%
Creative Arts & Design	16,976	9%	Social Studies	13,204	13%
Social Studies	13,204	7%	Subjects allied to Medicine	10,179	10%
Subjects allied to Medicine	10,179	6%	Maths & Comp Sci.	9,897	10%

4.22 Other popular course areas among alternative routes applicants were Creative Arts and Design; Social Studies Subjects allied to Medicine; and Maths and Computing Science. It is worth noting, the top five course areas listed accounted for 70% of all alternative routes into HE applicants, but only 41% of all traditional routes applicants, suggesting that alternative routes applicants cluster around particular course areas. Whether this was due to preference or inability to access other courses is unknown.

4.23 As well as examining the course area studied by the total volume of applicants, it was also possible to analyse the proportion of alternative routes applicants across different course types. For all course types alternative routes applicants accounted for 35% of all applicants. Figure 4.2 highlights the five courses where such applicants were disproportionately represented above (blue) and below (red) this mean level.

Figure 4.2 - Proportion of alternative routes students by course area type (Source: UCAS 2006)



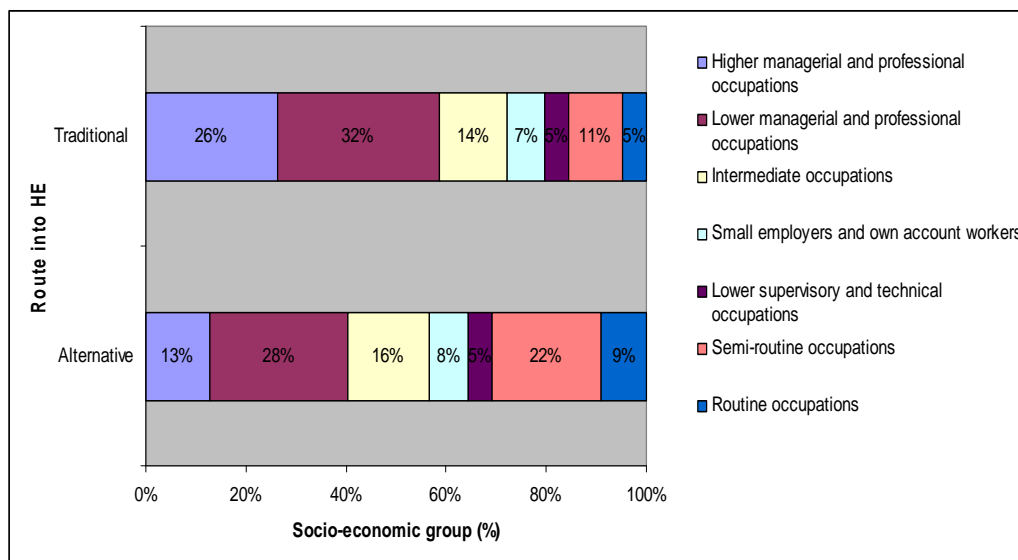
4.24 For courses in the Technologies and Creative Art & Design areas, applicants taking an alternative route into HE accounted for over 50% of the total number of applicants to the course. In contrast, for courses in European Language and Non-European Languages, alternative routes applicants made up a relatively small proportion (11% and 14%, respectively) of the total applicants. Similarly, with Linguistics and Classics, alternative routes into HE applicants accounted for only 16% of the total number of applicants. For many language courses there is a requirement for students to have studied the language previously at A-level which explains the low numbers of alternative routes applicants taking language courses.

Socio-economic status

4.25 Figure 4.3 shows the socio-economic status of those applicants taking an alternative route into higher education, where socio-economic status is measured by the employment status of the applicant’s parents or in the case of mature applicants their own employment status. The graph shows that alternative routes applicants were more likely to come from backgrounds where parents work in routine or semi-routine employment - 31% of such applicants, compared with only 16% of traditional routes into HE applicants.

4.26 Conversely, traditional routes applicants were more likely to come from backgrounds where parental employment was in higher or lower managerial professions - nearly 60% of all such applicants compared with only 41% of alternative routes into HE applicants.

Figure 4.3 - Socio-economic status and route into HE (Source: UCAS 2006)*

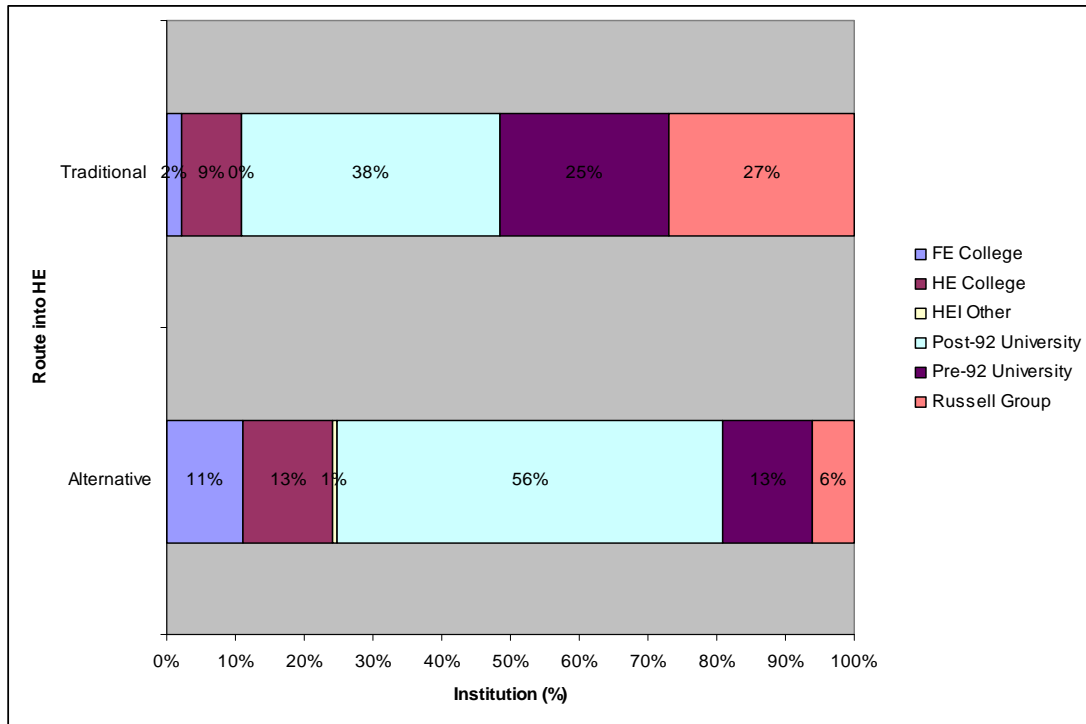


*Data is only for those applicants with a known socio-economic background

Pathway through HE and institution type

4.27 Applicants choosing an alternative route into higher education were more likely to be taking an alternative pathway **through** HE than those students choosing a traditional route into HE - 32% and 12% of students, respectively. Figure 4.4 shows the types of HE institutions attended by alternative and traditional routes groups. Over 50% of traditional routes into HE applicants took courses at either a Russell Group university or a Pre-1992 university, compared with less than 20% for those applicants taking an alternative route into HE. The majority (56%) of alternative routes into HE applicants took courses at Post-1992 institutions.

Figure 4.4 - Route into HE and institution type (Source: UCAS 2006)



4.28 Nearly one quarter (24%) of applicants taking an alternative route into HE attended either an FE or HE College, compared with only 11% of traditional routes into HE applicants.

Alternative pathways through HE

4.29 In this sub-section, we analyse the data on those full time applicants taking alternative pathways through higher education. From the UCAS data we established that nearly one fifth of the total English domiciled populace accepted onto a **full time** course took an alternative pathway through HE.

Gender

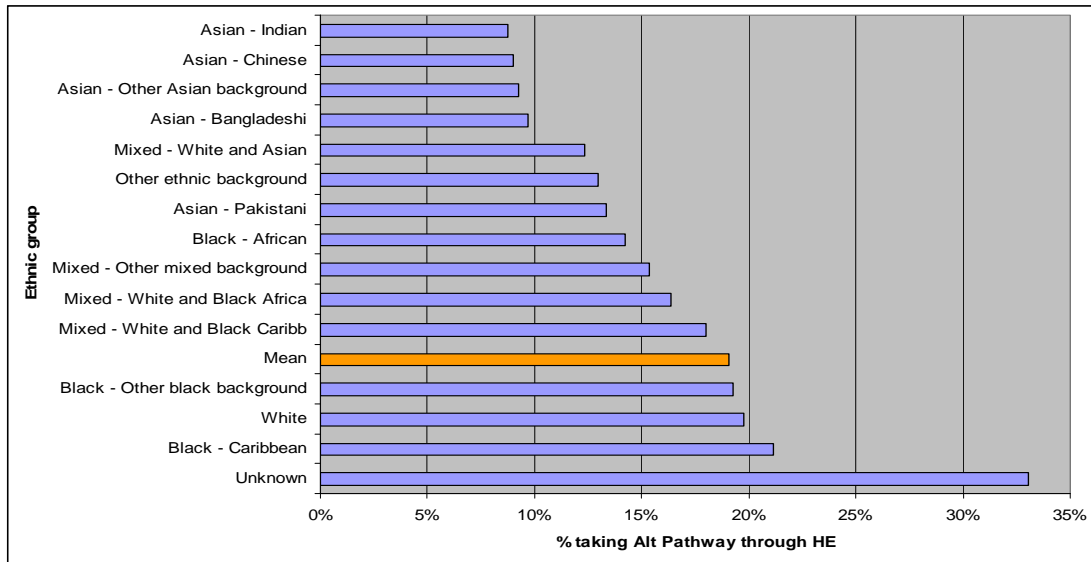
4.30 Nineteen percent of full time English domiciled applicants enrolling on full time HE courses were taking alternative pathways through HE i.e. an HND or Foundation Degree course and/or at an FE / HE College⁶. Split by gender, 17% of all male HE applicants and 20% of all female applicants were taking alternative pathways through higher education.

⁶ These are the only two pathways able to be defined from the UCAS data.

Ethnicity

4.31 Figure 4.5 highlights the ethnicity of full time applicants taking alternative pathways through higher education.

Figure 4.5 - Ethnicity and pathway through HE (Source: UCAS)



4.32 It is evident that applicants from Asian backgrounds were less likely to take alternative pathways through HE - no groups from Asian backgrounds were above the mean. White applicants; Black Caribbean applicants; Black applicants of other background; and applicants of unknown ethnicity were all more likely to be taking alternative pathways through HE than the average.

Route into HE and pathway through HE

4.33 When full time applicants took an alternative route into HE, they were more likely to go on to take an alternative pathway through HE - 28% of all alternative routes into HE applicants took alternative pathways through, compared with only 12% of traditional routes applicants.

Course studied

4.34 Table 4.4 shows the top five and bottom five course areas, as measured by total applicant numbers, studied by alternative pathways applicants.

Table 4.4 - Course areas studied by alternative pathways applicants (Source: UCAS 2006)

	Course type	Number	% of all Alternative pathways applicants
Top 5 courses	Creative Arts & Design	14,353	27%
	Business & Admin studies	6,385	12%
	Education	4,860	9%
	Biological Sciences	4,181	8%
	Sciences combined with social sciences or arts	3,329	6%
Bottom 5 courses	Combined social sciences	223	0.4%
	Medicine & Dentistry	161	0.3%
	General, other combined & unknown	141	0.3%
	European Langs, Lit & related	29	0.1%
	Non-European Langs and related	12	0.02%

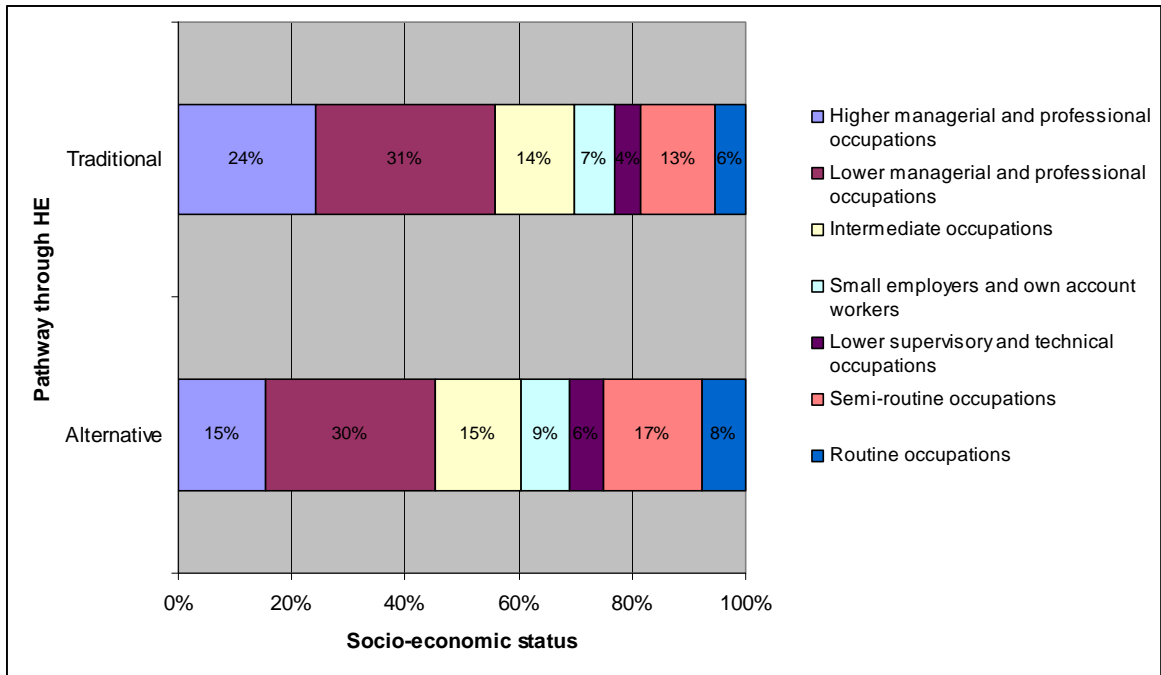
4.35 Creative Art and Design was the most common course area choice, accounting for over one quarter of all alternative pathways applicants. Other common course areas favoured by alternative pathway applicants included Business and Administration Studies and Education.

4.36 European and non-European Languages were not common course choices, accounting for only 41 applicants or 0.12% of all alternative pathways applicants. Unsurprisingly, Medicine and Dentistry was also not a common choice for alternative pathways applicants.

Socio-economic status

4.37 Figure 4.6 shows the socio-economic status of those applicants taking alternative pathways through HE.

Figure 4.6 - Pathway through HE and socio-economic status (Source: UCAS 2006)



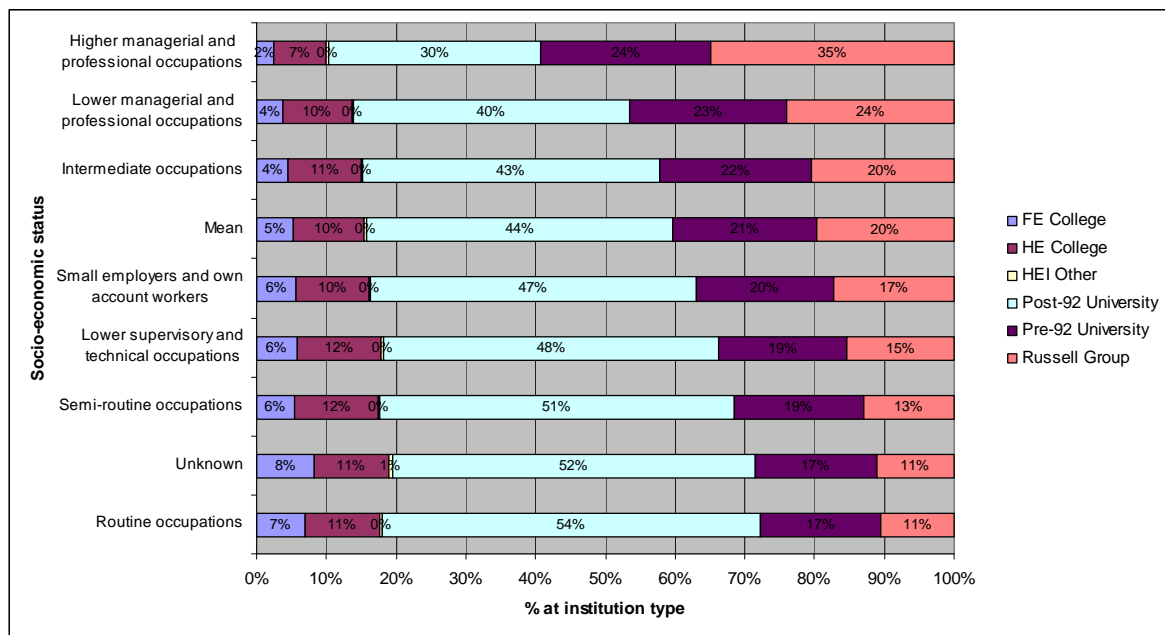
4.38 More than half (55%) of applicants taking traditional pathways through HE were from families where parents worked in higher or lower managerial professions, compared with 45% of applicants taking alternative pathways through HE.

4.39 Twenty five percent of alternative pathways applicants came from backgrounds where parents worked in routine or semi-routine professions, compared with 19% among traditional pathways applicants.

HE institution

4.40 Figure 4.7 highlights applicants' socio-economic status and the type of institution where HE was undertaken. Applicants from higher managerial backgrounds were more likely to be studying at a Russell Group or Pre-1992 university than any other type of institution.

Figure 4.7 - Socio-economic status and institution type (Source: UCAS 2006)

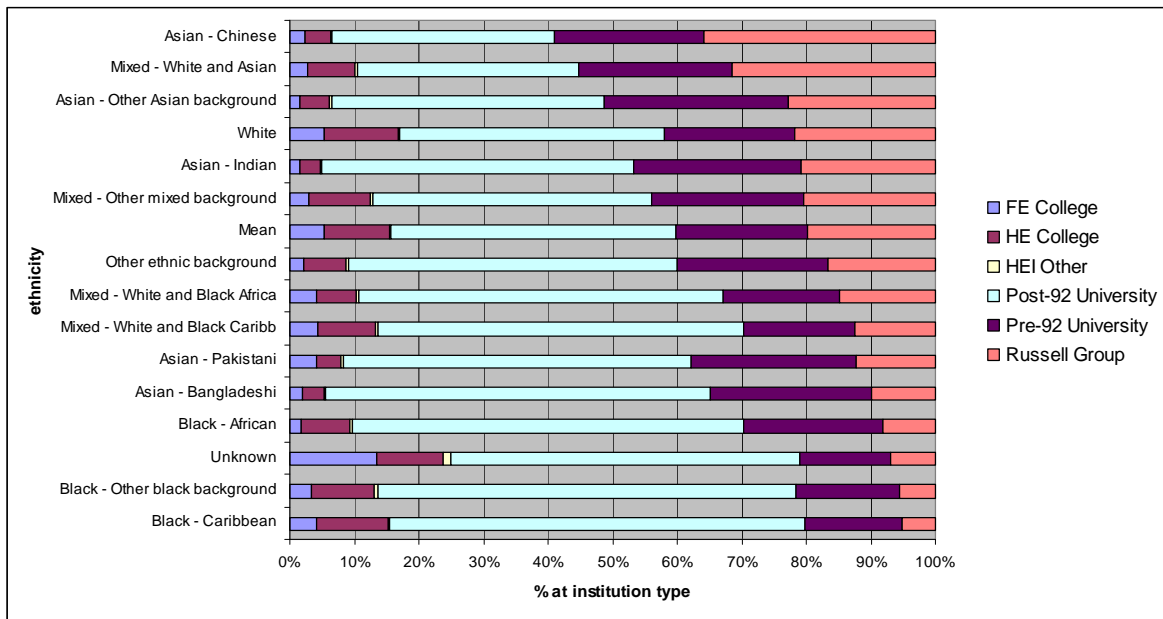


4.41 Nearly 60% of such applicants were studying at Russell Group or Post-1992 institutions. This compares with only 28% of applicants who came from routine occupational backgrounds. Conversely, around one half of applicants from routine, semi routine or lower supervisory backgrounds studied at a Pre-1992 institution, compared with less than one third of applicants who were from higher managerial backgrounds.

4.42 Figure 4.8 highlights applicants' ethnicity and institution type at which HE was undertaken. On average, around one fifth of all applicants studied at a Russell Group university. This number rose to over one third (36%) for Chinese Asian applicants, but fell as low as 5% for Black Caribbean applicants. As a group black applicants were less likely (between 20% and 30%) to study at a Russell Group or Pre-1992 university compared with the average figure of 41%.

4.43 Applicants of White ethnicity were the most likely group to be undertaking HE at either an HE or FE College - 17% of all white applicants. Noticeably fewer applicants from Asian backgrounds were taking HE at a college than the average - between 5% and 8% depending on the category compared with around 15% on average.

Figure 4.8 - Ethnicity and institution type (Source: UCAS 2006)



Analysis of HESA data on part time students

4.44 In the remainder of this section, we provide a brief overview on the numbers of English domiciled students in the first year of a part-time HE courses. The data on these students was provided by HESA and is limited in its extent and as such, we are unable to provide an in-depth analysis of part-time students e.g. whether they took an alternative route into HE. Where possible we have compared trends among part time students with those for full time students - although it should be noted that the two different data sources used means that comparison is indicative, rather than absolute.

Total numbers of part-time students

4.45 The total number of students in the first year of part-time courses in 2006/07 is 321,412. This breaks down to 252,285 at HEIs and 69,127 at FEIs.

Background qualifications

4.46 Table 4.5 shows the highest background qualifications of those part-time students for whom data was available. The commonest background qualification of part-time students was a first degree, comprising 16% of students. A further 6% of students had a higher degree. So, around one fifth of part-time students have already accessed HE before - technically such students are not of interest to this study. Other significant groups include 15% of students whose highest background qualification was a combination of A-Levels, SCE Higher and GNVQ / GSQV or NQV and 11% with only GCSEs or O Levels.

Table 4.5 - Highest background qualifications of part-time students (Source: HESA)

Background qualification	Total	%
First Degree	36,379	16%
Any combinations of GCE A/SCE 'Higher' and GNVQ/GSVQ or NVQ	34,789	15%
GCSE/O Level	24,097	11%
Professional qualifications	20,344	9%
HNC or HND	15,670	7%
Higher Degree UK Institution	13,621	6%
Other	12,973	6%
Mature & work experience	12,503	6%
Dip HE	11,564	5%
No qualifications	6,828	3%
Other non-advanced qualification	6,562	3%
ONC or OND	5,298	2%
HE credits	4,966	2%
Other HE qualification of less than degree standard	4,859	2%
A-Level equivalent	4,858	2%
Cert or Diploma of education	4,462	2%
Post graduate diploma	3,160	1%
Foundation Degree	1,914	1%
ACCESS	1,458	1%
Total	226,305	100%

Ethnicity

4.47 Table 4.6 highlights the ethnicity of those students taking part-time and full time courses.

Table 4.6 - Ethnicity of part-time students (Source: HESA & UCAS)*

Ethnicity	Part-time	P.T. %	Full time	F.T. %
White	247,434	86%	207,097	78%
Asian	16,074	6%	31,485	12%
Black	16,121	6%	15,911	6%
Mixed race	4,213	1%	8,459	3%
Other	2,746	1%	3,293	1%
Total	286,588	100%	266,245	100%

*Only for those students of known ethnicity

4.48 Notably, white students made up a larger proportion (86%) of part time students than they do full time students (78%). Conversely, students of Asian origin made up a smaller proportion part time students (6%), compared with full time students (12%).

Course studied

4.49 Table 4.7 highlights the course areas studied by part time and full time students.

4.50 Part time students were more likely than full time students to be studying certain courses, for example: Education (12% vs. 4%); Subjects Allied to Medicine (19% vs. 5%); and Combined courses (20% vs. 15%). Part-time students were less likely than full time students to be studying courses such as Biological Sciences (3% vs. 9%); Creative Art and Design (3% vs. 12%) and Law (2% vs. 5%).

Table 4.7 - Course area of part time and full time students (Source: HESA & UCAS)*

Course area	Part time	%	Full time	%
Medicine & dentistry	55	0%	6,406	2%
Subjects allied to medicine	48,615	19%	18,079	6%
Biological sciences	8,400	3%	24,250	9%
Vet Sci,Ag & related	1,410	1%	3,085	1%
Physical sciences	4,955	2%	11,193	4%
Mathematical & Comp Science	10,740	4%	17,316	6%
Engineering & technology	7,200	3%	13,156	5%
Architecture, building & planning	5,400	2%	5,492	2%
Social studies	19,715	8%	20,624	7%
Law	4,655	2%	12,989	5%
Business & administrative studies	20,830	8%	30,375	11%
Mass communications and documentation	1,050	0%	7,165	3%
Languages	18,485	7%	13,772	5%
Hist & Philosophical studies	12,810	5%	10,670	4%
Creative Arts & Design	7,825	3%	34,805	12%
Education	30,550	12%	10,732	4%
Combined	49,590	20%	42,482	15%
Total	252,285	100%	282,591	100%

* Data for part time students only available for those studying at HEIs

Institution

4.51 Information was available on part-time students studying at Russell Group and Non-Russell Group HEIs. Only 10% of part-time students were studying at a Russell Group university, compared with 20% of full time students.

5 THE STUDENT INTERVIEW SAMPLE

5.1 In this section we provide an overview of the sample of students interviewed; a review of data analysis protocols and some guidance as to interpreting results.

Survey sample

5.2 In total we completed interviews with 334 students as outlined in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 - Location of completed interviews

Institution	Interviews completed
The Open University	41
The University of Huddersfield	33
Leicester College	33
Liverpool John Moore’s University	31
Leeds Metropolitan University	31
The University of Chester	29
The University of Winchester	26
The University of Hertfordshire	19
Newcastle University	19
Bath Spa University	15
The University of East London	12
Doncaster College	10
The University of Nottingham	7
The University of Northampton	7
York College	7
Staffordshire University	6
Other*	4
The University of Gloucestershire	4
Total	334

* NB - Seventeen universities actively agreed to participate in the study. In addition, we interviewed four students from other institutions who were referred to the study by friends.

5.3 This completed total of 334 interviews is less than the original target of 400 interviews. However, as we reflected on earlier in the report, there were significant challenges in recruiting students to take part in the study and also in ensuring students turned up for interviews - over one fifth of students failed to show up for a pre-arranged interview.

5.4 Table 5.2 highlights the spread of interviews across the four typologies of student identified for the study. Obviously, we conducted a low proportion of interviews (6%) with students taking a traditional route into HE and an alternative pathway through. However, the most significant sample criteria was to ensure that we had insights from across the different routes into and pathways through higher education, rather than a statistically significant sample of interviews across the four study categories.

Table 5.2 - Spread across Alternative Routes/Pathways categories

		Pathway through		Total
		Traditional	Alternative	
Route into	Traditional	20%	6%	26%
	Alternative	44%	30%	74%
Total		64%	36%	100%

5.5 Of the students we interviewed, 74% took an alternative route into higher education and 26% took a traditional route into HE. In terms of pathways through HE, 36% of the students we interviewed took alternative pathways through HE (i.e. part-time; at an FE College or doing a non-degree level course) with the remaining 64% of students having taken traditional pathways.

Student backgrounds

5.6 Table 5.3 shows some of the background characteristics of the students interviewed. The final male/female split for the sample of 39:61 is reasonably representative of the national figure of 45:55 split between men and women in HE.

5.7 On ethnicity the overall sample is slightly skewed towards white students (82% of the sample) but within reasonable bounds of the national level suggested by UCAS data of 77%. Fourteen percent of the students we have spoken with have some form of disability, most commonly dyslexia, but the sample includes students with physical and mental disabilities. Finally, 17% of the students we interviewed had some level of responsibility for caring for either a child or an adult.

Table 5.3 - Student backgrounds

Gender	
Male - 39%	Female - 61%
Age	
Mature - 61%	School leaver - 39%
Ethnicity	
White - 82%	Ethnic minority - 18%
Disability	
No disabilities - 86%	Disabled - 14%
Caring responsibility for adult or child	
Yes - 17%	No - 83%

Students from deprived backgrounds

- 5.8 In commissioning the study, DIUS were keen that the interview sample should include a significant proportion of students from deprived backgrounds. The most practical way of understanding the extent to which students come from deprived areas is to measure their postcode’s Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) ranking using the Neighbourhood Statistics website⁷. This method is not foolproof - IMD rankings are based on small geographical areas (Super Output Areas) which are on average 1,500 people, within which there can be wide variations of levels of deprivation - but it provides the best approximation available. Table 5.4 below shows the proportions of interviewees from different IMD groupings.
- 5.9 Table 5.4 shows that 14% of the interview sample was from areas in the bottom 10% of the deprivation in England. A further 19% of interviewees were from areas that were ranked in the bottom 11-25% for deprivation of all super output areas in England. Combining these two figures, about one third of the students that we interviewed were classified as coming from a deprived area.

Table 5.4 - IMD ranking of interviewees (Source: IMD and survey)

IMD Ranking*	% of interviewees	Cumulative %
0-10%	14%	14%
11-25%	19%	33%
26-50%	23%	56%
51-75%	22%	78%
76-100%	22%	100%

* The lower the IMD ranking the higher the level of deprivation

Data analysis

- 5.10 The information from the interviews with students was rich and varied, with students often offering very candid views on their experiences of higher education. To this extent, every interview conducted is unique. However, there were consistent themes and views aired across the piece which we have sought to capture in a quantitative as well as a qualitative fashion.
- 5.11 It should also be noted that although the nature of the interviews was semi-structured, not all students were able or willing to offer views on all the questions asked. Also, consultants were advised to explore in more depth those areas where the student had particularly interesting or enlightening experiences.
- 5.12 All interviews were written up in Word using a standard format, following which the key themes and messages, e.g. main motivations for undertaking higher education, were coded into an Excel spreadsheet to allow for quantitative analysis, where appropriate. We have not attempted to attach any statistical significance to any of the quantitative numbers generated - in many cases the sample size is too small for this to be feasible - rather they are presented to give a general idea of weight of opinion.

⁷ <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/>

5.13 The interviews themselves were also analysed using MAXQDA a bespoke tool for analysing large amounts of qualitative data that allows the user to code up and highlight points of specific interest.

Interpreting the results

5.14 Before we move onto the results section, we reflect briefly on some of the biases that are relevant in such a study and which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Some of the biases will be:

- **Survivorship bias** - Students willing to take part in the study will be those students who have overcome possible barriers to accessing and completing an HE course.
- **Choice supportive bias** - The tendency to remember one's choices as better than they actually were, so for example in statements such as "of course university was the right choice for me".
- **Rosy retrospective** - Whereby students reflect overly positively on past events, for example in statements such as "the barriers to accessing HE weren't that challenging".
- **Optimism bias** - Whereby students are over optimistic about their planned course of action, for example in statements such as "I will have no problem getting a job with this degree".
- **Relativity** - The tendency for students to consider their position in relative terms, rather than absolute terms, for example in statements such as "I will be £20k in debt, which isn't much, everyone's in the same boat".
- **Internal consistency** - Students were not always internally consistent with their feedback, so the response to one question may not always tally with later responses during the interview. Where possible interviewers challenged such inconsistency.

5.15 We highlight some of the biases in play to highlight their existence and guard against a *prima facie* interpretation of the quotes and anecdotes listed in the report. The interview write ups were written in the third person and wherever possible interesting quotes were noted. The quotes used in this report have been changed to the first person and are a representation of feedback from students, rather than direct verbatim quotes. For example, in some cases language / wording has been altered to improve readability. Under no circumstances have the aims and intent of what students told us been altered.

5.16 We would also highlight the issue of correlation and attributing causation. In a study of this type there is often a temptation to attribute causation to a correlation between two factors so while it might be possible to state "students from family backgrounds with no experience of HE are more likely to take alternative routes into HE" it would be incorrect to state that "students take alternative routes into HE because they come from family backgrounds with no experience of HE".

- 5.17 We would also note that while the study is interested in understanding broad trends and bulk opinions, we are also very interested in the experiences of those students for whom the decision to enter or be accepted into HE was a marginal one. Indeed, widening participation will very likely need to focus on increasing participation among such marginal students. So, in the results section we have sought to reflect on those factors or influences which, while not important for the majority of students, may have been the tipping point in the decision to enter HE for a small number of students.
- 5.18 We would note that much of the information garnered during the interviews was of a qualitative nature. As was noted earlier, we have attempted to codify the data wherever possible to give a broad idea of scale of trends. In doing this we have had to categorise or codify a very broad range of answers, which were sometimes opaque and ambiguous. As such, we have sought to provide broad weighting trends wherever appropriate, but have not attributed very specific percentages to our findings.
- 5.19 For the sake of clarity, it is important to stress that, unless the text says otherwise, the use of the word 'students' refers to the students in the study, not all students at an institution.
- 5.20 Finally, while it may be the case that a high volume of citations for a specific factor (e.g. university being close to home), across the whole interview sample, is reflective of that factor's importance, it doesn't signify that for each student proximity to home was the most important factor.

6 STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS AND HE DECISIONS

6.1 This is the first of three sections outlining the main findings from the student interviews. In this section we cover the following:

- **Influence of students' backgrounds on HE progression:**
 - early educational experiences including the school experience and impact of not completing a course;
 - family attitudes to education and previous family experience of HE; and
 - attitudes towards A-levels and vocational qualifications and impact on HE decision.
- **The decision to undertake Higher Education** - Reflection and analysis of some of the key factors affecting the entry route into Higher Education:
 - Push / pull factors to undertake HE for different student groups; and
 - the key factors affecting decision to delay entry into HE for mature students.

Influences of students' backgrounds

6.2 During the interviews, students were asked to reflect on their earlier educational experiences, especially at school, including whether or not they had dropped out of a course at any time during their education. Students were also asked to reflect on their course choices for example choosing A-levels, rather than vocational qualifications.

Early school experiences

6.3 Students taking alternative routes into higher education were less likely to reflect positively on their early school experiences compared to students taking traditional routes into HE. Around a quarter of traditional routes students were ambivalent or openly negative about their school experiences, compared with nearly two thirds of students taking alternative routes into HE. Around one in twenty traditional routes students specifically reported negative early educational experiences, compared with around one quarter of students taking alternative routes into HE.

6.4 Prior educational experiences, unsurprisingly, played a significant factor in framing some students' FE and HE choices.

"I started A-levels, but dropped out after one module, I just didn't feel capable. My family were very disappointed, but I went onto to College to study a BTEC which suited me much better."

"School was OK, but I was looking forward to leaving, I hated exams. I did a BTEC because none of the academic subjects were of interest."

"I hated school, I only went into the sixth form for social reasons. I did a GNVQ because it was less hours. I certainly wasn't ready for HE."

Failure to complete a course

- 6.5 Just over one third of all students had failed to complete some form of education (i.e. actively dropping out of a course, rather than just a failed exam). This ranged from dropping a single A Level through to starting and failing to complete an HE course.
- 6.6 We spoke with seven students who had dropped out of or had been expelled from school. Not unsurprisingly, these students' journeys into and pathways through higher education were often challenging and we reflect on one interview in particular where the student in question had left school at 15 with no qualifications.

"I moved to a new school when I was 14 and struggled to integrate with the other kids. I was bullied a lot and left at 15 with no qualifications. I returned to college a year later to do 5 GCSEs at night school and followed this up by doing an A-level in Biology. Unfortunately, I had to drop the A-level because of a lack of background knowledge having not done a GCSE in Biology.

I worked for a number of years before deciding I would really like to go into HE to study Animal Physiology. However, with only 5 GCSEs I was unsure how and where I could study. Only one institution would accept me and then only for a Year 0 qualification, but they were very welcoming of me and my unusual background which made a big difference."

- 6.7 Thirty six of the students we interviewed had dropped out of A-levels while at school. Not unsurprisingly, many of the students dropping out of A-levels reflected badly or ambivalently about their school education. For some, personal circumstances meant they were unable to complete their A-levels:

"I had a hard time at school with my disabilities and some other personal issues, and didn't apply myself. My education was further disrupted by part-time attendance at a special needs school because of my condition."

"I dropped out of my A Levels due to domestic issues. My school education was appalling and the teaching was particularly bad and I definitely didn't reach my potential."

- 6.8 For other students, the academic expectation of A-levels was too much to cope with, or students had misgivings about their own academic capacity to complete the qualification:

"I did OK at school, so naturally went on to A-levels. I chose four hefty subjects, but I didn't enjoy the strict academic environment and ended up dropping my A-Levels and returning to do an AVCE."

- 6.9 Finally, some students dropped A-levels because the learning style did not suit them and subsequently changed to a vocational course.

"I couldn't really see the relevance of A-levels and didn't like the classroom style learning and exams. I spoke with Connexions who helped me to find an Apprenticeship which suited me much better."

- 6.10 Prior academic failure seemed to affect a student's route into higher education i.e. those students who have dropped A-levels to take a vocational qualification move from being traditional routes students to alternative routes students. Interestingly, it doesn't seem to have any impact on a student's pathway through higher education. Those students who had previously failed to complete a course were just as likely to take a traditional pathway (around two thirds) through as those students with no experience of academic failure.

Background qualifications

- 6.11 Students were asked to reflect on the choice of background qualifications i.e. A-levels or vocational qualifications.

Vocational qualifications

- 6.12 Students from vocational qualification backgrounds cited a range of factors for their school age educational choices. About one third of students suggested that a lack of confidence in their academic abilities was a predominant factor behind their decision to take a vocational qualification, rather than A-levels. This lack of confidence was often based on poor prior educational experience e.g. GCSE, although some students had achieved good GCSEs and tried A-levels, only to realise they had made a mistake.

"I left school with 8 GCSEs and was made to pick four A- Level subjects even though I didn't necessarily feel capable. I left after the first module test though due to interest in the subject area and the academic work being too difficult. My parents were extremely disappointed when I dropped out and put a lot of pressure on me. I went on to my local FE College to study for a BTEC, which I very much enjoyed"

- 6.13 For the remaining two-thirds of students taking vocational qualifications, the reasons cited for doing so were more positive. Over forty percent of alternative routes students suggested they chose vocational qualifications specifically with a career in mind and one quarter suggested they chose a vocational qualification because the learning or examination style suited them better.

Career

"I never really considered A-levels and wasn't considering going to university. My expectation was to go onto something vocational, so I took a BTEC in Beauty Therapy."

"I chose the City and Guilds qualification over AS/A levels as it matched my interests and was more practically focused. I don't see not doing A-levels as barrier to a future career, because my qualifications were practical and will help me in the workplace."

Learning style

"I chose to study the AVCE as it was more practical and coursework based. Being a practical course helped because I could cope better with the demands of the course and my dyslexia."

"The modular style of GNVQ was much more attractive than the A-level learning style"

A-levels

- 6.14 For those students taking traditional routes into HE the choice of A-levels as a course type was relatively straightforward, with students often observing that A-levels were the most appropriate qualification to get into university.

"I did A-levels because I knew I would need a degree in engineering or similar for my career ambitions."

- 6.15 However, there were occasions where students had taken A-level qualifications as a means of accessing higher education, but subsequently regretted the choice.

"My family were very keen for me to go to university, so I did A-levels. With hindsight, I would have preferred to have done an AVCE, I think the learning style would have suited me better. Lots of my friends did AVCE courses and still got onto good courses at university."

- 6.16 A number of traditional routes students we interviewed had chosen to study a combination of A-levels and vocational qualifications and they all reflected positively on their experiences of doing vocational qualifications. Interestingly, all of these students were going onto study courses at university of a more vocational nature e.g. IT; Events Management etc.

"I did A-levels and an AVCE. The AVCE was the only course I could do in IT that was relevant to the degree I wanted to do. I much preferred the learning style of the AVCE course and it was certainly good preparation for my university course."

"I did both A Levels and an AVCE. The AVCE was less theory based and more useful for my course in Music Production."

"I did A Levels and an AVCE because an AVCE seemed to be more connected with the real world and what I wanted to do as a career."

"I did a BTEC after completing my A-levels which I didn't enjoy. The learning style of a BTEC suited me far better and convinced me I could go on to higher education."

- 6.17 For the most part, A-level students had no defined views on vocational qualifications, with the overwhelming impression that for the vast majority of students they simply weren't on the radar as an option.

Factors influencing the decision to go into higher education

- 6.18 During the interviews students were asked to reflect on the key push and pull factors that affected the decision to go into higher education. Students reflected on a range of factors including, career development, the influence of family and personal development. Surprisingly few students reflected that the lifestyle or social life at university was an important factor in going onto to do HE. However, it may be that, under observation, students provided the answers they thought most relevant to an academic study.

The influence of family

- 6.19 Students taking a traditional route into HE were much more likely to cite the expectations /influence of family as a factor influencing the decision to go into higher education. Nearly four in ten students from traditional routes backgrounds suggested that family expectation or influence had been a factor in their decision to go into HE. This compares with only one in ten of all alternative routes students - although this figure rises to just over one quarter when only alternative routes students of school leaving age are considered. These figures may seem low, but many students suggested that parents were supportive, although this was not a key factor in their decision making process - *"my parents were happy with the decision to go to university, but had no influence on the decision"* or ambivalence *"my parents would have been happy whatever I chose to do"*. Tacit parental support was maybe important for such students, but was not vocalised explicitly during interviews.
- 6.20 Among all students who cited family expectation / influence over the decision to enter HE, nearly three quarters suggested some level of prior family experience of higher education and around one third reported a significant history of prior HE participation e.g. a parent attended university. In contrast, among those students who didn't cite family influence as a key factor to enter into HE, only around 50% of students reported some level of prior HE experience and only 13% reported a more significant history of family HE participation.

"Both of my parents went to University and studied languages. They encouraged me to go to University and to some extent expected me to go."

"Both my parents went to university in Nigeria and my mother also took a degree in England - my parents' passion is for us all to go to university. All my brothers and sisters went to university and my parents were keen for me to go."

- 6.21 However, not all students we spoke with cited a strong parental influence as a positive push factor towards university.

"My parents were very keen for me to attend university, both of my sisters had been to university as had relatives and cousins. There was very little personal choice in the decision to go to university."

"Both my parents are very academic and there was a strong expectation that I would follow them into higher education. However, I didn't want to go to university aged 18 and I wouldn't have taken the decision to go, if it wasn't for my parents."

- 6.22 Conversely, while for some students family was a significant push factor in the decision to undertake higher education, for other students their families had at some point in their lives actively discouraged participation in HE and / or were reluctant to support students through higher education. Women were much more likely (around three quarters of such citations) than men to cite family influence as a reason for not going into higher education.

"My parents expected me to become a secretary."

"Nothing was expected of my generation - I was just expected to get a low paid job, get married and have children."

"My parents didn't value education and so couldn't understand my desire to further my education and so did not encourage or support me."

"I was the only girl amongst four children, and it wasn't even considered that I would go to university. Girls were not expected to have a university education, and school education focussed on learning to darn socks."

"University was just not seen as something they would do; you didn't go to university unless you were posh."

- 6.23 All of the women citing family as a dissuasive influence towards HE were mature students and most of this group were over 30. This suggests that the issue is perhaps linked to outdated expectations around the role of women in society. Of the three women under 30 years of age reflecting on a negative family influence towards education, two were of Asian origin and noted that there was a family expectation that they should get married and start a family.

The influence of school/college

- 6.24 For four in ten students of school leaving age the encouragement or support from a school or college was an important factor in influencing the decision to take an HE course. There was only a small difference between the proportion of students taking A-levels or vocational qualifications citing the influence of their school or college.

“At my school there was a strong expectation for pupils to go onto HE - you had to justify why you didn’t want to go to university. One day a week at school was set aside for social skills with tutors, all dedicated to UCAS and university research.”

- 6.25 For the most part, students defined the support from school in general terms i.e. encouragement and support with guidance provided on how to fill out UCAS forms. However, for some students, school or college was a more direct influence, with strong pressure being brought to bear in some instances and not always being positively received. Also, for some students the intervention or encouragement of an individual teacher or lecturer played a significant part in their decision to access higher education.

“Because of my disabilities, the local education authority wanted me to attend a special school but this was not what me or my parents wanted. Also, the school careers advisor told me to pursue a vocational career but again this was not what I wanted to do. It was only because of a lecturer at my College who encouraged me to aim higher and pursue what I wanted to achieve rather than what others wanted of me.”

“My mother was not interested in my education at all and she wanted me to leave school at 16. I left school after my A-levels having not done very well. Splitting with my boyfriend was a major turning point in my life. I kept in close contact with my teachers at school; an old form teacher was a major influence, telling me to carry on with my education to fulfil my potential.”

“In my second year, all students at the college were put under great pressure to fill in UCAS forms. I filled them in to keep the college quiet, but I didn’t think I would stand a chance of getting in”

- 6.26 For some school leaving age students we interviewed the motivations for attending HE were rather nebulous. A commonly cited reason for going onto HE straight after school was that it was ‘the natural thing to do’ after school. There is some suggestion from the data that this view was more common among traditional routes school leavers than alternative routes school leavers.

“It was my decision to go to University and my school encouraged me to apply. I didn’t think about doing anything but University and I’m not sure what I would have done as an alternative.”

- 6.27 While for many students school or college was a positive or at least benign influence on the decision to access HE, for eight of the students we interviewed the advice given by school and or college was actively negative to the effect of telling students they shouldn't consider applying for higher education. However, these were all mature students, which may again reflect an outdated approach to HE which no longer has much currency - active dissuasion by schools and colleges was not reported by any younger students.

"It was expected I would do my O-levels and then get a job. I lived in a mining area with high unemployment and the only advice I was given by school was to join a YTS scheme."

"I told my school careers adviser I wanted to do work experience at a funeral directors, but was told that was ridiculous and was sent to a mechanics garage instead. There was no encouragement at school for university, it was more employment / benefit claimant focused"

- 6.28 When the combined influence of school and family is considered around one third of traditional routes students cited both as factors influencing their decision to go onto higher education, compared with only 1 in 11 alternative routes students of school leaving age.

Delayed entry into higher education

- 6.29 We have already reflected on the influence of family and school / college in affecting students' decisions not to enter HE straight after school. More commonly cited were two other factors, namely: discontent with education in general; and a desire or need to go out and work / earn money.
- 6.30 Nearly four in ten mature students reflected that disillusionment with education was one of the factors that led them to delay entry into higher education.

"Both of my parents went to University, as well as my sisters. I was expected to go but I was too rebellious and I had no aspirations at school."

"I did reasonably well at school, but I absolutely hated school, there was no way I was staying on to do A Levels. I found learning tedious and wanted to get out and earn some money."

"I didn't enjoy school and lacked confidence. I did the minimum required to get by in my work and was much more interested in the social side of school."

- 6.31 For some students there was a reflection that, even though they had the qualifications to go straight into HE after school, the opportunity would have been wasted on them.

“At age 18 I knew I didn’t want to go to uni until I was about 23. The UCAS form put me off and I had no idea what I wanted to study. I thought I would end up wasting the first year at university.”

“I got offered a place at 18 to do primary education. I deferred at 18 for a year to do a gap year but never went back. If I had gone to uni at 18, I would not have finished the course. I didn’t have the motivation required.”

- 6.32 Discontent with education was sometimes linked in with the desire to go out and work - in around a third of cases where students cited discontent with education, a desire or need to work was also expressed.

“I had no interest at the time in A levels, I don’t like revising or exams, and I didn’t have any aspiration to go to university, I just wanted a qualification and then to go out to work.”

- 6.33 However, there was also a significant group of students for whom the decision to not enter HE straight after school was based solely on the desire or need to enter employment.

“I could have gone to university, but I didn’t want to be a burden on my family. My parents were disappointed with my decision to go to work.”

“I lived with my grandparents and I needed to work in order to help support the family, if not I would have gone straight on to university.”

“I had a place at university guaranteed, but took a year out to get a job and never took up the course offer. Going straight out to work was nothing unusual in my family.”

Push pull factors for mature students going into HE

- 6.34 Having considered the main factors that meant students did not go straight into HE from school, we now reflect on the key drivers which pushed/pulled mature students back into higher education later in life. In discussions with students there were two consistent themes that were regularly cited.

- 6.35 Firstly, the desire to enhance career prospects, whether this be embarking on a new career or developing an existing one, and half of the mature students we spoke with cited career aspirations as a key driver for entering HE. It should be noted that students of school leaving age also often talked about “a career” as a motivation for entering HE, but this was in much looser terms and more along the lines of “I need to get a degree to get a good job.”

“After school I spent some time working in a nursery and this made me realise that I wanted to work with young children and decided that I wanted to go to university to train to be a teacher.”

“I was keen to progress my professional development and saw OU study as the first stepping stone towards a career.”

- 6.36 A corollary to this desire to enhance employment prospect was notion of an employment ‘glass ceiling’. A common story was of students leaving school at 18, working for 5-6 years and realising that without a degree they could be confined to lower paid work with fewer chances of promotion and progress. Around one quarter of the mature students interviewed actively cited that reaching a dead end in their current employment was a factor affecting the decision to enter HE.

“I was applying for a number of other jobs, but getting rejections all the time. I think that the absence of a degree was putting off potential employers.”

“I was going nowhere, felt like I didn’t exist in my job. I didn’t want the lifestyle of work colleagues, late hours and always covered in paint. I wanted to be able to provide for my family, so took the decision to go to university.”

“My apprenticeship was monotonous and the company wanted people to work as cheap labour. While I was on day release at College a woman came in and spoke to us about university which sparked my interest in going.”

“I had worked for several years, had grown up, and had not been enjoying work due to lack of promotion opportunities. My employer was supportive of my decision to leave, as they recognised that they could not offer me the promotion opportunities I wanted.”

- 6.37 The second major factor affecting mature students’ decisions to go into higher education was less defined, but could broadly be described as a personal desire or motivation towards general self-improvement. Encompassed within this was, for some students, the chance to ‘prove they could do it’ and laying to rest concerns about previous academic underperformance or failing. For other students, going into HE later in life was about fulfilling their academic potential where earlier life circumstances had meant they couldn’t continue with their learning.

"I decided to go to University after my second child was born - after having my first child I had decided that I wanted to do something for myself."

"When my second child was 6 weeks I went to the doctor for a normal check up and I spoke with the doctor about doing a university course - he actively encouraged me and I contacted my local college about signing up for courses."

"Throughout my working life, I always felt as though I had "missed out" on higher education. HE was never really an option in the past though, because I had to bring up and support a family. My children had grown up, so there was less responsibility on me as a mother and I wanted to prove I could do it. University was less about where it would lead to, but more about the experience of something new"

"I married young and my partner had expected children straight away, so university wasn't an option. I always had a life ambition to do higher education and it was a dream I clung onto. It was only after I got divorced that it became feasible for me to do it."

- 6.38 For some mature students, the decision to go into higher education was the completion of 'an educational journey', at the start of which they had not always conceived of higher education as being an option. In such cases, the confidence gained during the early stages of adult education or the enjoyment of higher education in an adult setting was often the stimulus to start thinking in terms of higher education as a possibility.
- 6.39 A number of other interesting, but less commonly cited factors were raised by mature students as being important in their decision to go into higher education.
- 6.40 The influence or experiences or advice from friends or siblings was a factor for some mature students. Sometimes this advice was no more than planting the seed of an idea about going into higher education and / or allaying students' fears or misconceptions about HE.

"I applied unsuccessfully to become a radiographer, but didn't get in. I think that the lack of A levels hindered my application. I spoke to my cousin who was thinking of doing an Access course, which sounded ideal."

"I couldn't have got any further in my job because my lack of qualifications was holding me back. My friend asked why I didn't go and get a degree, which started me thinking."

"My little sister went to university which gave me an insight into what uni was like. This was a big influence as it changed my impressions of what university would be like."

- 6.41 For ten of the mature students we spoke with, the encouragement of their employer was a significant influence in their decision to go into higher education. Interestingly, the encouragement from employers was not always with a view to developing the capabilities of employees and boosting business performance. In some cases, employers, realising they would not be able to fulfil the career aspirations of talented employees, suggested university as a good way to progress a career. For other

students, undertaking higher education was an industry standard e.g. the construction sector, and supporting students to study part-time while working was a common pathway through higher education.

“Most of my friends went straight from school to work and this was the done thing for many women of that generation. I didn’t even think about university, until a particularly proactive boss encouraged me to apply for university, suggesting that I could get company funding.”

“I did my A-levels, but had not thought about higher education. It was only after I gave a presentation in my job that people at work suggested I should go to university. People at work gave me the confidence to think about higher education.”

“Doing part-time study is a well trodden path in the construction sector and my company sponsor me to do the course and give me time off to study.”

- 6.42 For many students we spoke with, the influence of public sector support services, such as the school careers service or Connexions, in the decision to participate in higher education was limited. However, there were a small number of students we spoke with for whom the advice from support agencies was a factor in guiding them towards higher education.

“Advice from Connexions was a major factor in me taking an AVCE and then going onto HE.”

“Connexions encouraged me to stay in education and also contacted the university for on my behalf.”

Conclusions

- 6.43 Our conclusions from this section looking at the impact of students’ backgrounds on HE choices are as follows:

- **Early academic experiences are important** - Students who have poor early academic experiences are more likely to be taking alternative routes into higher education.
- **The influence of family is important.** Traditional routes students were more likely to receive active family encouragement to go into HE. There is evidence that some students received active dissuasion from entering HE, although this tended to be among older students.
- **The positive influence of school.** There was some limited evidence to suggest that traditional routes students get more of a “push” towards HE than their vocational peers. However, the difference between student groups was relatively small. There was certainly no evidence to suggest that vocational students were actively dissuaded by their schools from going on to HE.

- **HE straight out of school is not the right choice for some.** The desire to earn money and / or disillusionment with education meant that for many mature students HE was not a viable option straight after school / FE. Only after a period of employment and reflection did students consider HE. We do not believe there is much that could be done to persuade / influence this group of students' decisions aged 18, nor would it be productive to do so. However, there is potentially much to be gained from attracting more such students into HE in their early to mid 20s. The route into HE for such students was often not linear and there was a sense that some of this student group stumbled on HE by accident as much by design. This presents a challenge for policy makers as to how market and present HE options to what is a disparate group of students.
- **Vocational qualifications positively viewed by many taking them** - Many of the students we spoke with were positive about the reasons for taking vocational background qualifications, with some choosing them over A-levels for career or academic reasons. However, there is a minority of vocational students for whom the choice of a vocational qualification was seen as inferior or the second best option having performed poorly at GCSE.

7 FACTORS AFFECTING THE PATHWAY THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

7.1 In this section of the report, we reflect on the factors which affect students' pathway through education, focussing on:

- choice of institution;
- choice of course;
- mode of study (full time and part-time); and
- factors affecting the timing of entry.

Factors affecting the choice of institution

Location

7.2 With regard to students taking *in situ* degrees (88% of the total sample) i.e. one which requires them to attend lectures at a physical institution, the geographic location of the institution was the most commonly cited factor affecting students' choice of institution. By geographic location we mean the location of the HE institution in the country and not, for example proximity to the city centre.

7.3 Across the whole sample, nearly three quarters of all students cited the location as an important factor in determining where they studied. However, within the broad catch all of location, there were numerous different reasons cited as to why location was important, for example, being close to family or the desire to live at home.

7.4 Two-thirds of those students who regarded location as an important factor in deciding where to study cited being able to combine higher education study with the opportunity or need to live at home as important to them. This desire to study and live at home was more prevalent among mature students (nearly two thirds of all mature students) than students of school leaving age (just over one third). Interestingly, however, of those students of school leaving age studying and living at home, a disproportionate number (just over half) compared to the sample representation (just over one quarter) were taking an alternative pathway through HE.

7.5 For many students the reasons given for living at home were couched in broad terms and often either for practical reasons - i.e. for mature students continuing to live at their fixed abode - or for younger students a desire not to move away from home / family. However, for around one third of students living at home the reasons cited for doing so were more defined, for example, childcare responsibilities; the cost of moving away from home; or disability issues.

7.6 The location decisions of students with childcare responsibilities were largely dictated by the need to study at an institution close to their family home. In some cases, the HE choices of mature students with childcare responsibilities for children were more restricted as a result.

"The course was structured around children, running 10am to 3pm, and close to home, accessible by car. I couldn't attend X University as it had early and late lectures"

"The course was local and fitted around my childcare needs."

"My choice was limited by the location. I need to be close to home as I have children and need to get home to them easily"

- 7.7 For about one in ten of those students choosing to study and live at home, the decision was made for explicitly financial reasons, with the cost of living away from home and paying course fees considered to be expensive.

"I considered universities away from home, but the cost of living and distance from home ruled it out."

"I only applied to local institutions to save money on living expenses."

- 7.8 Finally, for a very small number of students we spoke with, the decision to live at home while studying was dictated by their disabilities and the need to be close to support networks. However, for one student we spoke with who had multiple disabilities, the choice of university was made on the basis of the support networks in place at the institution.

"I didn't want to be far from home as I often have transport issues due to my disability."

"The university has one of the best student union disability support structures, for which it is well known. I had been to three universities which had no real support networks."

- 7.9 Finally, it is also worth noting that for about one in five students taking an *in situ* qualification, 'proximity to home' was an important choice factor in deciding where to go to university. Very often in such cases students wanted to be far enough away from home to feel independent, but close enough to be able to visit family easily. Traditional routes into HE students - i.e. school leavers with A-Levels - were more likely to cite proximity to home as an important factor than any other groups of students.

Background qualifications

- 7.10 For one quarter of all students we interviewed (including distance learners), where they studied was dictated or influenced by an institution's acceptance of their poor grades and / or qualification type. It should be noted that during some student interviews disentangling students' perceptions of why they were rejected or accepted from an institution was not always easy i.e. whether or not rejection was actively due to their type of entry qualification or the grade of the qualification.

- 7.11 For the large majority of students taking alternative routes into higher education the type of background qualification was openly accepted by the institutions they applied to and there was little sense that vocational qualifications were viewed as an impediment to university access. Indeed, a familiar refrain during interviews was that ‘institutions were fine with my background qualification type’. Only in a small number of cases was explicit reference made to institutions rejecting students because of the **type** of qualification they were applying with and / or students’ own perceptions that a vocational qualification was a lesser qualification with which to access HE.

“I had a good GNVQ Level 3, but I was rejected from the local redbrick university. The advice from UCAS was confusing on GNVQ’s and I was told that universities would judge their value independently, which left me confused”.

“I applied to a number of institutions, but only University X would accept students onto their IT course with an AVCE.”

“I did badly in my AVCE and was only accepted by one university. I think universities see AVCEs as lesser qualifications than A-levels - although it’s hard to say how universities would have regarded me if I had applied with only weak A-levels”

- 7.12 For a very small number of alternative routes students, their choice of institution was coloured by their preconceptions of how they and their background qualifications would be judged by an institution. The comments made often focused on students’ perceptions of the “atmosphere” at redbrick institutions and how they would be regarded, rather than any explicit experience of rejection.

“I applied to lots of institutions in my local area to be close to home because my dad is ill. The local redbrick only wants people from an A-level background, so I didn’t apply there.”

“I got offered a place at a redbrick, but the university gave me the impression that they were only after high flyers, which knocked my confidence, so I turned them down.”

“The local redbrick appeared to be more middle class and snobby, so I turned them down.”

- 7.13 Interestingly, some of the alternative routes students at redbrick universities we spoke with (albeit a limited sample) provide an interesting counter balance to the views above; with redbrick institutions making allowances for work experience in lieu of traditional educational experience and in one example, a redbrick university admissions office accepting a half-completed Access qualification and a tutor’s reference as acceptable qualifications for university entry.
- 7.14 Those students citing ‘acceptance of grades’ as a factor affecting their choice of institution were slightly more likely to be traditional routes into HE students i.e. school leavers taking A-Levels, but were no more likely to be taking an alternative pathway through HE. Indeed, among the traditional routes students we spoke with, ‘acceptance of grades’ was not necessarily because students had poor grades, rather the institutions to which they were applying had very competitive entrance requirements.

"I was struggling getting in to university with only my AS level grades and so had to look for a diploma course which would give me access to a degree qualification."

"I applied for six different courses all related to primary school teaching at four different institutions. I did not get accepted into any of the courses as I had applied for a BA and my A level grades were too low. I got a knock back from this and decided I had to contact universities to ask their advice about what I could do. University X guided me towards doing a diploma with a view to progressing onto a degree."

- 7.15 There was some evidence that institutions were often willing to be flexible in making allowances for students' backgrounds or circumstances. For example, for some mature alternative routes students, universities' acceptance of work experience in lieu of academic experience was a key factor in helping them to access higher education. This admissions approach tallies with the reflection of some mature students on the extent to which work experience provided invaluable background knowledge and skills to help them cope with the course while also providing useful contextual experience for other younger students on their courses (see later sections).

"I applied to university very late and with no background qualifications, but because my extensive work experience and training showed I had an aptitude for learning I was accepted on the course at short notice."

"My background qualifications were not sufficient based on the universities' own criteria but my work experience was taken into account and I was accepted onto the course."

- 7.16 Institutions' willingness to be flexible and/or make students offers on non-degree level courses meant that some students with poor or no qualifications were able to access higher education, having sometimes suffered from being rejected from other institutions.

"I had real problems at school and left with only 5 GCSEs. I was rejected from all the institutions I applied to, apart from University X who invited me to take a Year 0 qualification as a means of accessing HE."

"A chaotic home life meant I did very badly in my A-levels. Only University X took account of my circumstances and accepted me with my poor grades."

Course

- 7.17 Around one third of all students cited their course as a significant factor in their choice of institution. This was generally couched in broad terms such as 'the institution did the course I was interested in'. Less frequent were students for whom institutional choice was largely dictated by the availability of specific courses.

"I chose X university, because it does international business, with a year abroad as part of the course."

- 7.18 There is no suggestion from the data that, for example, traditional routes students were more likely to choose an institution on the basis of the course on offer than alternative routes students. There was some suggestion, however, that mature students were less likely to cite course as a motivating factor when choosing their institution.

Distance learning

- 7.19 We interviewed 41 distance learners taking HE qualifications at The Open University (OU). Their motivations for taking distance learning courses, rather than *in situ* courses were unsurprisingly focussed around the need to combine studying with other life or work commitments. For around four in ten distance learners, the ability to combine work and study meant that distance learning was the most convenient option or in some cases it was perceived to be the only option available to students. Some OU students had considered taking part-time HE courses at physical institutions, but factors such as the inflexibility of the course timings meant they were not a practical option.

"I didn't even consider other universities - I wanted to work and study part-time"

"I didn't look at other institutions, I work full time and I didn't want to be tied to specific sessions at a university which are often during the day".

- 7.20 The second most cited factor for choosing to study at the OU was family commitments with around one quarter of respondents citing this reason. Again, as with those students working and studying, the ability to combine study around family commitments was recognised as a key plus point of OU study.

"The main advantage of distance learning was not having to be somewhere at a specific time which can be difficult if you've got a family."

Fee rates

- 7.21 We noted earlier that for some students - traditional and alternative - their choice of HE institution was somewhat dictated by the desire to live at home as a means of saving money. Less commonly cited, but still noteworthy were the students who chose their HE institution partly on the basis of the fees being charged. There is very little internal competition on price with many HE universities choosing to charge the full fee rate of circa £3,000 per annum in 2007. As such, for many students the fee rates charged by an institution do not figure heavily in their decision making process about where to study.

- 7.22 However, one of the institutions where we conducted interviews, Leeds Metropolitan University, charges only £2,000 in 2007 for its undergraduate courses. For the vast majority of Leeds Met students in this study, this was not cited as a motivating factor in deciding where to study, but for two students we spoke with it had influenced their decision.

“Leeds Met was not initially my first choice, but the fees and living costs were lower. The university has very good facilities, but the choice of where to study was very much a financial one.”

“The £2k fee rate at Leeds Met was an important influencing factor in my decision.”

- 7.23 Another group of students who referred to the cost of HE study were students of school leaving age studying at FE institutions. Five such students we spoke with had been made offers by universities, but chose to study HE at their local college, in part, because it was cheaper to do a two year Foundation Degree and then top it up with a final year at a university, rather than do three years at a university.

“I was offered a place at university, but the fees were over £3,000 per year, plus the expense of living away from home. Studying at my local college I can live at home and the fees are only £1,200 per year and I can top up to a full degree at the end”.

“I could have done the course at university, but I’d done my BTEC at college and knew the campus. Also, the fees for studying at college are about half the cost of a university.”

- 7.24 Finally, one in five OU students we interviewed cited cost as one of the key determinants in their decision to undertake distance learning, rather than studying at a university. For some students, the choice of distance learning was recognised as a next best and most realistic option to full time university study.

“I was really worried about finance while at university and I ended up in lots of debt before dropping out. The OU is a lot cheaper than a conventional university. You don’t have to pay it all as one lump sum and it only costs £20-£30 per month”.

“I didn’t think I could afford university study and the decision to study with the OU was largely finance based. I would give anything to study full time and I think it would be easier to study at a university than by distance learning”.

Teaching style

- 7.25 An observation made by some students studying HE at FE Colleges was that the teaching style at college was more intensive, with teacher to student ratios as small as 1:10, and that they felt more comfortable learning in this environment than the more self-directed learning approach required at a university. Allied to this was that students had often previously undertaken their earlier Level 3 qualifications at the college and had built up a strong relationship with the same lecturers teaching them on their HE course.

"The course is pretty much the same content as the university I applied to, but there are ten people in the class, compared with probably 100 at university."

"I did my BTEC at the College and staying on was just a natural progression. I liked the fact that I knew all the lecturers and the facilities the College had."

"I could have gone to university, but I felt comfortable at the college - I knew all the lecturers."

The student welcome

- 7.26 The process of applying for higher education can be a nerve wracking experience, and for some students the "welcome" they were given by an institution played an important part in their decision as to where to study. Indeed, in some cases the welcome given to some marginal students tipped the balance in favour of them undertaking higher education or not. In terms of defining those students for whom 'student welcome' was important, there is little difference from the overall sample in terms of route into or pathway through higher education. However, only one in four of those students for whom student welcome was important reported that their school experience had been a positive one and half of such students reflecting that their school experience had been bad or very bad. Those students citing the importance of the 'student welcome' were also more likely to be female mature students - 60% of such responses.

"The University made me feel very welcome, offering tours, leaflets, info from lecturers."

"I telephoned University X and explained my situation i.e. poor A-levels, but with work experience and the issues I might have with childcare. I got a very negative response and was told I would be competing against students with good A-levels. I then rang University Y and got a completely different response and talking to the course leader for an hour made a huge difference to my confidence."

"I found the course Director helpful and approachable, responding to emails straight away, which counted for a lot."

Other factors

7.27 There were other factors regularly cited by students, which affected their choice of institution, such as “the campus” or “the city”. One might have expected these to be more prominent factors for younger students who were less location dependent, but there were no significant differences worthy of note between the different student types. The only significant variation was between institutions, with for example students at Bath Spa regularly citing the city itself as an influence in their HE choice.

Factors influencing the course studied

7.28 The choice of subject by students to some extent reflected the wider trends that we identified in Section 4 of this report i.e. that subjects allied to medicine; business studies related courses; and creative art and design courses were among the most popular courses taken by all groups of students. The only notable difference was that we interviewed a high proportion of alternative routes into HE students who were taking modern language courses (10% of the sample of alternative routes students), while the data in Chapter 4 suggested that modern languages was a course area where such students are poorly represented.

7.29 In terms of students’ motivations for choosing their course subject, there was little discernable difference across the different student groups. For the large majority of students we spoke with the decision about which course to study was based on potential career prospects - for example some of the alternative routes into HE students taking modern languages were hoping to become teachers - and / or a personal interest or previous interest in the subject.

7.30 We reviewed the data from the interviews to examine whether there were any differences among different student types citing career motivations for their course choice. While across the sample there was no quantitative difference between different student groups citing career aspirations for their choice of course, there was a qualitative difference in their answers.

7.31 For those “young mature” students (i.e. between 21 and 31) undertaking higher education to further employment prospects, their “career” ambitions were more explicitly defined than those of students of school leaving age or older mature students; with students actively looking to gain qualifications to enhance an existing career or to develop a specific new career. These decisions were often framed in the context of previous work experience, which often helped students understand their strengths and weaknesses and / or what they enjoyed doing.

“I had been working for a number of years as a youth worker and after seeing a talk about the social work profession, I decided this was the career for me.”

“I was working in a nursery and was inspired to go into HE by a lecturer who visited the family learning centre. I wanted to work in child nutrition, and was advised I would need a degree to do this.”

“I was already teaching adult literacy and numeracy at my local prison and wanted to develop my career further.”

- 7.32 For students of school leaving age, course choices and career ambitions, not unreasonably, were couched in more general terms e.g. “I want a well paid career, so I chose course X.” There was also some evidence of the influence of popular culture in younger students’ course choices, with at least three students citing the influence of the Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) television series as a motivation for them taking forensic science courses.

“I had no idea about a career at the time, but I always wanted to get a degree. I thought it would be fun to do IT and it would help me get a better job.”

“I did Tourism Studies because I thought it would be interesting and I wanted to get a job in the industry”.

“I wanted to keep my career options open, so I took a Business, Digital Media and Tourism Course.”

- 7.33 Finally, for “older mature” students the choice of course was often less about career development, rather learners were looking to learn for personal development purposes and / or for the love of the subject. Reduced family and work commitments freed up the time, so students could go into HE.

“Creative writing was really where my heart was and the choice of course had nothing to do with career aspirations.”

“I always wanted to be able to say I have a degree, that was my expectation growing up, but my life took a different turn. My children had grown up, so I chose to study for a degree, more for personal fulfilment than anything else.”

Level of course

- 7.34 Another significant factor in a student’s pathway through higher education is the level of course studied e.g. degree or non-degree level study. We interviewed 67 students taking courses that were not honours degree level. The majority (64%) of such students had taken alternative routes into higher education i.e. a vocational qualification and/or were mature students. The evidence we collected suggested that students taking non-degree level courses did not have unduly bad school experiences compared with other student groups and neither did they have less family history of HE than other students. Further, in our sample, and contrary to the wider data, these students were no more likely to be from an ethnic minority group than the wider sample.
- 7.35 For half the students we spoke with, the choice to do a non honours degree level subject was based on vocational ambitions. For some such students, the ability to combine a part-time vocational course with full time employment was important. For other students in this group, the ability to do a course that directly matched their career ambitions was a reason for taking a non-degree level programme. There was little suggestion that students with vocational ambitions saw their mode of study as inferior,

indeed, for some degree level study was passed up as an option in favour of a non honours degree level course.

“The course is very specific to the vocation and I’m totally focussed on getting the qualification as a means of getting a job”

“I got 10 As at GCSE and three A-levels. After A-levels, I was seeking to move away from the ‘more academic’ type of course and study a vocational course. I liked the content of the Foundation Degree Course and the fact that in the final year students actually run their own business which was very appealing. I was initially concerned at how a Foundation Degree might be viewed, but I can always top it up to a full degree later.”

“I want to get into Sports Science. I got full distinctions in my BTEC which equated to 360 UCAS points and could have gone to university, but I preferred to carry on at College where class sizes are smaller.”

- 7.36 For around one third of students taking non honours degree level qualifications, the reason for doing so was largely determined by poor academic grades or the lack of qualifications. Many such students reflected that they investigated the possibility of degree level study, but poor grades meant they had resorted to either a Foundation Degree or HND / HNC as a second best option. However, students’ experiences of alternative course options were not always seen in a negative light and for some students it opened up different opportunities for them. In other cases where students hadn’t got onto full time degree courses, they were still sanguine about the course they were taking and the opportunity to top-up to a full degree at a later date.

“I knew I wouldn’t get on a degree course - I didn’t have enough points. My A-levels had knocked my confidence and I wasn’t sure I could cope with a full degree. I began to think about a career in construction and went to an Open Day run by the Institute of Civil Engineers which led me onto the HND course.”

“I wanted to be a teacher, but did not have appropriate grades so took the Diploma in HE which can be converted to a BA in the third year as a way of getting onto a degree course.”

Factors influencing the study mode

- 7.37 Around one in five students we interviewed were studying part-time, with the remaining number studying full time HE courses. Full time students were fairly straightforward in their motivations for their study mode. For almost all the full time students we spoke with the desire to complete their course in the shortest possible time frame and / or a preference for the intensity of full time learning were the key factors dictating their study mode. There was a perception among full time students that part-time study was a lesser experience.

"I chose full time study because I wanted to invest all my efforts in the course. I thought, "if I'm going to do this, I should do it 100%."

"I did think about a part-time course, but once I decided to go into HE, I thought "I may as well do this properly."

- 7.38 In the case of part-time learners, nearly all of whom were mature students, the desire or the need to combine study with work or family life dictated their study mode. Indeed, for many mature students with financial commitments, giving up work to study full time was simply not an option.

"The first year of my course was full time, but it was too much and I made the choice to go part-time so I could fit study around my childcare commitments."

"I needed to continue working while studying and I also had a child to look after. I would have loved to have studied full time, but it wasn't feasible."

- 7.39 Around two-thirds of the part-time students we spoke with were distance learning with The Open University. For some, part-time *in situ* study was considered, but for practical and / or financial reasons wasn't realistic.

"I considered a bricks and mortar university but I needed to stay in work and couldn't find any courses that were really part-time."

"The University of Wales also did the course I wanted to study, but it would have involved a lot more physical commitment, and higher fees."

"Traditional institutions are just not flexible enough to offer courses that appeal to working people."

Timing of entry into HE

- 7.40 The timing of entry into HE for students of school leaving age was straightforward. For most, progression straight from school, or with a gap year, was the natural step and there was nothing to distinguish vocational learners from A-Level students. There was no significant evidence to suggest that students of school leaving age had considered delaying entry to earn money prior to undertaking HE. A number of students noted that taking a gap year would have meant delaying their application, which could have meant paying additional top up fees. This prompted them to progress straight from school into higher education.

“A key factor behind when I applied to go to university was the introduction of course fees, if I had had to pay university fees, then I would have been unlikely to have gone.”

- 7.41 For mature students, the timing of their entry into higher education was contingent on numerous factors, including the need to gain suitable qualifications, family commitments, financial circumstances and other factors such as personal health or loss of employment.
- 7.42 The most commonly cited factor affecting the timing of entry into HE for mature students was finance. Students referred to the availability of employer (often NHS) or state funding; a change in personal financial circumstances; or the need or desire to delay entry into higher education in order to save money first. A point made by a number of mature students was that their financial responsibilities were much higher than those of younger students and often included home or car ownership and children to support. While it was recognised that financial support for mature students recognises this to some extent, the financial risks of going into HE for mature students appear to be magnified significantly.

“It was a huge financial decision for me to give up a job. It was only because of the support from my husband that I could consider going into higher education”.

“I was made redundant and got a pay off which meant I was able to afford to go into HE.”

“If finance hadn’t been such an issue, I would certainly have gone into HE earlier.”

- 7.43 For some students (mostly mature) the timing of entry into HE was dictated by family responsibilities. Students sometimes delayed entry into HE, waiting until children had grown old enough to start school, leaving students freer to pursue their academic aspirations. For older mature students, children growing up to an age where they can “look after themselves” was a key factor dictating the timing of HE, with students reflecting that “I’ve looked after my family, now I want a career”. However, children were not always an impediment to entering HE for all students, with some relying on their families for childcare support, or in a small number of cases choosing an institution specifically because the childcare support was very good.

"I could have started HE a year earlier but I wanted to wait until my second child had started school - not because of childcare problems but because I wanted to stay at home until then."

"It was a natural progression to go from FE to HE, to go as far as I could, but I had a young son and postponed the decision until he had grown up a little."

"The college course was structured around children, running 10am to 3pm. I couldn't attend a university course as it had early and late lectures."

"I have a very young child, but I still wanted to go into HE as soon as possible after school. The support of my family to help with childcare meant this was possible."

Conclusions

7.44 Our conclusions for this section looking at the factors influencing pathways through HE are as follows:

- **Mature students' HE choices are more limited than those of younger students.** Mature students' HE choices were very often constrained by personal and / or career commitments which require them to attend an institution close to their home. Further, there was a suggestion that for some students supply side limitations meant they were further restricted in their HE choices e.g. universities unable to deliver evening courses. FE colleges and The OU were the natural destinations for many such students and were often able to provide the more flexible learning arrangements required by students. This begs the question as to what more universities could do to deliver more flexible HE provision that meets the needs of mature students.
- **Little to suggest that vocational students struggle to access HE.** The prevailing sense was that vocational background students were not facing any prejudice from admissions departments and / or a lack of understanding of their qualifications. In part this may be because students are applying for courses at institutions where they know their qualifications will be recognised, but this doesn't diminish the point.
- **Other less tangible factors such as the "student welcome" can be important in HE decisions.** Certainly for some mature students who were nervous about returning to education the initial welcome to an institution was crucial in their decision about where to study, and potentially about whether to enter HE at all (although we didn't speak with students not entering HE). There is evidence that a number of institutions went out of their way to ensure such students felt welcome at institutions.
- **Course fees can affect institution choices.** There was emerging evidence that a number of students were making HE choices based on the levels of fees charged. These students chose to study at a university charging lower fee rates; take non-degree level qualifications at a college at a cheaper rate before topping up to a full degree later; or do distance learning via the OU. It remains to be seen whether the

growing financial implications of HE study and / or the development of significant variations in the fees charged by institutions leads to more students choosing an HE institution based on financial factors.

- **Mixed messages on some HE qualifications.** Those students taking non honours degree level qualifications did so for various reasons. On the positive side, many did such courses for vocational reasons, suggesting they could top up to an honours degree course at a later date. There was no sense from students that this was felt to be an inferior HE pathway. Other students chose non honours degree level courses for financial reasons and / or in some cases because they preferred the more intensive teaching environment at an FE college. For other students, the decision to take a non honours degree course was the lack of qualifications to take a full degree course; however, many such students were positive about the opportunity to take an alternative pathway to getting a full honours degree.

8 EXPERIENCES OF UNDERTAKING HIGHER EDUCATION

8.1 In this section of the report we reflect on the students' experiences of undertaking higher education, focussing on:

- **Experiences of participating in Higher Education:**
 - The transition to HE;
 - Key academic challenges of HE; and
 - Wider challenges of undertaking HE.
- **Satisfaction with HE** - Analysis of overall satisfaction levels with Higher Education and choice of institution among different student groups:
 - Factors associated with high / low satisfaction levels; and
 - Reflection on wider benefits of HE participation.
- **Support services for students:**
 - Analysis of support services used by different student groups and satisfaction levels with support services provided; and
 - Review of suggestions for additional / enhanced support proposals suggested by students.

The transition from school / FE to HE

8.2 During the interviews, we asked students to reflect on the transition from further education to higher education; the challenges involved and the extent to which their background qualifications and experience had been good preparation.

8.3 Students' transition from school / FE to HE provided much rich information, which was not always easy to categorise. Broadly speaking, students faced two challenges: academic and social and we split our analysis along these lines.

8.4 Trying to compare the discrete HE experiences of 100s of students and drawing generalised conclusions is hard, not to say inadvisable in some instances. For example, high achieving students taking challenging courses e.g. Medicine may find the transition into HE has been hard, given the novelty of much of what they are learning. In comparison, less academically capable students but taking a course directly linked to their background qualifications may find the transition into HE straightforward. Given this potential pitfall, and the multitude of student experiences we encountered, we have looked to reflect only on substantive points reflected in the interviews with students, rather than trying to infer too much from the results.

Reflections on relevance of background qualifications

- 8.5 For many students, their background qualifications helped them to develop the skills and knowledge they required to undertake HE. Around two thirds of all students we spoke with suggested their transition from further to higher education was relatively or very straightforward. Students reporting a straightforward transition into HE were no more or less likely to be a mature student; taking an alternative route into HE; or taking an alternative pathway through HE than the wider sample.
- 8.6 However, one observation is that those students suggesting a straightforward transition into HE were **more** likely to have gained some form of A-Level qualification, although not necessarily more A-Levels. Around 60% of the group of students who said the transition to HE was straightforward had some form of A-Level qualification, compared with only around one third of those students for whom there had been some issues with HE transition. In terms of how students with different types of vocational qualification fare in terms of HE transition, there is only limited variation and no clear cut evidence to suggest students with, say, an Access Course find HE transition easier than those with a BTEC.

“A-levels prepared me well for HE. The style of learning was very similar in terms of lectures and taking notes - I think the AVCE students on my course found it a bigger leap in terms of adapting to the learning style.”

“There was a lot of overlap between A-levels and the course, the tight grading system on the degree was the same, so you know what effort you need to put in.”

BTEC students

- 8.7 The BTEC students we interviewed were more often than not going on to study HE courses of a more vocational bent, for example, a BA in Fashion and Marketing or a non-degree level vocational course. On the whole BTEC students (over 70%) found the transition to HE straightforward and felt their BTEC prepared them well for HE. Indeed, in some cases, students reflected that doing a BTEC had prepared them better for some aspects of their HE course than A-level students.

“With hindsight, the BTEC was right for where I am now. In some cases, I am ahead of A-level students, for example in the drafting of bibliographies. A-levels might be academically ‘harder’ and more intensive, but my BTEC skills are better for university study.”

“I was really well prepared by the BTEC, having done essays, prepared a portfolio, group debates, presentations etc. It gave a head start on everyone else.”

“I did A-levels and they weren’t good preparation for the course. The BTEC students were much better prepared for the IT skills required by the course.”

- 8.8 For some students who had taken a vocational BTEC course and moved onto a more academic course, where the A-levels were the standard background qualification, there were problems with a lack of background knowledge and/or a difficulty in adapting to the learning style required, for example a lack of exam experience or report writing skills.

“On applying for the course I was offered the chance to do a written essay or take the option of a Year 0 course. I chose the essay which I passed, but with hindsight was a mistake. The BTEC was not much good, despite being in a similar subject and I am really struggling now”.

“The reporting style in BTEC was more question and answer based, whereas on the Foundation Degree I had to learn to write more formal essays. Also, on the BTEC I wasn’t used to doing exams which was a challenge.”

Access students

- 8.9 Those students entering HE with Access qualifications were more likely to have had negative formative educational experiences and had consequently dropped out of education. However, despite this, three quarters of Access students were positive about the transition to HE and many students actively citing that the Access course, specifically, had been a good preparation for higher education.

“The Access course was a good preparation for taking a degree course. Initially, after so long out of education, I found the demands of the Access course tough and my skills were a bit behind the pace, but I soon caught up. In some elements of the course, I think that Access students were better prepared than A-level students.”

“The Access course helped me prepare for the academic side to the course; I don’t think I would have been able to cope otherwise.”

“I brought lots of skills from work, but the Access course is, I think, the best way into university for mature students. The core training in study skills; presentation skills; and communication skills were invaluable.”

- 8.10 Where students from an Access background had struggled with the transition to HE, the problems had been more around adapting to the social environment, rather than explicit criticism of the Access qualification. Only two out of thirty five students we spoke with actively suggested that the Access course had not provided them with the requisite knowledge or skills to undertake HE.

AVCE students

- 8.11 Students with AVCE qualifications were slightly more likely to find the transition to HE challenging, especially if they had only an AVCE and no A-level experience. Around four in ten AVCE students had some issues with the transition to HE and a number of students highlighted particular gaps in their experience or knowledge.

"I found the step up from AVCE to HND a big jump. I got top grades in my AVCE, but I'm having to work hard to get merits in my HND."

"The step up to Foundation Degree was hard and a jump from the AVCE, it's the same for all the AVCE students on the course."

- 8.12 However, for a number of students who had a combination of AVCE and A-level qualifications the mixture of learning styles had proven beneficial in the transition to higher education.

"A levels have been good for providing the right background information to do the course e.g. how a business is run. But, the AVCE is more practical and I think gave me a clear advantage over straight A level students in the first year. For example, A-levels give you no experience of doing group work which is a big part of the course."

"The AVCE qualification gave me practical experience in the course area and the A-levels gave me a good academic experience."

Foundation Degree & HND/HNC

- 8.13 Some students we spoke with had taken either a Foundation Degree or an HND or HNC, sometimes specifically as a means of getting on an honours degree course. The transition to HE for these students can sometimes be a tricky one - it is possible, for example, for Foundation Degree students to go straight into the final year of a degree course, although not all choose to do so. Foundation Degrees, for example, may be taken at a local college with the full degree completed at a university. This sometimes presents a social challenge to students in that student friendship groups have already been established and academically because the cross over between courses is not always seamless.

"I did well on my Foundation Degree and this prepared me well for the degree course. I was initially offered a place in the 3rd year, but decided to enter as a second year student."

"As a Foundation Degree student I did sometimes feel forgotten about. Lecturers would refer to modules or work from the first year degree course which Foundation Degree students hadn't completed. Also, when you start the Foundation Degree, all the information you're provided with is about the university, not the college where you are studying."

"The Foundation Degree wasn't focussed enough for my degree, there was too much generalised science and not enough specific chemistry, I think I would have been better off with an Access qualification."

- 8.14 Another challenge identified by a Foundation Degree student we spoke with was around tutor support. The perception was that tutor support was very intensive in the first year, when students face the most significant challenges in adapting to HE, but after this support tends to tail off. This is understandable, but presents a problem for those Foundation Degree students who may be joining a course in the second or third year, but who may still require intensive support.

"Tutor support tends to be intensive for first year students and then tails off once students find their feet. People joining a degree course in the second or third year still need some initial support to help them understand the systems and protocols. It can also be a problem getting a reference if tutor support wasn't provided for late entry students."

Generalised observations

- 8.15 In addition to reflections specific to students' background qualifications we think there were a number of wider points made by students worth reflecting on.

"Lack of challenge"

- 8.16 There was concern among some students that the transition to HE had been "too easy" or that the first year of their HE course was a repeat of their final year in school or FE. There were no distinct trends among those students suggesting their HE course was too easy.
- 8.17 Courses that were perceived to be too easy sometimes had a knock-on effect to students' motivation, with some students suggesting that the lack of challenge was having an impact on their HE performance. However, it should be noted that some students' reflections about courses being too easy were based on their own failure to get to grip with the demands of self directed learning, with the expectation that they should be pushed harder by the university lecturers. In other cases students had expectations that HE would be very hard and as such their perception of reality was perhaps slightly distorted.

“The course has been time consuming, but the academic standard is lower than A-level.”

“I have found the course very easy, I am used to studying very hard, but the pace of the course is simply too slow and there isn’t enough demanded of students. As a result, I’ve begun to lose motivation.”

Previous HE failure not always a negative

- 8.18 Students reporting a straightforward transition into HE were no more or less likely than other students reporting a harder transition into HE to have some experience of academic failure. Indeed, in some cases students who had previously started, but subsequently dropped out of HE, noted that the experience had stood them in good stead for their second attempt at higher education.

“I had done two years of HE previously, before dropping out. This stood me in good stead, I knew what would be expected of me and in terms of the hard and soft skills required.”

“I had got 120 credits from another HE course, so I was aware of what would be required. Other students coming from the Foundation Degree were shocked at the standard required.”

Work experience

- 8.19 Mature students with work experience often reflected positively on the extent to which this had prepared them for HE. Even in examples where the course being taken was unrelated to the previous work experience, students noted that the discipline and transferable skills gained at work had been invaluable in preparing them for HE.

“My experience working in a nursery was useful as it developed my team work skills and helped me to manage my time more effectively.”

“I had been out of education for a while, but I felt prepared for higher education as I had a lot of transferable skills from work.”

Academic challenges faced in undertaking HE

8.20 Students were asked to talk specifically on those aspects of HE which were most challenging. We reflect on these in this section.

Group work

8.21 On many HE courses there is an expectation that students will engage in group work and on some courses this group work forms part of the formal course assessment. A number of students (about 8% of the sample) raised the issue of group work as a key challenge on their course. These students were slightly more likely to be mature students and were largely taking HE courses at Post-1992 institutions.

8.22 Older students tend to have more singular academic / career ambitions for HE study. Very few cited the social aspects of HE as a reason for taking a course, and their frustrations with lack of commitment from younger students was sometimes apparent. The substance of students' complaints about group work was that there was a "free rider problem", with a lack of commitment on the part of some students not being penalised as group work is generally marked collectively. For other older students the issue was less about collective marking, rather the practical challenges of completing group work tasks with poorly motivated younger students.

"I have frustrations with hung over or non-attendees for group work sessions, as group marking means they are getting a free ride."

"I don't like group work, I do all the work and a lot of other students don't seem to care. My tutor suggested that group work was a way of the university saving money, but I want my £3k's worth."

"Group working is not the same as team working, in a professional environment, some people in our group work assignments don't even have the basics to cope."

"Doing group work as a mature student starting late on the course was hard. By the time I arrived on the course the cliques had already formed and I was with the lazy students that no one else wanted to work with."

8.23 However, some students did reflect positively on the group work process observing that it was an essential skill for the workplace and also a good way to meet and integrate with other students.

"I was very nervous about group work presentations, but I've found that this style of working is a really good way of making friends and mixing with other students."

Self directed learning

- 8.24 The second most commonly cited challenge of HE study was adapting to self directed learning. There was no significant correlation between students citing the problem of self directed learning and their route into or pathway through HE. Students with issues around self directed learning were likely to be younger than average. For younger students the problems with self directed learning were often conflated with concerns about the lack of formal contact and/or the quality of teaching, and the impact this had on students' motivation.

"The quality of the teaching has not always been up to standard, this has had a knock on impact on my motivation to study."

"My biggest issue is self motivation. The course is so lax that this has had an impact on my motivation levels."

- 8.25 A corollary to some students' concern around a lack of contact time was the concern from a small minority of students about the value for money of higher education.

"You don't get much for what you're paying for, my tutors don't really seem to care and are very inaccessible and it seems like a lot of money to pay for a certificate at the end."

"Given the levels of tuition fees, you don't really get much tuition, I expected more contact time, but it's all self-directed learning."

- 8.26 For older students, work experience and the discipline this engendered meant motivation was less of a problem, rather the challenge was around balancing self directed study with family commitments, or adapting to the learning style.

"Independent learning is hard to fit around family commitments, it's easy to get distracted - if I had lectures pencilled in, I would have to go."

"There were lectures, but for the assignments you had to work on your own. There were tutorials to help you, but they were optional and I couldn't always make them because of other commitments."

"I found it hard to get the right balance between being self reliant and needing support. My tutors have been very supportive in helping me through this."

- 8.27 However, not all students we spoke with reflected negatively on the issue of self directed learning. For some students, developing the skills required for self directed learning and independent thinking was recognised as one of the central tenets of HE learning.

"Help is available, but I wouldn't expect too much, after all, university is about independent study."

"If I were being lazy, I would say I would like more contact time but I appreciate that university is about self directed study."

Lack of background knowledge

- 8.28 HE course providers will naturally assume some level of background knowledge or understanding of the subject area among applicant students. For the large majority of students, their previous study had equipped them with the knowledge and understanding of a subject to make the transition to HE a relatively smooth one. For a small proportion (less than 10%) of the students we spoke with, the lack of *a priori* knowledge represented a challenge in undertaking higher education. Respondents reporting this were more likely to be mature students and 80% of such students had a vocational qualification. Also noticeable was that around three quarters of students suggesting that a lack of background knowledge was a problem were doing an academic HE course e.g. BSc Chemistry.

"I found the biology elements of the course the most difficult, having jumped straight from GCSE level to degree. My BTEC was of no use to me on the course."

"Sometimes lecturers referred to work done during the first year of the degree, forgetting that Foundation Degree students had joined the course later."

"There are some parts of the course I find difficult because I have no previous experience in the subject area. Many of the A-level students have covered the course before."

"One of the major problems was that the lecturers kept referring to A-level and saying 'you would have covered that at A-level so I will not go over it'."

Exams

- 8.29 A small number of students (20) highlighted the issue of exams as a key academic challenge and all but one of these students came from an alternative routes background. While exams were a stressful time for all students, there was a suggestion from some students that their background qualifications had not stood them in good stead for taking examinations.

"A-level students seem to be well practised doing exams, but this isn't the case for BTEC students."

"I really enjoyed my BTEC, but there was no preparation on how to do exams or how to revise, both of which are important skills for HE."

Essay writing

- 8.30 Fifty students we spoke with cited problems with essay writing as one of the main academic challenges they faced in HE. Students suggesting problems with essay writing were more likely to be mature students with a vocational background qualification. Interestingly, surprisingly few students (just over one quarter) who had dyslexia suggested essay writing was a particular problem for them.

"I found writing essays a challenge, initially. The A-level students were more used to that format but tutors very helpful and gave me good guidance."

"BTEC was not good preparation. Learning to write assignments and presentations was the most difficult aspect - it was on the next level from GCSE and college - I found this difficult especially as I had taken time out from studying."

Student comparisons

- 8.31 During interviews we asked students to draw a comparison between themselves and other students on their course in terms of age and perceived academic background. Many students didn't distinguish between themselves and other students, indeed some suggested that once you'd got into HE, "everyone is at the same level."

"Traditional and non-traditional routes are just different ways of getting here. Two plus two equals four; two times two equals four."

"I see myself as being on the same level as 'traditional' students. Any differences are down to individuals, rather than 'groupings'."

- 8.32 For those students who did draw comparisons, the majority raised the issue of age and the differences between mature students and students of school leaving age. Many of these comparisons were focussed on the issues already covered earlier in the report i.e. maturity and motivation levels for HE, and are not repeated here. However, students did not often comment on their or other students' background qualifications as a differentiating factor. This may in part be because students were unaware of their colleagues' qualifications, but also across the interviews we conducted there was not really a prevailing impression that students with vocational backgrounds identified themselves as having taken an alternative route into higher education and / or that they were at a disadvantage for having done so.
- 8.33 There were isolated examples where students suggested their lack of A-level experience counted against them, or where A-level students suggested they were better prepared than other students, but this view was the exception, rather than the norm.

“University was geared towards people who had just finished A-levels, for example, they have experience of doing exams which I don’t have.”

“I found it really difficult to get up to A-level standard to bridge the gap between HEFC and I was struggling for quite some time.”

- 8.34 As a flipside to this, there were also examples where vocational students suggested, for example, that the practical nature of their course meant they were better prepared than students with more academic qualifications. As was noted above, students were far more likely to couch any comparisons with other students in terms of age, work experience and maturity than qualification type.

Social and financial challenges of HE

- 8.35 In this section of the report, we describe the social challenges students often face in adapting to life in higher education.

Mature students

- 8.36 As was noted earlier in the report, mature students’ motivations for entering HE were often subtly different from those of younger students i.e. more likely to be defined in specific career development terms and / or for personal development reasons. Also, mature students have sometimes made significant family or career sacrifices to enter HE. These two factors will likely have significant positive endowment effects on the value mature students place on the academic aspects of the HE experience. Certainly, for the majority of mature students, academic achievement and the process of education was of much greater importance to them than the social experience of HE. This preference meant that there was a low level of irritation among mature students at younger students’ perceived lack of commitment and motivation. In some of the more extreme cases there was genuine frustration where poor behaviour from younger students was affecting lectures, for example.

“I had to make serious decisions about my life and daughter to be at university; it was a very conscious decision to come and learn. I’ve found the behaviour of young students, really shocking. I’d forgotten how young 18 year olds are, there’s appalling behaviour in lectures, talking, phone calls, macho boys stuff.”

“The behaviour and work ethic of younger students is not great. Lecturers continually have to throw students out of lectures and students constantly turn up late for lectures.”

“Younger students are very rude during lectures, constantly talking, but I am confident enough to speak up and tell them to keep quiet.”

“It can be difficult studying around 18 year olds who were experiencing things for the first time. Sometimes I wish they would save it for the bar.”

- 8.37 However, the complaints made by mature students were, as suggested, often low level irritation, rather than material concerns about studying with younger students. Indeed, some mature students recognised that the university experience for younger students was necessarily “a growing up experience”, as well as one of academic development and achievement.

“For younger students it’s about learning to manage their time, money etc. It’s about learning life skills for them. I’ve done all that.”

- 8.38 Also, many younger students genuinely appreciated the opportunity to study with mature students. For example, it was often noted that the work and life experience that older students brought to discussions and seminars was valuable to younger students.

“There is a real mixed group on my course, some straight from school and some mature students with direct work experience. There are real benefits from having such a mix of different groups of students with different strengths.”

“It’s a mixed bag of students and I enjoy being in the company of younger students and sharing my work experience with them.”

“There are a number of mature students on the course who bring work experience to the discussions in lectures. I have no practical experience but know the background theory and so we bounce ideas off each other. The mature students have made the course more welcoming and enjoyable.”

“The majority of other students on the course have done this as a continuation of school, very often following in family footsteps. Overall the group dynamic is good. I think my work experience is recognised among fellow students and earns me respect.”

- 8.39 However, while the majority of students who commented were overwhelmingly positive about the mix of mature and young students on their course, there were some concerns raised by a few students. A very small number of young students resented the presence of mature students on their course, suggesting that their work experience gave them an unfair advantage. Of more relevance was the observation in some quarters that while mature students’ work experience can add a useful context to classroom discussions, it can be a little overwhelming for younger students who sometimes feel ill equipped to contribute. The flipside to this is that from the perspective of some mature students, younger students appear to be unwilling to participate in discussions.

“Mature students on the course do better on aspects of the course where they can make comments related to work experience. This frustrates a lot of people.”

“Mature students are separate from the rest of the students. I think that the work experience they bring helps them with their course and gives them an unfair advantage.”

“I think younger students feel threatened and intimidated by mature students sometimes. Lectures can feel like a conversation between mature students and lecturers.”

Balancing study and caring commitments

8.40 For around 15% of the students we spoke with, HE study had to be combined with caring commitments. The large majority (nearly 90%) of students citing caring commitments were female. In most cases students were caring for children, but a number of students we spoke with had to combine study with care for a sick or disabled relative. Caring responsibilities very often placed significant additional burdens on students. For the most part, HEIs were seen as being responsive to the needs of such students, however, this was not always the case and in this sub-section we reflect on the some of the potential learning points for institutions.

8.41 The extent to which childcare commitments were a burden often depended on whether children were of school going age - as was noted earlier in the report, for some students with children the decision of when to go into higher education was directly influenced by their children either entering school or being of a sufficient age to look after themselves after school. However, it was also noted that while older children are better able to look after themselves, they keep more similar hours to adults, so finding the time in the evenings for independent study can be challenging.

“My children are all at school, so there were no childcare issues to worry about.”

“I knew it would be tough juggling home life with college life, but it has been harder than I expected. I have no evenings free because my daughter has been particularly demanding as she gets older and goes to bed later.”

8.42 Studying and bringing up a family represents a challenge not only in terms of finding the time to contribute to the running of a household, but also the emotional pull from family which can be a distraction to study.

“The difficult bit is juggling time and guilt about family commitments. It just has to be managed, but it’s about all of us, this degree.”

“My children do affect my ability to study and I find myself doing university work on my supposed day off. I sometimes feel I am spending too much time on my work rather than with my children.”

- 8.43 Another significant factor for students with childcare commitments was the support of immediate or extended family. In some cases, it was suggested that without family support, participation in HE would simply not have been possible.

“The childcare grant that is applied for through the student loan process is inadequate. It has only covered about 80% of the cost of day care for my child. I have had to remove my daughter from nurseries a number of times because of money, but luckily my mother has been able to help out. This may be more a barrier to mothers entering education than perhaps the government realises.”

“My husband’s support has been crucial and has meant I haven’t had to miss any lectures or classes.”

“I rely on my parents for childcare support, without which I wouldn’t have been able to do the degree.”

- 8.44 While the majority of students with childcare commitments worked around the challenges of balancing HE study with family life, for some, the constraints placed on them by course and institutional timetabling were unhelpful.

“The timetabling comes very late in the first term, which leaves me unable to plan childcare needs in advance. I nearly had to give up my course because of this.”

“Always having exams after the school holiday is very hard for students with children. Christmas holidays are a very busy time and it’s hard to find any time to revise.”

“Sometimes I have morning lectures till 11am and a tutorial at 4pm. I just can’t fit this in around my family life, so end up having to miss the tutorial.”

- 8.45 For many students with family commitments staying later at university to do independent study was not an option and very often study had to be completed at home. This necessitates finding a quiet space to study and/or IT facilities on which to complete course work, not always easy if students have children studying who also require use of a computer.

“I previously had a computer in the bedroom which helped get peace from the children. This year has been more difficult as the PC is in the dining room. I now study at weekends when the children are over at their dad’s.”

“You need to have a permanent room setup away from the rest of the house to get away from normal family life, no TV or radio.”

University culture and mature students

- 8.46 University study for mature students can be an isolating experience. Work and / or family commitments means that students do not have the time to engage in the wider university experience, although as was noted earlier this is not something they are always looking to do. Students may be travelling long distances to attend university which compounds this problem.

"I just drove to and from home to lectures; it was very hard for me to integrate with other students."

"My journey from home to university was stressful and meant I had less time to mix with students and started to resent younger students."

- 8.47 Also, even for younger mature students (i.e. those in their early 20s) there were challenges to engaging with and gaining acceptance from their younger peers. Indeed, for some mature students concerns about fitting in with 'university culture' were more of an issue / concern than the academic challenges of HE.

"The social side of university has been difficult. At the beginning my age impacted on my ability to make friends. People tended to stick with people from their halls of residence, not those on the course."

"Some good practice guidelines for mature students would be helpful - HE can leave you utterly lonely and feeling angry towards 18 year olds which is unreasonable."

"Being a mature student felt like being back at school. At first, I didn't know anyone on my course and my confidence was low and I was insecure. Younger students in particular seemed unwilling to speak to me. This has changed over time, but there is a surprising lack of empathy between students, given the course choice."

"My course has been amazing for mature students, but I have friends who are put off from applying to HE courses because they are for young people and they worry that they would feel isolated. The image of university is also off-putting to some older people - it's all about getting drunk and partying."

- 8.48 For a very small number of students, the barriers to integrating with other students were couched specifically in terms of class, rather than age.

"There is a class divide and those students from an A-level background seem much better prepared."

"It has been difficult at times socially. Many of the other students on his course are from a different background/class, and their approach to me has sometimes made this obvious."

- 8.49 However, despite these challenges many mature students do overcome the barriers to integrating with other students and a number have made some helpful observations about how institutions could help this process. Sometimes, this was as fundamental as having a mature students' society, but there were other more subtle changes suggested.

"Something as simple as "stand up and introduce yourself" sessions would really help to break down the barriers. This isn't always practical in big groups, though."

"A student buddy system, not necessarily mature student with mature student, would help people feel less lonely."

"In group work, if tutors split groups randomly this would prevent cliques forming and would help students mix more easily."

"Some activities early on or an induction day for the students to get to know each other would be very useful. This never really happened and left some students feeling very isolated."

- 8.50 Some of the suggestions above are early stage interventions and the importance of a "good start" in HE was recognised as being important for students' confidence.

"A good start is essential for students - an early bad experience can knock your confidence. I nearly quit my course in the first year due to problems integrating with other students."

Students with disabilities

- 8.51 We interviewed 46 students who declared some form of disability. The largest group of students declaring a disability were students with dyslexia. Of the 21 dyslexic students we spoke with, nine students had been diagnosed with dyslexia while in higher education. This late diagnosis of dyslexia had, for some students, affected their previous academic performance and subsequent aspirations to enter higher education.

"My experience of school was not very positive because of my undiagnosed dyslexia. I was a low achiever yet was bright and articulate but couldn't convert on paper and had trouble remembering things. After school, I didn't even think about university and took a vocational qualification."

"I was treated as a remedial student at school, because of my undiagnosed dyslexia. I tried other courses later in life, but couldn't cope, it was all paper and pens. It wasn't until I took a more vocational Access course I started thinking about HE. Being diagnosed with dyslexia at university was a huge shock to me."

8.52 Late identification of dyslexia often made the transition into HE for students difficult.

"I found lectures hard; it was difficult to translate spoken words into written text. Once my dyslexia was diagnosed I could use equipment to record lectures, which made things easier."

"My dyslexia wasn't diagnosed until I came to university and I have struggled with core skills such as essay writing. The help from the university has helped, but I am still struggling."

8.53 However, it should also be noted that dyslexia is a broad condition with many different manifestations, which will affect students' ability to study effectively differently. Indeed, some students with dyslexia had not reported their condition to the university and / or did not find the condition a significant impediment to study.

"I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was seven years old. I decided not to declare this on my current course - it is only mild dyslexia and doesn't affect me on a practical course."

"I've been disappointed by the lack of academic challenge on the course noting that even with dyslexia I find it too easy."

8.54 For the most part students were positive about the additional support they were given to cope with their dyslexia. Where isolated students have been critical of the support it has been around the flexibility of the support i.e. it's all or nothing or the speed with which the support has been made available, rather than the support itself.

8.55 For students reporting other disabilities e.g. difficulties with mobility, the support provided by institutions was generally well regarded and in some cases made the difference in allowing students to complete their course.

"During the first year of my course, my mobility problems were very bad. To help I was given a car parking space near the university and extra time for course work and exams, because I couldn't sit down properly. I also got a laptop to enable me to sit in bed and work. I also got academic support from one of the lecturers in writing and presentation skills. Without the support of the university, I wouldn't have been able to complete my first year."

8.56 Only on one occasion did we encounter a student with disabilities for whom the decision to enter HE had been marred by poor support.

"The course has been OK, but I've struggled to access support. There was no support group for disabled students and I had real problems understanding the DS1 pack. To try and get support is complicated, there is no one central point of access."

Financial challenges

8.57 Across the interviews with full time students there was a commonly held view that university study was synonymous with debt. In discussions about the financial challenges of undertaking HE, students' views varied markedly and were often dependent on an individual's relative view of debt. So, for example, one student noted that "I expect to be £18k in debt by the end of my course, but that's the norm, isn't it?" while a different, more debt adverse student suggested "finance is a big worry, but I think I will break even and finish my HE course not in any debt." As such, without asking students how much debt they expected to be in at the end of their course, it was hard to get an absolute understanding of the students' financial constraints. There was nothing to suggest that views on the financial challenges of HE were different for students taking alternative routes into HE. There was however, a difference of view between those students taking full time and part time pathways through HE.

8.58 In broad terms, around just over a half of students we spoke with suggested finance wasn't a major issue (or they were unconcerned with their finances). This group included nearly all of the part-time students we spoke with, many of whom were working full time and / or their companies were paying for their courses. Seventy five percent of part-time students suggested that finance was not an issue for them.

"I only study part-time and work pay for all my fees, so finance really isn't an issue."

"I chose an Apprenticeship, so I could work and study, but primarily so I wouldn't get into debt while I was studying."

8.59 For students on full time courses, nearly half of all students suggested that the financial side of university had been a struggle for them and around 15% of full time students suggested they were having major financial problems. There was no discernable pattern among those students suggesting they were struggling financially, but as was noted above students' perception of what constitutes financial difficulty varies significantly from person to person.

8.60 Just over half the full time students we interviewed worked part-time. This ranged from half a day at the weekend, to some students who completed a full time course while working up to 25 hours per week. Some students who worked part-time noted the potential trade off between financial well being and academic achievement.

8.61 Looking at the data, students who worked were slightly less likely to raise finance as an issue than those who didn't work. However, students who worked were more likely to have found the transition to HE hard (12% more students) and were less likely to be satisfied with their HE choices (8% more students) than those students who didn't

work. It's worth noting that the sample sizes for these comparisons are relatively small. And it should also be noted that correlation doesn't imply causation. However, they provide an interesting point for potential further exploration and research.

"Finance is a real burden for me, but I don't want to try and work and study. I think it would affect my studies too much."

"I am scraping by financially, but it's only the end of my first year. I'd rather not have to work, given the volume of study I have to do, but I couldn't manage otherwise."

"I work part-time during term time, but this can be quite difficult. The nature of the job means I can get called on at short notice. I'm trying to cut down in my final year to concentrate on my studies more."

Satisfaction levels with HE choice

- 8.62 As part of the interviews, we asked students to comment on whether their decision to go into HE had been the right one and to elaborate on any specific factors that had contributed to a positive or negative experience. As was noted earlier, students' responses were not always internally consistent, especially around this question. So students might talk negatively about the HE experience, but still reflect that it was the right choice. There may be endowment effects affecting their response i.e. they've invested significant sums of money and time to going into HE and were more likely to respond that HE had been the right choice.
- 8.63 The large majority (around three quarters) of students were broadly satisfied with their decision to go into HE. Indeed, only a very small minority (5%) of students we spoke with expressed open dissatisfaction with their HE experience. The remaining 20% of students reflected that HE had been the right choice, but had some reservations.
- 8.64 There was little to suggest that satisfaction levels among students from alternative routes into HE were any different from those of traditional routes students, or that entry age has any significant impact. Interestingly, students taking an alternative pathway through HE were more likely to reflect positively on their HE decision than students taking a traditional pathway through HE. Also, students who earlier had noted that the step up to HE had been too easy were more likely to be dissatisfied with their decision to enter HE than those students for whom the transition to HE had been more challenging.
- 8.65 Those students reflecting that they had made the right HE choices offered many and varied reasons as to why. Many of the reasons we have referred to already in this report in other sections e.g. reflections from college students about small class sizes. Very often students talked only in general terms that their institution of choice was good and they were enjoying their course. As such, we reflect on some of the more interesting factors which may have affected the journey through HE for students for whom the decision to study was a more marginal decision.

- 8.66 One stand-out message from the data was that only one student taking a part-time course was openly negative about their HE choice. The remainder were for the most part openly positive about their HE decisions. This may be because part time students have committed less financially and personally to undertake HE and so have less at stake. There will be some part-time students for whom HE study was a personal improvement choice, rather than an academic choice and perhaps these students are more relaxed about their HE study, fitting it in around their wider lives, rather than it being their main focus.
- 8.67 Refreshingly, for some students we spoke with, very often those taking alternative routes into HE, higher education had been something of an epiphany providing them with a major boost to their confidence and self belief.

“Being given the opportunity and experience to study especially not having A-levels and being given the chance without A-levels is fantastic. When I left school, I never thought I would get a degree.”

“Going into HE was the best decision I ever made. I am coping better than I expected and I love having the chance to try new things and meet new people.”

“HE was very much the right decision, for personal and academic reasons. I am now able to assess things critically, which is a great skill to have. As well as the academic side it taught me about how to be more sociable.”

Students dissatisfied with HE choices

- 8.68 Around a quarter of the student sample had some minor reservations with their HE experience and a small number of this group were openly dissatisfied with their choice to go into HE. The issues raised by such students were very often around the amount of contact time they had with lecturers, or the expectations for self directed learning, rather than the social or financial problems of undertaking HE. These concerns were very often framed in language such as “the course is too easy”, which sometimes reflected a misunderstanding about the nature of HE provision and / or the expectation for significant amounts of self directed study.

“Higher Education was the right choice for me, but I would like more contact time. Four hours a week just isn’t enough.”

“There isn’t enough face to face time with lecturers and sometimes the lecturers aren’t up to standard. The experience feels like a sausage machine.”

“My choice of course felt right at the time, but it’s been too easy and I’ve lost motivation. I’m not sure how useful the qualification will be and whether I wouldn’t have been better off going to work.”

“I’ve no regrets about my decision to go into higher education per se, but if I had my time again I would do the course somewhere else, it’s just not taxing enough here.”

- 8.69 Nine students we spoke with suggested that HE had been the right choice, but they had problems meeting the academic standard required which had detracted from the experience.

"I felt like packing the course in at the beginning of the second year. I got very worried in advance of the exams, my first since GCSEs, but with hindsight I should have asked for help."

"I thought about quitting HE last year due to the volume of work, but I still think that going into HE has been the right choice."

- 8.70 Conversely, there were some students for whom the transition to HE had been hard, but who were very positive about the experience and their decision to go into HE.

"I have found it very hard coming back to higher education, getting my brain back in gear. It's been hard work, but I have had lots of family support and have no regrets about doing the course."

"I was highly insecure, academically, but this course is the best thing I've ever done, I've absolutely loved it. It was a fine line to decide whether to come or not."

- 8.71 Other less cited factors which led students to question their decision to go into HE include study / family balance; the wrong course; disabilities and poor personal motivation, all areas that are discussed elsewhere in this report.

Sustainability of FE provision

- 8.72 A concern raised by students taking an HE qualification at an FE college was the sometimes precarious nature of course provision. Many students started courses with class sizes of 15-20 students, but which had dwindled to as low as four students in one instance. In a number of cases, students were told their courses would have to be cut because of lack of demand, only to be saved at a later date. Students recognised the financial implications of running an HE course for so few students, but were rightly concerned that courses they had signed up to might be cut.

"I am a bit concerned, our class size has shrunk dramatically and students are wondering whether the course will be shut down."

"Our course was going to be axed, but I went to the local press and raised the issue to get us a stay of execution."

Student support services

- 8.73 Students were asked about the support services they had used during university, the quality of the services they had used and to provide suggestions on any additional services that would be of benefit. By support services, we included anything from course based tutor support through to wider services offered such as financial or housing support services.
- 8.74 Around a quarter of students we spoke with had not used any support services and there was no distinct pattern to this student group. The lack of uptake of services was generally because students were coping fine with university, rather than a lack of awareness about the services on offer. Indeed, some students noted “there’s lots of support available, but it’s up to you to go out and find it” or “it’s there if you need it.” Also, for some college based HE students, smaller class sizes (sometimes as small 4-5 students) meant that the use of formal tutoring services, for example, was unnecessary, with any academic questions or problems resolved during lectures.

Tutor support

- 8.75 By far the most common support used by students was tutor support, with around three quarters of students who engaged with support services utilising tutor support. By tutor support, students referred to both specific course tutors and/or less formal additional support provided by the lecturing staff. Students engaging with tutor support services were slightly more likely to have taken an alternative route into HE.
- 8.76 For the most part, students were positive about the tutor support provided, although the feedback was sometimes rather nebulous – students were appreciative of the tutor support provided but found it hard to frame definitive opinions. However, in some cases where students faced particular challenges, the support of tutors or academic staff was very important.

“The availability of a tutor every week made life a lot easier, despite the fact there were 85 students on the course, the tutors still got to know everyone.”

“My personal tutor was great and provided emotional support as well as help with studies, which helped to give me a lot of confidence.”

- 8.77 Very often, those students who reported that the transition to HE had been challenging also reported that the general level of support offered to students was poor, with a common complaint being poor tutorial support services. Clearly, effective student tutoring relies on the personalities of the individuals involved, but there was little evidence to suggest that students were finding it hard to establish a relationship with their tutor. Rather, the issue was with the availability and flexibility of the tutor support. For example, students on part-time courses sometimes found it hard to get access to tutor support in the evenings. Also, for students with childcare commitments the scheduling of tutorial sessions was sometimes inappropriate. The suggestion was made that for some students the provision of a telephone tutoring service would be beneficial.

“Do I have a personal tutor? I don’t know, the tutors are not around in the evenings.”

“For those who can’t always make tutorial sessions, telephone tutorials would be really useful.”

“I have lectures in the morning and then a tutorial session late in the afternoon, when I need to be at home for my children.”

- 8.78 Indeed, those students who were very positive about the tutorial support on offer sometimes noted that it was specifically because their tutor had gone out of his/her way that meant the student was able to meet with them. Other students who were very positive about the tutorial support on offer cited an “open door” policy as being both practical and welcoming.

“The university focuses on full-time students, and it can be difficult for part-time students to access support. I was only able to do so because my tutor was willing to stay later in the evening.”

“The lecturers at the university know the students on a first name basis and there is an open door policy for tutors, which creates a very friendly atmosphere.”

Extra academic support

- 8.79 Around one in ten students suggested they had utilised additional academic support services, with around half this number comprising students with dyslexia. Students requiring this support were no more or less likely to have taken an alternative route into HE. Students were largely very complimentary about the extra academic support provided.

“The support services were excellent - I accessed 1:1 support where staff member went through assignments, I also went to workshops on essay writing, however, the service is getting cut due to a lack of funding.”

Additional services

- 8.80 Students were surprisingly unforthcoming in terms of suggestions for additional services or facilities to support students. As was noted above, the main criticisms of the support services offered were around accessibility of services, rather than the lack of support services themselves.

- 8.81 There was a consistent suggestion from mature students that more could be done to help them settle in and adjust to life at university and we referred to some of the suggestions made earlier in the report.

- 8.82 Some students made innovative suggestions around the provision of lecture materials as pod casts to improve the flexibility of the learning offer and also give students the chance to revisit lecture material. Allied to this was the suggestion made by one student that telephone tutorials would be beneficial for those students who cannot always make formal sessions.
- 8.83 For students studying HE at FE colleges the issue of separate study space was referred to. At some of the institutions we visited, HE students were required to share the library space with FE students. In itself this wasn't a problem, but some HE students noted that the atmosphere in their college library was not always conducive to studying, with FE students treating the facility more like a common room than a study area. A corollary to this was the requirement for a separate common room space for HE students studying at college. While very few college HE students raised the issue of studying with younger students, it was noted that a space specifically for HE students would help them to feel more like "HE students than college kids."

Conclusions

- 8.84 Our conclusions for this section looking at students' experiences of undertaking HE are as follows:
- **Students with some form of A-level likely to suggest an easier transition to HE.** However, for the most part students from vocational backgrounds seem to cope with the transition to HE. There was some suggestion that in key areas such as exams or essay writing vocational background students were more likely to struggle than A-level students. It would be easy to suggest adding elements such as exams and/or essay writing to vocational courses, but often the very reason students take vocational qualifications is because they are not overly academic, with little in the way of formal exams and / or essay writing. However, despite issues with academic skills, vocational students often reflected well on the more practical 'hands-on' skills they had learnt and the extent to which these prepared them for HE.
 - **The HE experience.** The large majority of students were positive about their experience and for some it had been a genuinely transformational experience. For a small minority of students, their expectations of HE had not been matched by the reality. Often these students reflected on a "lack of contact time" or observed that HE study was "too easy". However, in many cases this view was the result of a student's failure to get to grips with the demands and rigor required for independent, self directed study in a university setting, rather than a direct reflection on HE provision.
 - **Mature students face specific challenges adapting to HE.** Mature students face a range of additional challenges adapting to HE. These can be cultural challenges, e.g. studying around younger students or practical challenges of undertaking HE to fit in around family and personal commitments. Interestingly, the cultural barriers were often significant for younger mature students in their early 20s, as well as older mature students. Flexibility of provision and sensible time tabling are two areas where institutions could do more to help mature students with the practical challenges of undertaking HE. In terms of cultural challenges, one key intervention area might be helping mature students sometimes to overcome feelings of isolation while doing HE and some suggestions are made to address this, earlier in the report.

- **Concern among mature students about poor behaviour from younger students.** There was a low level of discontent among older students about the poor behaviour of younger students, for example mobile phones / talking in lectures and treating the library as a common room. We cannot determine whether this is a growing trend. However, it's worth noting that this may be a generational issue with differing expectations as to what is productive study environment. Indeed, this reflects a wider debate in society around the role of libraries as places of study or more social meeting places.
- **Work experience is valuable.** Students who had had work experience prior to undertaking HE often reflected positively on how well this prepared them for HE. There was also evidence that universities were willing to accept work experience in lieu of formal qualifications.
- **Part time work can compromise study.** Many students we interviewed were working part-time, sometimes up to 25 hours per week, while taking full time HE. There was evidence to suggest that some students working long hours part-time were potentially compromising their academic studies and/or their satisfaction levels with their HE experience. The extent to which part-time work affects HE study is an area, perhaps, for more in-depth study.
- **Flexibility of student support services is important.** Students were, on the whole, positive about the support services provided. However, the availability and flexibility of some support services e.g. tutor support was of concern to some students. In some cases, this was conflated with wider concerns with the value for money of higher education.

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 The 334 interviews we conducted with students provided a remarkably rich and varied set of student experiences. One obvious conclusion from the study is that students are a very heterogeneous group and simple categorisation and generalisation of experiences is hard and in some cases unhelpful. The original typology of 4 student categories developed for the study was helpful to frame the study, intellectually, but given the diversity of experiences, was of limited use in analysing the data.
- 9.2 Our detailed conclusions from the work are outlined at the end of each section and we do not recount them here, rather we provide an overview of the findings from the study and some of the implications for HE policy.
- 9.3 Students' socio-economic backgrounds and early educational experience help to dictate routes into and pathways through HE. As the meta-data analysis showed, students from some ethnic minority groupings e.g. students of Afro-Caribbean or African origin and / or lower socio-economic classes were more likely to be taking alternative routes into and pathways through HE. Our interviews with students suggested that early educational experiences and the influence of family were also important factors in determining HE choices. There was evidence to suggest that students from vocational backgrounds did not, on the whole, have major problems accessing HE, nor were they struggling unreasonably to cope with the demands of HE. However, as we noted at the start of this report, we cannot say anything about those who, for whatever reason, have not entered HE.
- 9.4 Meeting the government's 50% White Paper target will require boosting the demand side for HE courses. We think that this research provides some good evidence that a core group to target is those students for whom HE wasn't an option at 18, but with reflection and greater maturity want to come back to education in their twenties. Given the dispersed nature of older potential students this won't be any easy group to target and certainly the communication channels to such potential students will need to be innovative and various. However, many of those students who reflected that they weren't ready for HE straight after school were very determined and motivated to complete HE later in life. It may be that the returns from HE for such students are higher for having waited 5-6 years until participation. This is a key area for potential further exploration.
- 9.5 There was consistent evidence that the supply side of HE provision could be tweaked to boost participation levels. For many mature students, especially, supply side issues significantly affected their HE choices. For example, many mature students require flexible learning provision to fit in around personal and work commitments, but this may not be available at in situ universities requiring some students to take up FE College and distance learning options.
- 9.6 For some mature students coming back to education after time away the experience can be a daunting one. We were not able to deduce the extent to which this deters some students from actually undertaking HE in this study, but we suspect this will be the case. While some institutions were doing much to ensure alternative routes students felt welcome both on initial application and during the first stages of their courses, there was a feeling that some institutions could do more to help. This need not require major interventions, rather mature students sometimes needed little more than to feel included and to have their distinct needs recognised.

9.7 Finally, most students we spoke with were positive about their HE choices and in some cases the opportunity to undertake HE was a life changing experience. However, while in any large survey there are dissenting voices, there were some undercurrents of discontent which should be heeded. There were concerns from a small minority of students about HE being unchallenging or too easy - these students were more likely to reflect badly on their HE experience as a result. Poor student behaviour in classrooms and communal spaces such as libraries was commented upon by older students. This may be a generational issue and / or differences in the expectation levels of HE between younger and older students, but concern was raised too often simply to be dismissed. These issues were certainly not systemic, but should be considered and addressed if the HE experience is not to be degraded. HE is not immune from the laws of supply and demand and maintaining the status and high perceptions of HE courses is important to stimulate / maintain demand among more marginal potential HE students.

ANNEX A - STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills has commissioned York Consulting to undertake a survey of 400 higher education students in order to understand the issues facing students who have taken alternative routes into higher education, or are on alternative pathways through education.

- By alternative routes **into** higher education, we mean people whose entry qualifications are not just A levels; this includes Access and vocational qualifications, such as NVQ level 3, GCE AVCE, BTEC or no formal qualifications;
- By alternative pathways **through** higher education, we mean pathways like part-time learning, flexi-study, higher education courses in further education colleges, foundation degrees and non-degree programmes such as HNDs or Diplomas in Higher Education.

The government is committed to widening participation in higher education, in order to fill the expected increase in demand for graduates within the economy, and to maximise the benefits to individuals and society that a higher educated population brings.

To widen participation further, the government wants to develop the routes into and through higher education. But first, it would like to know more about individuals' experiences of entering and proceeding through higher education. Hence this survey.

The survey should last no more than 90 minutes. During the survey, we will be taking you through a series of questions designed to cover the following main areas:

- your educational background before entering higher education;
- the factors that led to your decision to enter higher education, including your route into this particular institution; and
- your experiences of higher education since you began your course.

Any comments or information you make will be treated confidentially. The results of the survey will be aggregated in order to provide a picture of student experiences entering and progressing through higher education. Any direct quotes would be used anonymously (e.g. a student said...). The final report from this project will be publicly available from DfES in due course. A short summary report (also anonymised) will be provided to your institution.

A £10 payment will be made to you at the end of the interview in recognition of the time you have taken to complete the survey.

Personal data sheet

This will be a separate sheet and will be completed before the interview starts. Interviewer to run through the completed form at the beginning of the interview to check accuracy and familiarise themselves with the interviewee's background

Instructions: Please fill in this data sheet with some personal information before the interview. Do not feel obliged to answer all of the questions, particularly if they are not relevant to your individual circumstances. However, the more detail you are able to provide, the more useful it will be to the research team.

Name: [forename] [surname]

Date of birth: [dd/mm/yyyy]

Gender: [male / female]

Home postcode: [xxx xxx]

Term-time postcode: [xxx xxx]

Qualifications: [qualification] [date]

Do you have responsibility as a carer (child or adult): [yes / no]

Main activity prior to taking course: [work, study, caring, etc.]

Career history: [job title] [dates of employment]

Current course: [department] [course title] [qualification] [full/part time, etc.]

Year of study and length of course:

Ethnicity:

- White
- Mixed
- Asian or Asian British
- Black or Black British
- Other ethnic group (including Chinese)

Disability:

- Is a disabled person
- Dyslexia
- Visually impaired
- Deaf / hearing impairment
- Wheelchair user / mobility issues
- Personal care support
- Mental health difficulties
- Autistic spectrum disorder
- An unseen disability
- Other disability
- No known disability

Educational background

“I’d like to start with your educational background, which is everything before the final qualifications that helped you to secure a place at this institution.”

1.1 Experiences of school education:

- GCSE-level qualifications
- Leaving age; if pre-sixth form, reasons for leaving
- A-levels: suitability / interest or otherwise; reasons for not taking /not completing; barriers to undertaking A levels (lack of childcare, need to earn money, etc.)
- Why chose alternative courses to A levels. Establish possible or perceived advantages of alternative routes courses versus A levels.
- Overall perceptions of school education, looking back from the perspective of higher education

1.2 Details of other education:

- Other courses taken in other institutions; if not completed, reasons why
- Private tuition or similar; reasons for choosing and benefits

1.3 Ever taken a course and not completed it?

- If yes, details and reasons why not completed.

1.4 Early influences with respect to education:

- Parents’ and siblings’ educational experience / level
- Expectations of higher education attainment from school, friends/partners, parents, etc.
- Usefulness or otherwise of formal support mechanisms, e.g. school careers and education advice
- Own early expectations and aspirations about education and career

Routes into higher education

“I’d now like to move on to discuss the details surrounding your entry into higher education.”

2.1 Details of the ‘final step’ qualifications and / or work experience before entering higher education:

- General background on circumstances immediately before decision made (education, work, and personal factors).
- If student had sufficient qualifications to enter HE straight after school, explore the reasons why HE was not an option.
- Length of time been working towards higher education - why?
- Ever thought of giving up during previous courses; if so, why continue now?

2.2 Factors influencing eventual decision to apply to enter higher education

- Influence / encouragement / experience of others (family, friends, peer group, teacher, school/college, employer, etc)
- Personal factors (linked to career decision, desire for self-improvement, perceived financial gain in the longer term, etc.)
- Explore how student applied for university i.e. via UCAS system or by direct communication with institution

2.3 Factors influencing the choice of institution:

- Specifics of course
- Distance from home / financial implications
- Availability of places / suitable entrance criteria
- Welcome ‘alternative routes’ entrants
- How alternative qualifications were viewed/perceived by institution

2.4 Factors influencing the choice of course:

- Interest in subject area
- Future work and career plans or aspirations; previous work experience
- Influence of others (parents, peers, etc.)

2.5 Factors influencing the route through Higher Education i.e. whether part-time or full-time.

- Prior and existing personal reasons (work, caring responsibilities, etc.)
- Courses - availability, and type may determine the route

2.6 Factors influencing the timing of entry:

- Availability of finance.
- Challenges in finding out about or accessing funding.
- Caring (e.g. parental) responsibilities
- Employment issues (eg change of carer, suggestion from employer, etc.)

2.7 Consideration of alternative choices:

- What other options were available, either into higher education or on to something else (job, travel, etc.)

Experiences of, and routes through, higher education

“Finally, I’d like to discuss your experiences of higher education.”

3.1 Extent to which students were ‘prepared’ for higher education:

- Familiarity with ‘hard’ skills (writing, research techniques, etc.)
- Familiarity with ‘soft’ skills (collaborative work, wider social skills, etc.)
- The right balance between self-study and formal contact time with university staff?
- Ability to ‘self-start’, educationally and socially

3.2 Enthusiasm / doubts about higher education choice:

- Extent to which higher education is still viewed as being the right choice
- Satisfaction with particular institution
- Choice of pathway (e.g. full or part-time); still viewed as the right one? If changed, why?
- Key positive aspects of HE i.e. social, personal development, educational
- Continued interest in course and specific qualification; if changed course, why?
- Any second thoughts; if so, reasons for staying, changing their mind, influencing factors

3.3 Reflections on study mode

- Extent to which study mode has been the right choice (part time, full time, etc.)

3.4 Most difficult aspects of higher education:

- Academic (difficulty of course/lack of challenge, exams, etc.)
- Social (getting on with other students, accommodation, etc.)
- Personal circumstances (juggling other commitments to family/children, job, finance, etc.)

3.5 Comparison with other students

- Reflection on perspective of fellow students from other backgrounds / routes / pathways (preparedness for higher education, perspectives on employability, etc.)
- Perception of experience gained through their own particular route

3.6 Support for students:

- Level of tutor support during the course and how valuable this has been
- What support has been available (student support services, university teams like Widening Participation, student union, etc.)?
- What would be helpful given the choice?

3.7 Financial issues:

- Extent to which finance been an issue, including course funding, living costs, part-time employment - necessity and impact on studies
- Part-time work undertaken while studying and extent to which this has compromised ability to study

3.8 Carer and family commitments

- Extent to which family or carer commitments impact on ability to study, attend lectures, participate in student life etc. etc.

3.9 Future plans and aspirations

- Career prospects, additional study, expectations of using the specific course (i.e. foot in the door or requirement for career) etc.
- Views / plans on finding a job upon qualification

- Thank and close -

ANNEX B - DETAILED METHODOLOGY

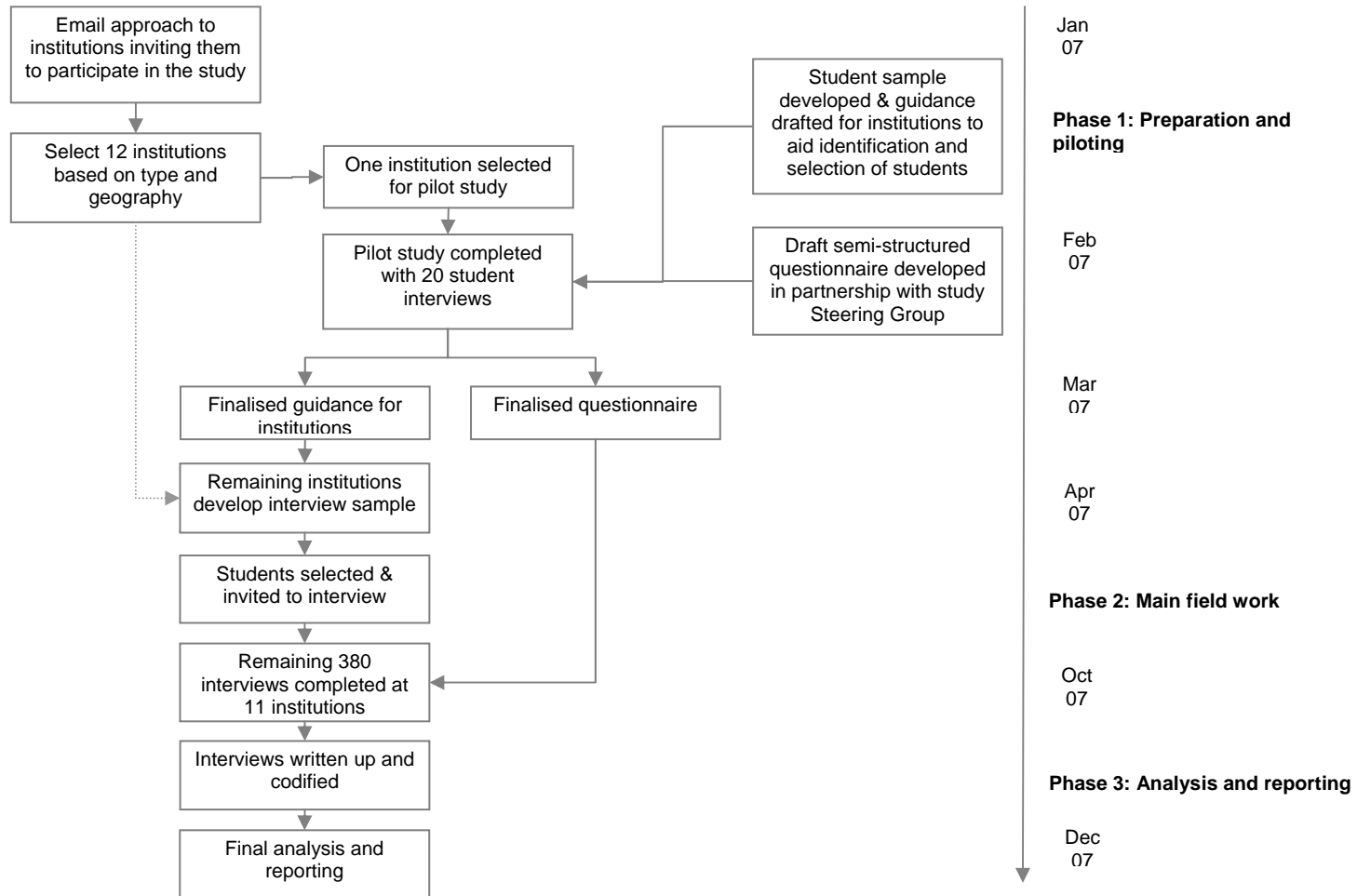
Study methodology

Our original methodology for the study is outlined in Figure 1 overleaf. In essence, the work was conducted in three phases:

- **Preparation and piloting**, comprising:
 - canvassing interest in the study from English HE institutions and selecting 12 institutions to take part in the study;
 - developing a broad survey sample of the students we would be interviewing;
 - developing study tools including the survey questionnaire and a guide for institutions to identify and select appropriate students; and
 - piloting the study approach at a chosen institution, completing interviews with 20 students and revising study approach and tools based on pilot experience.
- **The main field work** comprising:
 - working with institutions to identify and select relevant students to interview; and
 - arranging and completing the outstanding 380 interviews at 11 institutions.
- **Analysis and reporting** comprising:
 - writing up of interview notes and codifying data; and
 - analysis and reporting of findings.

Annex B - Detailed methodology

Figure 1 – Methodology



The timings and approach outlined in Figure 3.1 are our original approach as presented to the Steering Group at the Study inception. In reality, the study has taken longer than expected and we have worked with more than the 12 institutions originally suggested. This has largely been down to the challenges of completing a sufficient number of interviews to meet the study requirements.

Learning lessons

According to the head of the Steering Group, the Alternative Routes study was the first such piece of work commissioned by DIUS i.e. involving in-depth interviews with hundreds of students. Similarly, while York Consulting has substantial experience of conducting large scale surveys and in-depth interviews, this was the first time we had undertaken to carry out such a high number of detailed interviews.

In undertaking this work we made some methodological assumptions that were incorrect and/or at times we were overly optimistic about the success of the approach we were advocating. Given the novelty of the research approach, we think it would be helpful to provide an honest appraisal of the challenges faced in delivering this study, with recommendations made for any future studies looking to utilise a similar approach. In the remainder of this section we provide further insight into our approach for carrying out the study and highlight issues and future lessons where appropriate. In summary we will review the following key areas:

- working with institutions;
- the study questionnaire and interview approach;
- offering incentives to students;
- piloting the study;
- identifying students to interview;
- completing the study interviews; and
- codifying and analysing the data.

Working with universities

In our original proposal we suggested completing 400 student interviews evenly spread across 12 institutions to include:

- an Oxbridge university;
- the Open University;
- four pre-1992 universities;
- three post-1992 universities; and
- three FE Colleges which deliver HE courses.

Our original assumption was that the experiences of alternative routes students would vary according to the type of institution they were studying at, a supposition that turned out to be true. The initial split across the 12 institution types was, therefore, based on the desire to capture information on alternative routes students' experiences from across the full range of institution types.

In addition, there was an element of pragmatism behind the decision to conduct interviews at 12 institutions. Given the timescales and budget for the study it was considered impractical to try and conduct interviews at more than 12 institutions.

Canvassing universities interest in the study

To canvass universities' interest in helping with the study we emailed the Widening Participation Managers (or equivalent) at all HE institutions in England and a sample of FE Colleges explaining the study and what we would require from them. The contact information for the Widening Participation Managers was provided by HEFCE and we would thank them for allowing us access to this information.

The response to this initial email was positive with 26 institutions volunteering to participate in the study. From these 26 positive responses we selected 12 institutions at which to carry out interviews - see Table 3.1. This selection was based largely on the desire to carry out interviews across a range of institution types but there was also an effort made to ensure there was a reasonable geographical spread in the sample.

Table 1 - Institutions selected for the study

Institution name	Institution type	Region
Bath Spa University	Post-1992	South West
Doncaster College	FE/HE College	Yorkshire and Humber
Liverpool John Moores	Post-1992	North West
Newcastle University	Russell Group	North East
Sunderland College	FE/HE College	North East
The Open University	Other	National
The University of Chester	Post-1992	North West
The University of East London	Post-1992	London
The University of Hertfordshire	Post-1992	East of England
The University of Huddersfield	Post-1992	Yorkshire and Humber
The University of Nottingham	Russell Group	East Midlands
The University of Winchester	Post-1992	South East

As was noted earlier in this section, it was not possible to complete the required number of interviews at each institution and/or some institutions that had expressed an initial interest in taking part in the study were subsequently unable to do so e.g. Sunderland College. This necessitated approaching a further 6 universities to help us complete the study. These are listed in Table 3.2 below.

Table 2 - Institutions selected for the study

Institution name	Institution type	Region
Leeds Metropolitan University	Post-1992	Yorkshire and Humber
University of Gloucestershire	Post-1992	South West
Leicester College	FE/HE College	East Midlands
York College	FE/HE College	Yorkshire and Humber
The University of Northampton	Post-1992	East Midlands
Staffordshire University	Post -1992	West Midlands

The study questionnaire and interview approach

The questionnaire for the study was developed in partnership with the Study Steering Group. A full copy of the questionnaire can be found in Annex A of this report. Our approach to developing the questionnaire was driven by the requirement of DIUS for a largely “qualitative exploration of the experiences of students entering higher education using alternative routes”.

The brief for the work also countenanced the possibility of carrying out focus group work as a means of exploring student experiences of higher education. This approach was discounted on the basis that much of the information provided by students was likely to be of a sensitive nature and, as such, would be unlikely to be revealed in a focus group setting.

The questionnaire was designed to provide a semi-structured set of questions across four main sections:

- **Background information** e.g. gender; age; course; background education; etc.
- **Early educational experiences** with questions around early experiences of school; family background in HE; educational failure etc.
- **The decision to go into higher education** including questions about motivations for undertaking HE; factors affecting institution and course; factors affecting the timing of the HE decision etc.
- **Experiences of higher education** including questions about “readiness for higher education”; satisfaction with HE decision; key issues affecting performance etc.

The interview approach

Interviews were largely conducted face to face in a private interview room. However, faced with problems of students not showing up for interviews, towards the end of the study we carried out interviews over the telephone to ensure we spoke to sufficient numbers of students within the required budget. We also spoke with Open University students via the telephone for want of a suitable interview venue. While there were certain advantages to face to face interviews e.g. easier to build a rapport with the interviewee, our experience suggested that conducting telephone interviews was certainly more practical for both student and interviewer and didn't unduly diminish from the quality of responses that we received. In total 95 student interviews were completed over the telephone.

On average, interviews lasted about one hour. However, there was a significant variation around this average. For traditional routes taking HE straight after school and with an A Level background, the interviews were sometimes as short as 30-35 minutes, largely because their pathway through education was relatively conventional. Conversely, for some alternative routes students their experiences of accessing and undertaking higher education were extremely rich and interviews sometimes lasted as long as 90 minutes.

Offering incentives to students

From the outset of the study we proposed to incentivize students to take part in the study and we suggested £10 cash per completed interview as a reasonable fee. Our rationale for providing a cash incentive was simply that, without an interview fee, it would be extremely difficult to get students to participate in an interview that might last upwards of 75 minutes.

The decision to offer an incentive for interviews was not taken lightly, however. We would note that there was something of a 'moral hazard' by doing this i.e. paying a fee for interviews is expedient for completing 400 Alternative Routes student interviews, but potentially distorts the expectations of either students or institutions that incentives will be available for all survey research. However, there was anecdotal evidence from conversations with Widening Participation teams that fees for survey research were becoming more commonplace / expected by students.

As is noted later in the report, getting sufficient numbers of students to participate in the study was a major challenge - even with a £10 interview fee. One problem faced was actually raising awareness that the study was actually taking place and we talk about this later in the report. The second possible problem was that £10 per interview wasn't a sufficient incentive to get students to take part in the study. At a number of institutions we trialled offering students £15 to take part in the study and there was a noticeably higher response rate - although it wasn't always possible to disaggregate this price incentive effect from the efficacy of the marketing approach used to advertise the study. It shouldn't be a surprise that willingness to take part in the study was elastic in response to the level interview fee paid, but we suggest that somewhere between £10 and £15 there is a "tipping point" after which students are significantly more likely to take part in an in-depth survey.

Piloting the study

To ensure our study approach was practical we conducted a pilot study at the Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). We would take this opportunity to thank the University for its cooperation during the piloting phase. The aims of the piloting phase were to:

- test the protocol for identifying and selecting students for interview;
- gauge the responsiveness of students to the study;
- assess the effectiveness, length and flow of the draft questionnaire, with a view to developing a finalised questionnaire for the full survey;
- canvass some initial experiences and identify areas of interest for further exploration in the full survey; and
- identify the key risk areas for the main study and suggest possible remedial actions.

The University identified over 600 relevant students for the study from which we selected and approached 20 students to interview face to face. In parallel with our research Liverpool John Moores also conducted their own independent interviews with the same 20 students. All the students participating in the York Consulting study received £10 cash for their time. In addition, the students received a further £20 from LJMU for participating in their independent research.

The piloting phase was largely very successful, however this success did mask some of the challenges we faced during the remainder of the study. The piloting phase of the project was straightforward in part due to the £30 incentive for participating students. This high cash incentive distorted the response rate for the study, such that all students approached were willing to take part in the study and we only had one “no show” for an interview. While this was beneficial from the perspective of testing the survey, it did mean we had no knowledge about the extent to which a £10 cash incentive would be sufficient to entice students to take part in the study. Indeed, throughout the study we had a consistent problem with either attracting sufficient numbers of students to take part in the study and also students not showing for pre-arranged interviews. These factors combined to reduce the numbers of interviews it was possible to conduct at each institution.

Recruiting students for interview

Having identified relevant institutions to work with, we liaised with university staff to discuss our requirements for the study in terms of the identifying and selecting relevant students to take part in the study and the practical requirements for the work i.e. interview rooms for X number of days.

Institutions were informed that York Consulting would be looking to conduct between 32 and 36 interviews with relevant students. Based on experience elsewhere and guided by an employee who was formerly an employee with the survey company MORI, we requested that universities look to identify a sample of around 100 students roughly split across the four student typologies.

The assistance from Liverpool John Moores was invaluable and they were very helpful in identifying suitable students to interview at short notice and making practical arrangements to conduct the interviews. However, this level of cooperation, while very welcome, did mask some further challenges we faced later in the study. Certainly, not all the institutions we worked with were able to identify relevant students to interview, either for practical (lack of a coherent central database system) or resource reasons.

In light of this, we had to employ a number of approaches to recruit students to interview which included:

- ***En masse email to all students at an institution***, which while generating a high response rate, was an unpopular approach with many institutions and had the downside of significant additional work to sift through responses and identify relevant students;
- ***An open advert on an institutions' Student Net*** asking students interested in taking part in the study to respond to York Consulting. This approach had the advantage of not being overly laborious for the institution, with the downside that response rates using this approach were often very low; and

- ***Openly canvassing students during lectures*** which while effective, suffered from the problem that it wasn't always possible to pre-select students and so this approach was only used at one institution.

Interviewing students

In some senses this was the most straightforward element of the work, with the only major problem being "no shows" for interviews which we estimate at being around one fifth of all arranged interviews. The interviews themselves were very straightforward and we are thankful to the participating students for their cooperation.

Codifying and analysing data

Having completed the interviews, consultants were asked to write up all interview notes using a standard format. We also trialled interviewing students while typing up the notes simultaneously, but this was felt to detract from the quality of the interview. While the main purpose of the study was to develop a qualitative view of student experiences, we also, where appropriate quantified the key points made and recorded this information in Excel.

ANNEX C - DATA TABLES

UCAS data tables on full time applicants into HE

Total Count of Students

Table C.1 - Total count of students

Alternative routes into HE	Alternative pathway		Total
	No	Yes	
No	161,739	22,831	184,570
Yes	66,935	31,086	98,021
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

Alternative routes into HE

Gender

Table C.2 - Gender of students and route into HE

	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
Female	29,652	22,163	101,459	153,274
Male	23,526	22,680	83,111	129,317
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

Ethnicity

Table C.3 - Ethnicity of students and route into HE

	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
Asian - Bangladeshi	341	662	2,000	3,003
Asian - Chinese	308	343	2,228	2,879
Asian - Indian	1,128	2,184	10,250	13,562
Asian - Other Asian background	798	549	2,387	3,734
Asian - Pakistani	1,220	1,926	5,161	8,307
Black - African	4,191	2,080	4,020	10,291
Black - Caribbean	1,487	1,140	1,969	4,596
Black - Other black background	384	266	374	1,024
Mixed - Other mixed background	580	409	1,780	2,769
Mixed - White and Asian	324	323	2,025	2,672
Mixed - White and Black Africa	317	160	476	953
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	412	518	1,135	2,065
Other ethnic background	713	617	1,963	3,293
Unknown	8,964	4,559	2,823	16,346
White	32,011	29,107	145,979	207,097
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

Course Area

Table C.4 - Course area studied and route into HE

	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
Group A Medicine & Dentistry	1,415	122	4,869	6,406
Group B Subjects allied to Medicine	6,162	1,738	10,179	18,079
Group C Biological Sciences	3,442	3,522	17,286	24,250
Group D Vet Sci,Ag & related	797	716	1,572	3,085
Group F Physical Sciences	1,171	597	9,425	11,193
Group G Mathematical & Comp Science	3,138	4,281	9,897	17,316
Group H Engineering	1,963	1,906	7,460	11,329
Group J Technologies	450	505	872	1,827
Group K Architecture,Build & Plan	1,050	904	3,538	5,492
Group L Social Studies	5,450	1,970	13,204	20,624
Group M Law	1,856	1,034	10,099	12,989
Group N Business & Admin studies	5,119	6,457	18,799	30,375
Group P Mass Comms and Documentation	1,010	1,116	5,039	7,165
Group Q Linguistics, Classics & related	1,143	399	7,810	9,352
Group R European Langs, Lit & related	200	142	2,661	3,003
Group T Non-European Langs and related	126	74	1,217	1,417
Group V Hist & Philosophical studies	1,137	458	9,075	10,670
Group W Creative Arts & Design	7,305	10,524	16,976	34,805
Group X Education	3,095	2,111	5,526	10,732
Y Combined arts	1,394	877	7,337	9,608
Y Combined sciences	808	802	3,007	4,617
Y Combined social sciences	433	404	2,677	3,514
Y Sciences combined with social sciences or arts	2,479	2,729	8,257	13,465
Y Social sciences combined with arts	1,114	906	5,628	7,648
Z General, other combined & unknown	921	549	2,160	3,630
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

Socio-economic status

Table C.5 - Socio-economic status and route into HE

	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
Higher managerial and professional occupations	2,052	4,878	40,886	47,816
Intermediate occupations	4,889	3,937	21,058	29,884
Lower managerial and professional occupations	6,079	9,037	50,341	65,457
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	703	1,906	7,349	9,958
Routine occupations	2,293	2,674	7,481	12,448
Semi-routine occupations	6,656	5,231	16,758	28,645
Small employers and own account workers	1,208	3,071	11,468	15,747
Unknown	29,298	14,109	29,229	72,636
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

Table C.6 - Pathway through HE and route into HE

Alternative pathway through HE	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
No	37,957	28,978	161,739	228,674
Yes	15,221	15,865	22,831	53,917
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

Institution type

Table C.7 - Institution type and route into HE

	Alternative route into HE		Traditional route into HE	Total
	Mature	School leaver	School leaver	
FE College	5,362	5,551	3,988	14,901
HE College	6,336	6,325	15,926	28,587
HEI Other	377	240	333	950
Post-92 University	29,367	25,612	69,342	124,321
Pre-92 University	7,842	4,961	45,307	58,110
Russell Group	3,894	2,154	49,674	55,722
Total	53,178	44,843	184,570	282,591

UCAS data on alternative pathways through HE

Gender

Table C.8 - Pathway through HE and gender

Gender	Pathway through HE		Total
	Traditional	Alternative	
Female	122,205	31,069	153,274
Male	106,469	22,848	129,317
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

Ethnicity

Table C.9 - Pathway through HE and ethnicity

	Pathway through HE		Total
	Traditional	Alternative	
Asian - Bangladeshi	2,711	292	3,003
Asian - Chinese	2,619	260	2,879
Asian - Indian	12,373	1,189	13,562
Asian - Other Asian background	3,388	346	3,734
Asian - Pakistani	7,196	1,111	8,307
Black - African	8,829	1,462	10,291
Black - Caribbean	3,625	971	4,596
Black - Other black background	827	197	1,024
Mixed - Other mixed background	2,344	425	2,769
Mixed - White and Asian	2,342	330	2,672
Mixed - White and Black Africa	797	156	953
Mixed - White and Black Caribb	1,693	372	2,065
Other ethnic background	2,867	426	3,293
Unknown	10,945	5,401	16,346
White	166,118	40,979	207,097
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

Table C.10 – Ethnicity and institution type

ethnicity	FE College	HE College	HEI Other	Post-92 University	Pre-92 University	Russell Group	Total
Asian - Bangladeshi	58	105	3	1,793	746	298	3,003
Asian - Chinese	68	115	4	991	671	1,030	2,879
Asian - Indian	224	423	32	6,545	3,513	2,825	13,562
Asian - Other Asian background	60	167	14	1,578	1,067	848	3,734
Asian - Pakistani	351	305	29	4,475	2,126	1,021	8,307
Black - African	183	769	41	6,240	2,214	844	10,291
Black - Caribbean	191	506	9	2,958	695	237	4,596
Black - Other black background	35	99	5	664	165	56	1,024
Mixed - Other mixed background	80	266	8	1,195	656	564	2,769
Mixed - White and Asian	73	198	7	920	634	840	2,672
Mixed - White and Black Africa	39	60	2	539	172	141	953
Mixed - White and Black Caribb	90	186	8	1,167	358	256	2,065
Other ethnic background	74	214	9	1,676	771	549	3,293
Unknown	2,191	1,682	194	8,834	2,323	1,122	16,346
White	11,184	23,492	585	84,746	41,999	45,091	207,097
Grand Total	14,901	28,587	950	124,321	58,110	55,722	282,591

Table C.11 - Pathway through HE and course area

	Pathway through HE		Total
	Traditional	Alternative	
Group A Medicine & Dentistry	6,245	161	6,406
Group B Subjects allied to Medicine	15,862	2,217	18,079
Group C Biological Sciences	20,069	4,181	24,250
Group D Vet Sci,Ag & related	1,529	1,556	3,085
Group F Physical Sciences	10,733	460	11,193
Group G Mathematical & Comp Sci	14,308	3,008	17,316
Group H Engineering	10,220	1,109	11,329
Group J Technologies	1,455	372	1,827
Group K Architecture,Build & Plan	4,651	841	5,492
Group L Social Studies	18,333	2,291	20,624
Group M Law	12,137	852	12,989
Group N Business & Admin studies	23,990	6,385	30,375
Group P Mass Comms and Documentation	5,276	1,889	7,165
Group Q Linguistics, Classics & related	8,367	985	9,352
Group R European Langs, Lit & related	2,974	29	3,003
Group T Non-European Langs and related	1,405	12	1,417
Group V Hist & Philosophical studies	9,869	801	10,670
Group W Creative Arts & Design	20,452	14,353	34,805
Group X Education	5,872	4,860	10,732
Y Combined arts	7,480	2,128	9,608
Y Combined sciences	3,988	629	4,617
Y Combined social sciences	3,291	223	3,514
Y Sciences combined with social sciences or arts	10,136	3,329	13,465
Y Social sciences combined with arts	6,543	1,105	7,648
Z General, other combined & unknown	3,489	141	3,630
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

Socio-economic status

Table C.12 - Pathway through HE and socio-economic status

	Pathway through HE		Total
	Traditional	Alternative	
Higher managerial and professional occupations	42,245	5,571	47,816
Intermediate occupations	24,529	5,355	29,884
Lower managerial and professional occupations	54,693	10,764	65,457
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	7,820	2,138	9,958
Routine occupations	9,653	2,795	12,448
Semi-routine occupations	22,438	6,207	28,645
Small employers and own account workers	12,609	3,138	15,747
Unknown	54,687	17,949	72,636
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

Table C.13 - Socio-economic status and institution type

Socio-economic group	FE College	HE College	HEI Other	Post-92 University	Pre-92 University	Russell Group	Total
Higher managerial and professional occupations	1,191	3,551	152	14,549	11,708	16,665	47,816
Intermediate occupations	1,318	3,150	68	12,751	6,500	6,097	29,884
Lower managerial and professional occupations	2,496	6,447	162	25,861	14,825	15,666	65,457
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	585	1,197	27	4,779	1,847	1,523	9,958
Routine occupations	854	1,353	39	6,748	2,143	1,311	12,448
Semi-routine occupations	1,582	3,413	76	14,524	5,337	3,713	28,645
Small employers and own account workers	880	1,648	35	7,355	3,123	2,706	15,747
Unknown	5,995	7,828	391	37,754	12,627	8,041	72,636
Total	14,901	28,587	950	124,321	58,110	55,722	282,591

Institution type

Table C.14 - Pathway through HE and institution type

	Pathway through HE		Total
	Traditional	Alternative	
FE College	0	14,901	14,901
HE College	0	28,587	28,587
HEI Other	539	411	950
Post-92 University	115,411	8,910	124,321
Pre-92 University	57,045	1,065	58,110
Russell Group	55,679	43	55,722
Total	228,674	53,917	282,591

