

**Drop out and Persistence of Young People  
in Further Education: an exploration of student  
perspectives and alleged causes.**

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# **Abstract**

This thesis presents a detailed investigation into student drop out from full-time Further Education among 16-19 year olds, with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of the students themselves.

Drop out has become an important area of interest in Further Education since the fundamental changes in the funding and strategic direction of colleges in the early 1990s. The degree of student drop out is currently used as an indicator of college quality, and has a direct impact on levels of funding. It has also been suggested that drop out can have a detrimental effect on students themselves. This study considers the phenomenon of drop out within the wider context of youth transitions, and investigates structural and individualized influences upon young people's decisions to drop out or persist in full-time Further Education.

This thesis challenges the view of drop out as a necessarily destructive element within youth transitions, and instead argues that it is part of a complex process of choice and change with a variety of outcomes.

Depth interviews were undertaken with thirty individuals, including drop outs and those who completed their courses, and quantitative data on a cohort of 750 students, gathered throughout the two years they were expected to take to complete their programmes. Particular attention was paid in the methodology to issues of rapport-building.

Drop out is found to be the product of interrelated factors, and part of young people's individual journeys from school to work. Young people's aspirations, identities, social and cultural capital, prior experiences of education and their levels of confidence can lead them, as part of a regular re-evaluation common to most students, to drop out. Dropping out does not mean failure for the individual or the institution, but a change of mind and circumstance, often precipitated by, but not in itself caused by, a particular moment or event. For many students, drop out is a response to their changing ideas and identities as their experience grows and they encounter the wider range of opportunities and boundaries of the adult world.

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# Preface

This thesis investigates the issues around student drop out from Further Education (FE) among 16-19 year olds. It takes the form of a study of a cohort of students from a large general FE college in the north of England, and seeks to present their perspectives and views on the causes, experience and consequences of drop out for young people.

The thesis begins with an overview of current literature within which the study is located. As well as recent work on drop out itself, the wider body of literature on youth studies is consulted, particularly theories and empirical studies on the experience of youth transition, within which drop out may be situated. The research questions arising from this overview are then identified. Chapter 2 describes and discusses the methodology used to address these research questions, giving details of a two-stranded, multi-method approach. Chapter 3 to 6 present the findings of the research. Chapter 3 describes the empirical trends in drop out among the study cohort. Chapter 4 provides a set of case studies highlighting key issues arising from an ethnographic study of individual learners, while Chapter 5 presents more detailed findings from the qualitative study. Chapter 6 discusses the experiences of students after drop out.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides a summary and final discussion of the project's findings and limitations, and recommends improvements in policy and practice to address the key issues raised through the research.

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Most of all, my love and thanks to my husband Ste, who has nurtured me, protected me, guided me and never once lost faith in me. This work is dedicated to him.

## **Author's Declaration**

Parts of this thesis have been published at an interim stage of the research as 'Destination Drop Out? Learners' Perspectives on the long-Term Impact of Drop Out from Full-Time Education' in Hillier, Y. and Thompson, A. (eds) (2005) *Readings in Post-Compulsory Education: research in the learning and skills sector*. London: Continuum



# Chapter 1 - Drop out, Youth Transitions and the Landscape of Further Education

*“Our aim is to transform secondary and post-secondary education so that all young people achieve and continue in learning until at least the age of 18.”*

*(DfES: 14-19 Education and Skills)*

Student drop out has been high on the policy agenda since the sweeping changes instigated by the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The newly formed Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) at that time adopted drop out, usually referred to in the Further Education (FE) sector by the term ‘retention’, as a key performance indicator, alongside recruitment and achievement. It was embedded in the FEFC’s regimes for the funding and inspection of colleges. For the first time, the prevention of drop out was presented to colleges as an indicator of their own success, with associated penalties for failure. Something that was once an accepted part of the experience for some students in post-compulsory education had become a problem - and one with a substantial price-tag attached.

This chapter explores the rise of the issue of drop out as a problem for government, colleges and students. Theoretical and empirical research is presented as a basis for current understanding about how and why drop out happens, and what its consequences are for individuals, educational institutions and wider society. Relevant legislation and wider government policy is examined to establish why drop out became so important. The evidence and assumptions underpinning policies of the past ten years are outlined and preliminary questions asked as to how well these fit with current understanding of young people’s experiences on leaving school and moving towards the world of work.

Attention is then turned to the issues of drop out for colleges: their institutional role in keeping young people in full time education and the impact of retention as a key indicator of college performance. Finally, recent

research into the phenomenon of drop out itself is examined, with a consideration of the drivers behind much existing research, and questions which remain unanswered.

Throughout the chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, one key assumption upon which much of current policy and practice in Further Education is based is called into question: that the retention of 16 to 19 year olds in post-compulsory education is seen as a solution, and drop out is expected to be, for young people, colleges and society in general, a problem.

## **Education and Youth Transitions**

Concern about student drop out has arisen during a period of dramatic change in young people's lives and the choices they face in furthering their careers. Thirty years ago most young people could be expected to follow a relatively straightforward path from school into work, or for a minority, into full-time Further Education. An even smaller minority then continued to Higher Education. Training for most of the workforce was provided through apprenticeships, evening classes and on-the-job training. Apprenticeships were particularly important in the craft industries, where young people were taken on from school at mandatory school leaving age (or age 16) and a commitment made not just to train them, but in most cases to employ them long-term. These apprenticeships were more than a work-experience or training package: they were a full induction to the world of adult working and the vocation they had chosen, with a wage and the promise of long-term employment (Ashton and Brown, 1987).

The picture by the turn of the century was very different. The majority of young people are now expected to continue in full-time education until the age of eighteen at least; those staying on rose from 41 per cent in 1985 to 72 per cent in 1998 (DfES 2002), with larger and still-rising numbers continuing to Higher Education: 35 per cent of 19-21 year olds in 2002, compared with



10 per cent in 1980 (Universities UK, 2006). The labour market has transformed with the decline of manufacturing industries and the newly emerging service and leisure industries (Roberts, 2005). Technological advances have transformed the workplace and the skills required of employees. The old-style apprenticeships have all but vanished. Training is now provided primarily through full-time courses and Modern Apprenticeships, which differ significantly from the old-style apprenticeships. Modern Apprenticeships have evolved from the Youth Training Schemes of the 1980s, and although they provide work-based training requiring a placement and pay a training allowance, the links with particular employers are more fragile, the wages tend to be far lower than starting salaries for old-style apprenticeships, and long-term job guarantees are scarce. Modern Apprenticeships also suffer from very high drop out rates (Vickerstaff, 2005).

Although youth unemployment has reduced significantly since the 1980s jobs for young people entering the labour market are far less secure than they were for their parents and grandparents (Bynner et al, 2002). Young people are likely to change jobs more frequently, and employers require staff who are willing to be flexible and to acquire new skills quickly to cope with shifting workplace demands (Evans and Furlong, 1997). This is demonstrated by the emphasis in recent years upon Key Skills and encouragement for colleges to liaise with employers when developing courses and qualifications (DfES 2005). Colleges and other training providers, meanwhile, are charged with helping young people to meet the needs of this ever-changing labour market, with a greater emphasis than ever before upon the importance of formal education and qualifications.

### ***Education, Employment and the Transmission of Inequality***

The reproduction of social class and inequality from generation to generation has been observed and discussed for many years (Bynner et al, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2001; MacDonald, 1997; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Williams, 1989; Willis, 1977), and has been central to the debate about the process of school-to-work transitions for young people.

Clear links have been established between parental income and their children's educational achievements and vocational destinations (Bynner 2002). It is this transmission of inequality, and the role of education within it, which has precipitated much of the concern about the perpetuation of disadvantage, deprivation and social exclusion within families and communities (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). This includes concerns about drop out, which is often assumed to be part of the pattern of educational non-participation which is in turn linked strongly to future unemployment and poverty (Roberts, 2005).

Social exclusion emerged as a popular term in the late 1990s, after the new labour government came to power. The term refers to the social effect of a combination of factors prevalent in specific communities, including problems such as poor housing, low incomes, low levels of education, high crime, poor health and family problems, including high rates of teenage pregnancy (Bradshaw et al, 2004). Such communities are not just poor: they are divorced from the culture and social benefits of wider society, including active participation in the democratic process. Socially excluded individuals become powerless and alienated. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was created in 1997 with the aim of researching these issues and developing 'joined up' policies to address them in an holistic fashion. This resulted in a range of flagship policies for the new Labour government, including SureStart, which was targeted at health and education issues for young children; and Connexions, which offered a continuous advice and information service for young people. Education was seen as a vital route out of social exclusion, by providing young people with skills and an awareness of improved opportunities available to them. Young people would then, it was hoped, discover a viable alternative to crime, drugs and early parenthood and be better equipped to pursue that alternative. In the context of social exclusion, therefore, drop out is seen as a sign of failure. It is assumed that the young person who drops out of full time education will remain a non-participant and thus drastically reduce their chances of gaining the skills and social contacts which could help them break out of social exclusion (SEU 1999).



Two major studies demonstrate the links between education, class and young people's transitions from school to work. The *16-19 Initiative* demonstrated the impact of social class on careers: which, it was argued, came about "through its link with educational achievement." (Banks et al, 1992: p49). Social class and family background were linked with educational achievement, which in turn was closely related to career choice, engagement with post-compulsory education and training, and ultimately to their position in the labour market (Banks et al, 1992). The Birth Cohort Studies, which compared data from the National Child Development Study (1958 Cohort) and the 1970 British Cohort Study, also found strong links between class, education and young people's careers, as well as other aspects of transition such as housing and family composition (Bynner et al, 2002). This study demonstrated dramatic changes in young people's lives over the twelve year period between the cohorts. The more recent cohort of young people were likely to spend much longer in education; less likely to experience unemployment; less likely to get married and more likely to delay having children and forming their own families. There were also signs that the influence of family of origin were changing:

*"Family background remains a critical factor moderating these transitions, but the role played by high-level qualifications appears to be growing in importance."*

(Bynner et al, 2002, p xiii)

However, although higher qualifications were associated with higher earnings, the relative benefits of the jobs that require them are no longer as good as they once were. Roberts describes the process as "trading down", which he links to social exclusion. He argues that people take the best job for which they are qualified. However, when higher-level jobs are scarce, this means that they settle for ones which were previously associated with a lower level of qualification. Thus with the increase in new graduates, without a corresponding increase in jobs requiring that candidates hold a degree, graduates end up taking jobs which previously required only a Level 3 (A-

level or equivalent) qualification. This makes it harder for those who do not have a degree to compete for those jobs, so they settle for a job further down the qualifications ladder, and so on. In other countries, such as those in Eastern and Central Europe, Roberts argues, where families are supportive of unemployment and it is better tolerated, young people will wait for a job matching their highest qualification, rather than taking what they can get. Thus unemployment gets shared throughout the chain, while the pattern described above leads to a concentration of unemployment among the least qualified (Roberts, 2005).

It is also evident that unemployment and disadvantage are transmitted between generations. As Roberts concludes from the work of Bynner et al (2002):

*“...young people who are NEET (not in employment, education or training) is known to be most common among young people who have been reared in the most disadvantaged families...”*

(Roberts, 2005: p117)

Early discourse around the school-to-work transition presented a linear pattern, whereby young people's choices were strictly framed by their socio-economic background and the landscape of the labour-market in their locality. They were likely to enter similar vocations to their parents, peers and local community, and once the decision was made the majority of young people would follow this path to its natural conclusion. Some authors question whether this linear pattern is in itself an oversimplification (Furlong et al, 2005; MacDonald and Marsh, 1995), but in any case the vocational and educational choices available to young people have changed so much that the picture today is complex. The lengthier period of transition to independence, not just in the move from school to work but in terms of housing and family-unit as well (Coles, 1995), means that young people have longer to decide what they want to do and to develop their skills, identity and awareness of the wider options available to them. The links between parental occupation and their children's vocational destinations have weakened, not least because for

many young people the jobs their parents took as school-leavers simply do not exist any more, and neither do the relatively stable career patterns they might have expected. However, research suggests that patterns of inequality persist (Bynner et al, 2002). Young people whose parents have experienced long-term unemployment are still likely to experience unemployment themselves, and those whose parents have a low income are still less likely to do well at school (Roberts, 2005).

### ***Risk, Identity and Individualized Pathways***

Theorists such as Beck have argued that structural theories of society are no longer relevant in a world of rapidly increasing change and risk, where people are more likely to take individualized paths through life, and structural factors such as class are no longer valid or useful variables for sociological analysis (Beck, 1992). While it is true that structuralist theories may not adequately explain the full complexity of social life, the fact remains that there are still links between social class, locality and the outcome of young people's transitions. New concepts have been developed to explain the complicated nature of young people's journeys to independence, and to identify further, non-structural factors which contribute to their outcomes.

The work of authors such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) has inspired discourse around the nature of youth transitions and the concepts of risk, identity and individualization. It is suggested that while young people's transitions remain highly structured, they are also influenced by their individual responses to a world which is increasingly one of risk, uncertainty and complex opportunities and choices (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006, Hobcraft, 2003). Such a view also addresses one of the frequent criticisms of the linear model of young people's transitions: that it does not account for the diversity, for the fragmented or individualized experiences which have been observed (Coles, 1997; Fergusson et al, 2000; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). While trends and patterns of social mobility suggest some 'typical' transitions and outcomes, there has always been diversity within those trends. The broad groups described by studies of class, gender and locality are not homogenous



but account for a broad range of young people with different experiences, influences and outcomes of transition. This includes a diversity of routes to social exclusion (Coles, 1997), and drop outs themselves are a heterogeneous group (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001).

Giddens suggests that while life-courses have diversified and become more complex, this does not necessarily imply greater choice or freedom for individuals. Class-based inequalities remain and continue to influence perceptions and choices (Giddens, 1991). Beck, as Furlong and Cartmel discuss, proposes that change of focus from structural to individualized influences on trajectories affects individuals' perceptions of the choices available to them and the causes of their successes and failures. People's difficulties are no longer seen as a result of processes outside their control, but as evidence of personal failings and poor choices (Beck, 1992; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). From this perspective, drop out would be seen as a personal failure for two groups: firstly a failure for the student, because they did not complete the qualification, and secondly a failure of the professionals whose role it was to give advice or deliver the educational provision they were offered.

The individualized view of youth transitions highlights the importance of young people's choices and aspirations, and the factors confining, defining and directing them (Evans and Furlong, 1997). There has been much debate concerning the level and source of agency young people may have as their independence grows, and how this relates to the likely outcomes of transition. As Wyn and Dwyer assert, young people are:

*"... becoming increasingly pro-active in the face of risk and uncertainty of outcomes, and are making pragmatic choices for themselves which enable them to maintain their aspirations despite the persistence of structural influences on their lives."*

(Wyn and Dwyer, 1999: p5)

Thus although young people's choices are restricted, they still make decisions and react to the situations they find themselves in, based on a belief that they have some control over their lives. Degrees of perceived and actual control can vary significantly. Evans, building on Anglo-German studies (Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Evans and Heinz, 1994), found that most young people in her research had a sense of control over their lives, showing little evidence of fatalism, but nonetheless showed variation in how they made choices, agency operating differently for different people and contexts. She goes on to suggest that agency is 'bounded' or restricted by opportunities available and the qualifications and competencies demanded by the labour market, as well as socio-cultural experiences gained through interaction with peers and institutions such as colleges (Evans, 2002). The place of opportunities and social context in this equation means that those growing up in areas of high unemployment, and/or those who do not have such liberating and inspiring socio-cultural experiences, are at a disadvantage and, Evans suggests, would benefit from additional support:

*"... policies have to ensure that the greatest demands to 'take control of their lives' do not fall on those who are the least powerfully placed in the 'landscape' [...] agencies working with young people need to emphasise brokerage and advocacy as a primary aim and function, to the extent that young adults perceive and experience this to be as real as the emphasis that is currently placed on their 'deficits'."*

(Evans, 2002: p264)

This could suggest that drop outs, rather than simply failing to continue their education, are making a choice within the new landscape they find themselves, of being able to actively choose for the first time whether to stay in education or pursue a different option. In which case, what are the boundaries within which they make this decision, and what differences are there between different students in regards to constraints, experiences and opportunities available to them?

The strength of young people's aspirations and their self-confidence have been found to be very important factors affecting their sense of control and the likelihood that they will achieve their aims (Evans, 2002; Evans and Furlong, 1997). There are also a range of experiences which are likely to have an influence on their choices and perceptions of opportunity. As Dwyer and Wyn suggest, education is likely not to be the most important thing in young people's lives, and at best will be competing with work, an expanding social life, family relationships and obligations, as well as a host of new and potentially exciting experiences as the adult world opens up to them (Catan, 2004; Poole, 1984; Thomson et al, 2002). These broader aspects of young people's lives are often neglected in educational studies, and research into drop out is no exception (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Yet it seems highly unlikely that decisions as important as leaving full time education will be made in isolation from all the other changes and experiences young people are going through.

Furlong and Cartmel suggest that education policy has also changed the relationship between students and education providers. They argue that today's competitive atmosphere leads institutions to present courses as products, placing students and parents in the position of consumers. This is reflected in the way courses and colleges are marketed with an emphasis on parental (and student) choice and the publishing of Ofsted reports and league tables. Qualifications are vital currency in the job market, and colleges and other training providers offer an opportunity to gain them - for a price. This comes in monetary form for many students who are expected to pay fees, or at least deny themselves potential wages, but also costs their families, who could end up supporting their children through an extended period of full-time education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). Students see their courses as a means to collect currency in terms of qualifications, and as Riseborough found in his study of National Diploma Hotel and Catering students, this means they are focused on "the extrinsic rewards of their course" and put up with aspects of the course they don't like, distancing themselves from interaction with the institution in which they are studying (Riseborough, 1993).



In this consumer model, it could be that drop out is a reflection of the consumer's dissatisfaction with a product (poor teaching, perhaps), an inability to pay the price (in terms of work, money, surrender of social life or family support issues), or a change in demand (deciding on a different goal, and therefore needing different currency). However, this competitive, product-orientated educational environment has wider implications, as Furlong and Cartmel suggest:

*"People stand in differential positions in relation to the means of consumption, and have different amounts of social and cultural capital to trade in the educational marketplace. Consequently the rewards of the educational system remain unequally distributed. The illusion of choice created by the marketization of education masks the continued entrenchment of traditional forms of inequality."*

(Furlong and Cartmel, 2006: p14)

This view is supported by Bates and Riseborough, who found that young people's choices and biographies were strongly influenced by the culture, expectations and socialisation of their families and communities (Bates and Riseborough, 1993). Bates describes how young girls came to terms with the high emotional and physical demands of jobs in caring for the sick and dying:

*"Class-gendered cultural preparation in the context of the family appeared to be a crucial factor in explaining the trainees' adjustment to their jobs.... [Those] without these resources tended to react more sensitively to their working conditions and dropped out of training."*

(Bates, 1993)

Social and cultural capital and socialisation are, therefore, important in a wider sense than the commonly-understood sense of a privileged elite who have access through family and community to contacts, experiences and

resources which help them travel quickly up the educational and career ladder. As Bates's work demonstrates, less glamorous vocational choices also benefit from cultural preparation.

The role of drop out in the transition from education to work has not been explored in itself. As an example of educational non-achievement it is expected that drop out will have the same likely consequences as non-participation in post-compulsory education, putting young people at much greater risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. However, this assumption does not take into account the possibility that drop outs might return to education, either taking a different route (switching from a full-time college course to work-based training, for example) or a different course or college (perhaps seeking alternative teaching methods or institutional features). They might return after resolving a personal issue, such as pregnancy, health or family difficulties. Just like other categories of youth, drop outs are not a homogenous group: they are individuals with their own constraints, choices and 'stories'.

The nature of the risks young people negotiate during their school to work transitions are considered in a later section in this chapter. First, I will outline in more details the social policy and legislation and the college settings, to provide further context within which young people's decisions to drop out or complete full-time FE are taken.

## **Drop out, Legislation and Social Policy**

Drop out was discussed extensively in educational and social policy contexts throughout the 1990s, particularly in relation to social exclusion, and is still a dominant feature of FE and youth policy. Its rise as an important educational and social issue is associated with sweeping changes in the Further Education sector itself following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The Act relocated Further Education as a national, rather than



local resource, centralising funding and accountability. Prior to April 1993, Further Education colleges came under the direction and funding responsibilities of Local Education Authorities, with additional funding for work-based training from the Training and Enterprise Councils and employers themselves (Lambert, 1988). The 1992 Act transformed colleges into corporations, and set up the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) which was charged with the funding and inspection of colleges. Additional funding (and quality regimes) from the Training and Enterprise Councils continued, as did funding from the newly-formed Higher Education Funding Council for some institutions classified as 'Higher Education Institutions'; typically these were teacher-training establishments, or colleges providing Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, alongside degrees and diplomas accredited through universities with which they had an associative relationship.

The FEFC set up a system, known as its 'funding methodology' whereby funding for each college was calculated according to strict and complicated rules on student numbers and delivery models. Under the LEA regime, most college provision was funded on the basis of courses delivered. Although minimum class sizes were usually advocated for course inception, once a course was up and running payment was usually ensured and there were no repercussions if numbers dropped off. In many cases they were expected to (McGivney, 1996). Under the FEFC funding methodology, however, funding was provided on the basis of the number of students enrolled, and was dependent not just on initial enrolment, but also on the students' persistence, completion and achievement of a recognised qualification. Instalments were calculated at key census dates throughout the year, typically 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1<sup>st</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> July, and varied according to course type, institution type and other factors.

The impact of the 1992 Act was felt throughout the Further Education sector. The old colleges were extensively restructured, and new facilities were set up for the collection and organisation of data to fulfil the new funding and inspection requirements. Colleges adopted computerised 'Management

Information Systems' to assist in the management of data and reporting which had often previously come under the remit of the LEA, and was now considerably more demanding (Donovan, 1996). Information about student numbers, retention and achievement could be collated and analysed much more easily than before, albeit that there were some concerns over the quality and completeness of the data collected, especially in the early years (Spours, 1997).

With its implications for both funding and inspection outcomes, retention became very important for the financial success and reputation of the new FE corporations. The phenomenon of 'early leavers' had long been acknowledged, but now it became a matter of critical importance. The Audit Commission's report 'Unfinished Business' in 1993, which proposed the use of student completion as a performance indicator for 16-19 education, noted that:

*"The cost of the courses taken by students who do not achieve their intended qualification aims is about £500 million a year - as well as substantial amounts of students' time."*

(Audit Commission, 1993, p.2)

Two of the new, strident themes for FE are clear from this quotation: that the objective of post-compulsory education is for the student to achieve a qualification, and that wastage in this regard has financial consequences, being "a source of significant waste in 16-19 education" (Audit Commission, 1993, p36). That is not to say that these directives were absent in FE before incorporation, but, through the new funding and inspection regime, they became far more important. The new corporations were expected to provide a service, and to do so in a competitive, output-led environment:

*"Providers of 16-19 education are assuming more and more of the features of business units, but there is much unfinished business to attend to if they are to become fully effective."*

(Audit Commission, 1993, p.3)

Similar concerns of 'wasteage' were raised in a report from a project undertaken by the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC), which was responsible for the vocational qualifications provided through FE colleges; notably the National and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, and latterly the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). BTEC's report *Staying the Course* noted that while "Most BTEC students leave a programme with some recorded achievement" (Smith et al, 1992, p3), nonetheless "non-completion is a cause for concern" (Smith et al, 1992, p18). The proportion of students leaving without any achievement varied from 13 per cent for First Diploma and National Diploma courses, to 24 per cent of First Certificate and National Certificate courses.

In 1998 the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee raised concerns about the variable quality of provision by Further Education (BBC News, 1998, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>). Low completion and achievement rates were cited as evidence that the sector was not providing a good enough service to students, and suggested that colleges might be focusing on attracting numbers of students rather than focusing on the quality of education. In 1999 the *Learning to Succeed* White Paper outlined fundamental reforms to the systems set up at incorporation in 1992. The paper identified problems with the system, in particular that "mechanisms for planning and funding are complex, inconsistent and confusing" (*Learning to Succeed*, 1999 p6), that too much money was consumed by administration, and that inspection arrangements lacked co-ordination and consistency. Issues were also raised about the accountability of FE providers and their funders towards both students and government. These criticisms were not directed solely at the Further Education Councils, but also at the Training and Enterprise Councils, and particularly at disparities and lack of co-ordination between the two bodies. A new body, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), was introduced in 2000, replaced both the FEFC and the TECs, and took on additional responsibility for co-ordinating the provision of the whole range of further education provision on a sub-regional and national basis.



Government literature concerning young people repeatedly emphasises the importance of education and training. In the *Learning to Succeed* White Paper it is stated that those young people who “stop learning” at or before 16 have taken a route which “significantly affects their chances of making a success of their lives” (*Learning to Succeed*, 1999 p49). This risk is not confined to those who turn their back on education during or at the end of their compulsory schooling, however. The paper also observes that for those who engage with post compulsory education, achievement is not guaranteed, and “current levels of drop out from courses are too high” (ibid. p49).

*Learning to Succeed* also marks the rise in concern over issues of widening participation in adult education. In 1997 the Kennedy Report, *Learning Works*, marked a significant change in focus for education, and introduced the notion of ‘widening participation’ across all sectors of education. The report highlights the value of education, not just in terms of the economic gains of a better-trained workforce, but in generating social capital which will heighten the contribution and engagement of individuals within society.

Kennedy highlighted the role of education in reducing deprivation, and the persistent social inequalities in educational participation, particularly in universities. A host of initiatives followed the report, aimed at removing the barriers which prevent people from engaging in ‘lifelong learning’ and reaching their potential. These include the development of the new Learning and Skills Councils with their wider strategic objectives for identifying and meeting community as well as labour market needs (*Learning to Succeed*, 1999).

The link between low levels of education and deprivation highlighted by Kennedy also surfaced as a theme in 16-19 education policy in subsequent years. The dangers of poor retention are seen not only in terms of wastage of time, money and effort on the part of students and colleges, but are also thought to have more profound effects on society and on the life-chances of the individual student. *Learning to Succeed* suggests that these drop outs, like

others who are NEET, are more likely to experience “offending, drug addiction and financial problems” which make their route back to education or work “progressively more difficult” (ibid. p 49). The Social Exclusion Unit report *Bridging the Gap* makes similar points. It argues that young people who achieve few or no qualifications at school are those most likely to have come from backgrounds featuring aspects of social exclusion, such as poverty, single parenthood and crime. The document suggests that these individuals lack a clear route through FE, and have less promise of a positive outcome at the other end. High drop out rates are implicated in this process, and Youth Cohort Study data used in the report shows that nearly 10 per cent of those who were out of work and education at the age of 18 had embarked on a course of full time education at 16 but failed to complete it (Payne, 1995a).

Drop out is seen as dangerous to young people, especially those who have already had negative experiences of education, because it is another in a series of failures, and will further sap the individual’s confidence. The taxpayer is also seen to lose out as “much, if not all of the cost of the course is wasted” (Social Exclusion Unit 1999, p36). Current policy is designed to ensure that young people persist in education, training or employment from the age of 16 to 18, and hopefully beyond, to avoid the danger of social exclusion. In fact it is clear from *Learning to Succeed* that education is the preferred option. The Connexions Strategy was introduced in 2000 and entrusted to ensure “that far more young people continue in education and training until they are at least 19” (DfEE 2000). *Learning to Succeed*, *Bridging the Gap* and *Connexions* all emphasised that education should be considered a right for all at least to the age of 18, and should be encouraged as strongly as possible “while avoiding compulsion” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999 p13). Although work remained an option, education was clearly the top priority of this policy. The Connexions Strategy was set out with the intention of achieving the government’s “clear goal that *all* young people would stay in learning until 18 and beyond” (DfEE 1999, p9, emphasis added). Drop out was still seen as an indicator of failure, and sanctions and inducements for learning providers and students were planned to maximise retention. Much emphasis was placed upon the role of the new Personal Advisers working



through the Connexions Service to guide young people “in their transition to adulthood and working life” (DfEE 1999 p32).

Catan describes the debate as to whether Connexions should focus on NEET young people or those at risk of becoming so, or whether it should provide a universal service. A compromise was reached whereby all young people were theoretically able to access the service, but extra emphasis and resources was given to provide for those “at greatest risk of exclusion” (Catan, 2004, p 5). The criteria for young people to be targetted with this support included having dropped out, or being thought to be at risk of dropping out. In practice, patterns of referral were erratic and there were some problems with partnership working, although as Coles et al discovered, Personal Advisers could play “a vital role in promoting the well-being of young people, often in partnership with other professional workers” (Coles et al, 2004). These professionals often included advisors and other staff working in colleges.

The theme continues in legislation at the turn of the millennium and beyond. *Improving Student Performance*, published in 2001 by the National Audit Office, begins with the premise that “Further education is a crucial part of the Government’s strategy to combat social exclusion, unemployment and skills shortages.” (National Audit Office, 2001, p1). It outlines strategies and policies intended to achieve government targets for participation and achievement in further education, noting that despite the increase in numbers going through FE, the rate of course completion remained steady at an average of 85 per cent. In setting out new, flexible qualification pathways for 14-19 year olds, *Success for All* in 2002 once again confirmed that “Further education and training is important to the achievement of the Government’s twin goals of social inclusion and economic prosperity.” (DfES, 2002, p9) Most ambitious of all, *14-19 Education and Skills*, published by the DfES in 2005, begins with the bold statement:

*“Our aim is to transform secondary and post-secondary education so that all young people achieve and continue in learning until at least the age of 18.”* (DfES, 2005, p.2)

Outlining a new curriculum, with a wider range of vocational options for younger students through the introduction of Specialised Diplomas, among other initiatives, the strategy sets a target of participation for 17 year olds of 90% by 2015 - a rise of 15%, and includes as its objectives that it will “re-engage the disaffected”.

The Green Paper *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2006b) further reaffirms the importance of post-16 education and training, and emphasises the importance of information, advice and guidance for young people. Although the Connexions Service is by this time undergoing radical changes, becoming the responsibility of local authorities and funded by single grants, rather than administered nationally, it also notes the value placed upon Connexions by young people as a useful and approachable service, and intends that the brand Connexions be retained by local authorities. Although the Connexions Service is being radically altered, the emphasis is still on information, advice and guidance to help young people continue with education and training to ensure the smooth and productive entry into the workplace continues.

All of these policies and initiatives have been underpinned by assumptions about the value of education, the nature of qualifications and the labour market, which are rapidly becoming enshrined in our culture. Thirty years ago the majority of young people were expected to leave school at 16 or earlier, and enter the workplace immediately. Since then expectations have changed dramatically, to the point where the ‘usual’ school leaving age is raised to 18, and half or more of young people are encouraged to stay on to 21 (Coles, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Roberts, 2005).

## **Drop out, Failure and College Quality**

The theme emerging from these policies is that drop out is another form of non participation in education, with the same causes and effects as other forms, such as not staying on post 16, truancy or school exclusion. It is



accepted as an *indication of failure* in four ways. Firstly, it is seen as a sign that society is failing by not providing young people with a good start in life. Secondly, it is failing to provide the economy with a well trained work force. Thirdly, it is taken to show that the FE sector is failing to provide courses and teaching of a sufficiently high quality to maintain student interest and achievement. The FEFC Inspectorate, and latterly the Learning and Skills Council and OFSTED, use retention as a performance indicator and a guide to quality, and colleges are financially penalised for students who drop out. 'League tables' of FE institutions are produced around retention and achievement statistics. Fourthly and finally, the student who drops out is seen to have failed themselves. Drop outs are assumed to have eliminated their chance of gaining qualifications and a 'good job'. If, as assumed by Government policy, this failure is one of a series of knock backs for the individual, perhaps compounded by a deprived background and lack of advice and support, the drop out can expect a downward spiral towards exclusion and continued deprivation to be their future. Thus it is assumed to be of fundamental importance to "establish good practice and eliminate those dysfunctional conditions that may precede college drop out" (Page, 2004, p245).

This view of drop out as a pathological route for young people is rooted in a cluster of associated assumptions, which this thesis seeks to investigate. The most basic is that full time education is an appropriate and productive occupation for nearly all 16-19 year olds. This is in fact a comparatively new view of young people's paths to employment and adulthood, and has by no means been proven from an economic, social or personal point of view. In the 1960s and 1970s debate raged between those who saw post-16 education as holding young people back and denying them valuable 'real life' experience, and those who felt that the cohort was vulnerable and benefited from prolonged protection from the ravages of the workplace, which would allow for personal growth and development within a protective environment (Evans and Furlong, 1997). Both points of view assume that young people are an homogeneous group, following a predictable, synchronous route from education to work, and thus that 'one route fits all'.



This assumption of homogeneity persists today, but the emphasis by the turn of the millennium, however, was not on personal growth and experimentation, but with the acquisition of vocational skills and qualifications leading directly to the workplace.

However, young people presumably have their own rational motivations for dropping out of full time education. Following rational choice theories (Scott, 1991), it would be expected that each drop out reaches a rational decision as a result of considering the pros and cons of staying or leaving. For the individual students, the benefits of staying may not be as convincing as they appear to government policy makers. For example, they may find no barrier to employment from not having specific qualifications.

Associated with the high value placed on post-16 education is the assumption that there is no positive alternative to full time study for 16-19 year olds. Qualifications are the key to better jobs, and those who fall short can expect to face long-term unemployment and disadvantage. Although there are some training opportunities for young people in the workplace, the number of places available is tiny compared with thirty years ago. Traditional apprenticeships have been replaced in part by the more formal college-employer partnership Modern Apprenticeship schemes, but even here the emphasis on college attendance and the formalisation of skills acquisition and accreditation makes for a very different experience (Vickerstaff, 2005).

Work-based training is still seen as an important option, to be achieved through Modern Apprenticeships or other options, including an element of work-experience or work-based learning as part of a full-time course. It is thus an important strand in the new qualifications introduced from 2002-2008, including Specialised Diplomas, the modified Modern Apprenticeships and Foundation Degrees. As *Success for All* explains:

*“We need vocational pathways from the age of 14 which maximise young people’s participation at 16, attainment by 19 and progression into higher education and skilled employment.” (DfES, 2002, p.25)*

Transition from school to work in this framework is minutely time bound: there may be a variety of qualifications available to choose from, but otherwise the path is linear, and expected to be completed within a strict timeframe. This is reflected in the funding and resources targeted at the 14-19 age group, and in some cases in the very structure of colleges themselves, which strategically differentiate '16-19' provision from other areas such as work-based learning and adult education in their management and marketing structures.

The range of courses available, and in particular the decline of recreational and evening classes, many of which are no longer funded by the Learning and Skills Council, reflect the view that FE exists primarily to serve the needs of the labour market. As such, the task for post-compulsory education is to equip young people with the specific skills required by an ever-changing labour market (Dwyer and Wynn, 2001). It also assumes that young people's goals are also to serve the needs of the labour market, which as we will see in the next chapter may not necessarily be the case. Education and training is seen as a service which equips young people with marketable skills on the one hand, and matches the needs of employers on the other. Parents may also have expectations regarding their children's educational aspirations, and they may too therefore see drop out as a failure as falling short of such expectations. They may ascribe this failure to themselves, their child, the institutions their child attended or the educational system in general, or a combination thereof. Thus colleges must balance the dual aims of meeting the individual needs of learners, parents and the labour force needs of employers (DfES, 2002). However, employment as a destination for drop outs, while it may be considered a success by the young person concerned, is still registered as a failure in college performance terms as it is assumed that gaining qualifications will mean the young person will be able to get a better job (National Audit Office, 2001)

Policy and practice present an ideal transition for young people from school to work; a linear affair with logical, time-bound sequences, which will



ensure that the young person will enter the workplace with the skills employers want, either at the age of 18 or, better still, at 21 with a degree. It assumes that young people seek such a transition, being motivated primarily by personal vocational goals, and that if they are sufficiently supported, the majority can and should navigate it successfully. There is also an assumption that young people know what their aims are, and with appropriate information, advice and guidance, will be able to access courses which will enable them to follow the right path to achieve them (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999). To drop out is to take a dangerous, pathological route, and is assumed to threaten their chances of achieving the goal of a smooth and productive entry to the workplace.

These assumptions are evident in the policies outlined at the start of this chapter, but have also been embedded in education systems and cultures, as is reflected in the approach FE colleges take to retention and drop out. It is to this institutional aspect of drop out that we now turn.

### *Impact on Colleges*

The increased importance of retention as a performance indicator following Incorporation gave rise to a number of studies into drop out in the mid to late 1990s, most of which aimed to inform the development of retention strategies. These include a large-scale project conducted by the Further Education Development Agency (Martinez, 1996), collaborative projects involving a number of colleges (Kenwright, 1997; Spours, 1997), and a host of smaller studies based around single institutions (Knowsley Community College, 1995; Medway and Pennay, 1994; Page, 1996; Stockport College, 1995;). The focus of these studies was to find evidence on which to base strategies to improve retention. As Spours notes, the competitive and inspection-driven climate of the post-Incorporation landscape had a strong influence on the perception and progression of retention issues (Spours, 1997).



*Staying the Course* (Smith et al, 1993) identified personal support, course quality and advice and finance as important aspects, and these themes have continued to be the major points of discussion throughout a decade or more of retention research and policy, informing the development of Connexions, the Educational Maintenance Allowance and a host of individual institutional initiatives. The Connexions Service was directed to keep young people in education and training, with a mission to advise and support young people who were considering dropping out of college accordingly. The Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced from 2002, and in 2006 offers payments of up to £30 per week for students who come from a household with an annual income of less than £30,810 per year, providing their attendance and progress are satisfactory. The EMA website declares that “the main reason young people drop out of education and training at 16 is money.” (EMA, 2006). EMAs have been found to have a positive effect on attendance, retention and achievement, especially for those entering FE with lower qualifications and a higher statistical risk of becoming NEET (Middleton et al, 2004). Individual colleges have introduced schemes such as peer mentoring, study-skills courses, student counselling and overhauled tutorial systems (Martinez, 1997). Often these schemes are open to all students, and have been found to raise the quality of provision overall (Kenwright, 1997; Martinez, 1997). As well as these broad strategies attention has also been given to more specific interventions for drop outs and potential drop outs. Various studies have been undertaken to identify ‘risk factors’ which could be used to predict which students are most likely to drop out, with the aim of undertaking interventions to prevent this from happening, or to minimise impact, with varying levels of success (Bannister, 1996; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996; Kenwright, 1996; Martinez, 1996, 1997; Martinez and Munday, 1998).

However, the evidence for various predictors of drop out is not conclusive. Some studies found that females were more likely to achieve their qualification than males (BTEC, 1993; Martinez and Munday, 1998; McGivney, 1996) while others found no relationship (Kenwright, 1997; National Audit Office, 2001; Page, 1996; Payne, 1995a and 1995b), although

it was generally found that females gave different reasons from males for leaving (Kenwright, 1996; Page, 1996). Differences have also been noted in reasons given by age. There is some indication of an association between ethnicity and drop out, reflecting patterns observed in ethnicity and recruitment. Typically, Asian students show the highest completion rates, while Afro-Caribbean students are most likely to drop out (Page, 1996). However, as Martinez and Munday argue, this could also be related to other issues, such as prior experience of education and qualifications achieved at school (Martinez and Munday, 1998).

Drop out rates vary widely between colleges and between different courses. The Audit Commission (1993) found that 87 per cent of A level students completed their courses (70 per cent achieving a pass), compared with 81 per cent of BTEC first diploma students. McGivney (1996) reports higher drop out rates for students taking flexible delivery and distance learning courses. Martinez (1998) also notes a complex association between mode of attendance (i.e. full time, part time, day time, evening, day release, block release, open learning) and drop out, and that it varies between colleges. Kenwright (1997) found that drop out from courses varied, but not consistently between colleges, although there were some cases of poor retention courses all colleges in the study shared, such as GCSE maths. Retake courses have been noted in general for particularly low retention rates, indicating that factors such as self-esteem and motivation could be involved. Date of application for a course can also be a factor (Kenwright, 1997; Martinez, 1996).

There is a well documented relationship between prior qualifications and all aspects of participation in FE, including recruitment and drop out. In the past the recruitment aspect of this relationship has been embedded in the educational system, due to entry requirements placed on courses. However, there has been a move over the past ten to fifteen years towards widening access by putting in place fewer restrictions and providing more 'entry level' courses. Nonetheless, the association has perpetuated. The Audit Commission found that 42 per cent of students from vocational courses holding 10 or less



GCSE points, drop out compared with just 15 per cent of those holding 21 - 40 points. Similar trends were observed for students on vocational courses. Payne (1995) reports similar findings for A level students.

Given the apparent complexity of the issues around retention, and the shifting context of further education itself, it has not been easy for colleges to identify effective retention strategies, or to measure them effectively (Martinez and Munday, 1998). Claims have been made that initiatives have improved retention, such as the small-scale action research projects in Cousin's study, but this is difficult to prove considering the crude measure of retention itself. Improvements of one or two per cent are lauded as an achievement, when in statistical terms this cannot truly be considered to be a notable trend, especially over the span of a year or two (Davies, 1999). National figures for retention have not shown significant improvement over the past decade, fluctuating around the 80 per cent mark overall (LSC, 2005).

## **Causes and Consequences of Drop out**

Despite the flurry of research into retention, national evidence on the causes of drop out is not as convincing as might be expected. Longitudinal studies such as the Youth Cohort Study give a useful analysis of staying on rates across different cohorts, and FEFC and LSC data shows trends in retention by institution and course, but national data published from college records does not indicate reasons given for leaving, or what happens to them afterwards. By way of an additional complication, there is the fundamental issue of definition. The LSC, like the FEFC before it, has a census date of 1<sup>st</sup> November, at which point initial enrolments are counted, despite the fact that most courses start in September, with college enrolments taking place in late August. This policy was suggested around the time of Incorporation as a measure to allow for students to 'settle down', acknowledging that "in the first weeks of term, many students need time to settle into courses or transfer to others better suiting their needs" (National Audit Office, 2001, p.45). This implies that there is an initial period wherein a certain level of drop out is to



be expected, but that any drop out consequent to the census date is dysfunctional and therefore a cause for concern. The Audit Office estimates the level of 'pre-census' drop out to be "about nine percent of students".

Given that the purpose of the majority of the research into drop out is to improve retention, it is of no surprise that the 'official' definition of drop out as students who leave after the first census date and before the course end date is usually adopted. Thus very little is known as to the comparative characteristics or causes of drop out before the census date, or indeed, whether the assumption behind the adoption of November 1<sup>st</sup> as the cut-off is justified by student behaviour.

The FEDA and college-based studies referred to above have had a clear focus on quality improvement, and have sought to identify causes and potential solutions for drop out. The literature reflects some success in this regard, and also serves to highlight the complexity of an issue which is so often taken on face value as a single variable or indicator. Most studies agree that students usually give more than one reason for drop out (Kenwright, 1996; Martinez and Munday, 1998), and that for this reason college data can be difficult to interpret, as most colleges only record one reason (Martinez, 1996). Nonetheless, some causes appear recurrently through the literature.

### ***Common Causes of Drop out***

The three most common reasons collected from students via college data or questionnaire-surveys are course unsuitability, employment and finance. Each of these broad categories contain ambiguities. Course unsuitability covers a multitude of issues. These include deficiencies in college provision, such as poor teaching, inappropriate curriculum or administration difficulties, alongside problems in the information, advice and guidance system, such as the student finding the course did not suit their aims or interests (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Audit Commission, 2001). Similarly, employment can be seen as a reason for leaving (that the student preferred to take a job rather than continue to study), or a destination for the

leaver, where the student wanted to leave for other reasons, but took a job as an way out (Responsive College Unit, 1999). Financial problems have been picked up by the Government as a main cause of drop out. The inception of the Educational Maintenance Allowance is based on Government's belief that, as they explain on the EMA website "the main reason young people drop out of education and training at 16 is money" (DfES, 2005). The EMA evaluation did note an improvement in retention (Davies 1999). However, in research studies financial reasons are rarely cited as the only reason for students leaving, and drop outs have been found to have broadly similar financial circumstances to persistors, making the assumption that increased financial support will improve retention dubious (Davies, 1999; Kenwright, 1997). This apparent contradiction with the EMA outcomes could support arguments that while financial issues do not in isolation lead to drop out very often, they can be a powerful factor in tipping the balance, either towards drop out or, in the case of those in receipt of EMAs, towards completion.

Other factors commonly identified as causing drop out include transport problems; problems with other students, such as bullying; and 'personal' factors such as ill health, family problems and pregnancy. There are hints here that the student's background, their previous experience of education and their social class could have a bearing on the likelihood of completion, but as yet the exact nature of any association, or the mechanisms whereby background affects the decision to leave or stay, has not been fully investigated.

### *Perspectives on Drop out*

The picture of drop out presented so far in this chapter is derived from the point of view of colleges and policy-makers. Some research (Martinez and Munday, 1998; Spours, 1997) includes the perspective of teaching staff in colleges, who are often resistant or reluctant towards the use of drop out as an indicator of quality. Staff commonly distinguish between different groups of drop outs. Some leave because of 'college circumstances' - poor timetabling, inadequate provision, insufficient support - which the college staff could and



should be working to improve. Others leave for 'external reasons' such as family problems and health issues, about which the college could do little to change. The third category of students are those who staff believe should leave. This might be because they have, in the staff's opinion, taken the wrong course, or stayed on at college when another route would have been more appropriate for them. It also accounts for students who were disruptive in class and had an adverse effect on their peers. In some cases staff report being pleased to see students leave because they feared they might have caused other, 'good' students to leave had they stayed (Kenwright, 1997; Spours, 1997).

Very few studies shed much light on the student's view of drop out. One exception is Bloomer and Hodkinson's study (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). Bloomer and Hodkinson's work offers an alternative view of drop out to the one characterised by failure and exclusion. The research was a three year qualitative project, following a small cohort of students in two different colleges, investigating their experiences of college life. Like most of their subjects, the drop outs in their study came from varied backgrounds, had different aims and very different experiences. It is hard to imagine what the institutions they attended could have done to make them continue, and raises a very important question: did the young people make the right choice for themselves when they decided to leave? If they encountered difficulties after drop out, were they a direct result of dropping out, or would they have happened anyway? These questions pose a challenge to the assumptions of the 'failure' model. Drop outs were not the initial focus of the Bloomer and Hodkinson study, and therefore make up only a small number of interviews, but this is a rare example of qualitative research into drop out and provides some useful clues to inform future research.

### ***Decision-making, Disaffection and Risk***

The current literature concerning drop out describes a complex system of variables which affect each student's decision whether or not to continue in full time education. It seems likely that most students make this decision not



just once, in response to crisis, but regularly as they juggle conflicting priorities, aims and demands (Cullen, 1994; Martinez and Munday, 1998). For any one individual, a change in circumstances or disposition could tip the balance. This could explain why, for example, drop outs and persistors may have equivalent income and outgoings, but drop outs are more likely to have felt their financial position was a problem (Kenwright 1997).

The assertion that drop out is part of a continual succession of choices and decisions that young people make throughout their transition from school to work suggests that the process of decision-making itself in drop out could be worthy of study. Choices and decisions are a feature of many aspects of the transition from childhood to adulthood (Banks, 1992; Bates and Riseborough, 1993; Coles, 1995). Some structural factors have been directly associated with student retention. Locality, gender and ethnicity, for example, have all been found in one or more study to be related to the likelihood of drop out in some way (Kenwright 1997; Martinez and Munday, 1998; Page, 1996). The relationship between social class is assumed to be similar to the correlation between staying on and class described by the Youth Cohort Study (for example, Payne, 1999) and the 16-19 Initiative (Banks et al, 1992). Middle class 16 year olds with professional parents are much more likely to stay on and, it is assumed, therefore less likely to drop out, than their working class peers. However, this assumption could be misleading. Bloomer and Hodgkinson's work provides examples where class does not seem to be a factor in drop out (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999). It could be argued that once working class youngsters have got as far as FE, they could be more determined to stay than middle class individuals, who might have gone on to A levels as a matter of course, and only question their route later. Alternatively, working class young people could be more likely to drop out due to a lack of financial support from parents, or yet again, the middle class cohort could be challenged by the higher expectations and pressure from their families. It is easy to imagine any of these scenarios, but as yet there is insufficient statistical evidence to establish such patterns, or enough data to understand how such processes might work. More research is needed to clarify the relationship between social class, educational background and

family support and student drop out, especially in the light of the assumption in current policy, which implies a two way relationship between disadvantage and drop out. Hence one of the central themes explored in this thesis is: is there a relationship between student background and drop out, and if there is, how does it operate?

As well as the variable influences, predisposing factors, risks, aspirations and resources guiding a young person, it has been suggested that young people's biographies feature particular points where decisions are made which mark a turning point in their lives. These have been described with variations in definition as epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), career breaks (Humphrey, 1993), fateful moments (Giddens, 1991) and critical moments (Thomson et al, 2002). Thomson et al define a critical moment as:

*"... an event [...] that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities."*

Thomson et al (2002: p339)

Thomson et al found in their research a range of critical moments, including drop out from further education. Through analysis of these moments, they gained insight into the perspectives, resources and influences which the young people used to negotiate the particular risk the moment presented. For example, they present the case study of a young man who dropped out of college because it was not, for him at that time, promising him what he most valued:

*"This [criminal] identity, the respect of fellow gang members and a 'gangster' reputation in the eyes of younger children were far more empowering to Hamad than the pursuit of any particular education and employment transition, where at least in the short term the gains were less tangible."*

(Thomson et al 2002: p348)



Thus there is tension between the investment in the identity a young person has chosen, and the risks involved in maintaining it. This demonstrates how important it is to understand young people's views of drop out, if we are to understand its true causes and consequences. The values and perceptions of educational professionals can be very different from those of a young person, whose most important goal in life is to establish a position for themselves in a particular subculture; to build and maintain an identity; to transform themselves into an independent adult. Full-time education is only one of a range of routes available to young people, and although it might seem from the point of view of the government, colleges and even their families to be the safest one with the best outcomes for their employment prospects, young people might see things differently.

Elder and Russell (2000) argue that the late teenage years are a particularly important age for response to societal change because:

*“Free of adult roles and responsibilities, youth have the possibility of developing novel responses to the change that occurs in their lives and communities.”*

(Elder and Russell, 2000: p20)

There is a likelihood for particular impact from ‘turning points’: opportunities for reflection and re-evaluation of choices for an individual's future life course. Elder and Russell describe the impact of, for example, military service on young men. Time away from the direct influence of family and the relief from career decisions, plus immersion in new day-to-day domestic routines leave the individual free to contemplate their future. At the same time, exposure to new cultures and ideas provides them with a wider spectrum of choices and perspectives to inform their decisions.

Elder's life course theory (Elder, 1995) also emphasises the importance of the interaction between the individual and their social and historical location. Elder illustrates this relationship in his analysis of historical events such as the Second World War and the Great Depression in



the USA, describing the impact of events on families and communities. As well as the economic and employment changes that took place, Elder shows how the psychological impact of such events alters individuals' ambitions, the structure of families and how people navigate the choices and opportunities available to them. This indicates the importance not just of specific decisions, but the context and processes within which they come to be made.

The opportunities available to young people also seem likely to affect drop out, plausibly interacting with factors such as gender and social class. Bates and Riseborough (1993), for example, found a relationship between opportunities as perceived by young people and their choice of course or training scheme when they left school. Changing opportunities can be seen to have affected participation in post-compulsory education over the past 30 years. Most obviously, the dramatic decline in youth employment, from nearly full employment in the early 1970s to a rate of less than one in ten at the turn of the century (Roberts, 1995), along with other social and economic changes discussed earlier in this chapter, has corresponded with a huge leap in the numbers staying on in FE, from 41 per cent to 72 per cent from 1985 to 1998 alone (DfES 2002). A third option to full time education or employment is training, either through an employer or as part of a government scheme, or a combination of both. This route has historically been the most common in the form of apprenticeships, and the modern form became prominent in the 1980s with the development of Youth Training Schemes. However, work based job training has declined through the 1990s as full time education gained popularity. As noted by Coles (1995), the training offered covered a limited number of vocational areas and skills were not necessarily transferable. There was regional variation in the quality and availability of schemes, and in general they suffered from a poor reputation among young people (Hollands, 1990).

Social and cultural capital have also been linked with young people's transition through post compulsory education to work, as with other educational experiences (for example, Putnam, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel,

2006). Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital describes a set of attributes which operate as currency in specific social contexts or habitus (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, particular forms of language gain kudos in the playground or the pub, but may have a negative impact in the classroom or workplace. Cultural capital may be conferred via a variety of means, including the family, school, workplaces, social class and the wider community. Social capital refers to membership of and access to networks of social contacts. Social and cultural capital are often key concepts in the study of social exclusion as they offer a useful analytic tool for investigating the transmission of inequality and the formation of communities with limited access to social resources, just as social class has been related to economic resources (Giddens, 1991, Willis, 1977). In the case of participation in post-compulsory education it could be the case that engagement in education and training is related to the social and/or cultural capital available to the young person: for example an understanding of the workings of the FE system, or contacts to secure work experience placements or employment.

Little consistent data on drop out from full time education was kept by colleges until the early 1990s, but tutors have reported that drop out rates rose exponentially as more young people were recruited to FE. Some studies have suggested that large numbers of drop outs leave to go into employment (Kenwright, 1997), suggesting that college could have been a stop gap. This concurs with Roberts's assertion that upon the increase in youth unemployment which occurred following the decline of manufacturing industries in the 1980s, the extension of full time education served a 'warehousing' function, keeping young people off the unemployment register and out of trouble (Roberts, 1995). It could also be that juggling a part time job and social life is easier than the three-ball juggle of part time job, social life and college. This serves to emphasise another gap in the current literature. Although some material has been produced to describe trends and reasons for leaving, we do not yet understand what the decision to drop out means for young people, or have a picture of the processes and structures which impinge upon that decision. This is partly because the research to date has taken an institutional perspective, designed to remedy failure. In a presentation to a



meeting of researchers in FE in March 2000, Hodkinson suggested what he described as “the unthinkable view” that for the young people in his study (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999) “drop out was not an indication of failure, but the best choice for them, and should have been supported by the college and society as a whole.” Page (1996) makes a similar point, arguing that drop out is a pragmatic decision, and can have positive outcomes.

If it is true that young people may not inevitably benefit from continuous education from the ages of 16 to 19, the current emphasis in policy for school leavers to stay on could be troubled. However, the notion that a young person might discontinue their education on a temporary basis links with another pillar of New Labour’s education policy: Lifelong Learning. If education and training are to accompany each individual throughout their careers, it might benefit some young people to leave education at 16, when they are unclear as to their aims and disinterested in college studies, and return at a later stage when they have direct motivation, such as training for a specific job they are sure they wish to pursue. However, if young people were to choose not to take advantage of the promise of full time education to the age of 18, what else could they choose? Perhaps current policy is not just motivated by a wish to promote social inclusion through education, but a need to reduce social exclusion through unemployment?

Continuing education does not guarantee employment; rather, FE seems to replicate rather than confound social and economic inequalities (Bates and Riseborough, 1993). Even university graduates face the possibility of unemployment when they leave full time education. Page suggests that people could be attracted to FE by “the myth of social mobility” (Page, 1996, p152), and presumably leave when the illusion is shattered.

It is possible that the lack of alternatives for school leavers, rather than education itself, causes drop out and disaffection. If they do not go into employment, there is no welfare safety net to support most young people while they explore alternatives. Benefits for young people have been steadily eroded since 1980. Students now have no statutory grant, no benefit



entitlements in vacations, and over 18s may have to pay tuition fees if their parents' income is above a certain threshold. 16 and 17 year olds can only claim benefits if they can prove they are estranged from their families, and adult rates of benefit are only available to young people from the age of 26, unless they have children. The benefits system, at least, has postponed adulthood even beyond the age of 18 (Coles, 1995; Craig, 1991).

It could be the case that young people are not making a positive choice to continue their education, but are accepting it as preferable to doing nothing. Page suggests that the community approves of education, while looking down on drop out and unemployment, treating drop outs as social 'outsiders'. This is a simplistic view. There is evidence to suggest that some groups do not value education (for example Willis, 1977), and as Bloomer and Hodkinson's work, as well as Page's own findings suggest, most young people who drop out of education go on to have successful and satisfactory lives (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999; Page, 1996). Drop out is an even bigger problem among part time students, such as adults taking evening classes (Kenwright 1997), but presumably these are the very adults who Page suggests look down on young drop outs.

The current literature reveals a muddled picture. On the one hand it denies the clarity required for colleges to devise effective retention strategies, and on the other hand the strategic perspective of the research has left the exploration of context and meanings behind drop out under explored. There is no theoretical framework to locate drop out within the wider body of knowledge of the sociology of young people. By challenging the assumptions behind our current understanding of drop out, and investigating the issues from the students', rather than the colleges' or government's perspectives, this thesis presents an alternative view to the dysfunctional model of student drop out.

## *Conclusions*

Drop out has been stigmatised for some time. Cope and Hannah reported a quarter of a century ago that “there is a lingering negative attitude toward dropping out as a sign of failure”. In fact most of the students they studied found the experience of dropping out a positive one (Cope and Hannah 1975). This has been reported in contemporary studies as well (for example, see Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999). A sense of relief seems common, and a welcoming independence and a useful period of reassessment. For some this meant an appreciation of education and college life which ultimately led to their return and success. Cope and Hannah conclude:

*“Leaving college will be a necessary action for some students as part of on-going lifelong learning. The college door will be one that revolves freely to allow an entrance and exit for students at appropriate times...”*

(Cope and Hannah, 1975, p110)

In this study I aim to test the assumptions which underpin current policy on post-compulsory education for 16-19 year olds, and to question whether drop out is necessarily a disaster for all concerned, or whether it could be a valid and even positive step in a lifelong learning journey. In order to better understand the potential role of drop out and persistence in this journey, it is important to examine how it relates to other aspects of young people's lives and transitions to adulthood. The literature on youth transitions suggests that there may be a wide range of influences which shape young people's pathway from school to work, including their decision to continue on the path of full-time education when it has been chosen.

This thesis explores drop-out from the student's point of view, and seeks to relate their experience of full-time education to other aspects of their lives, including their background, life-course and influences from within and outside of their college lives. The next chapter describes the research



questions drawn from these aims, and the methodology used to progress the inquiry.

## **Chapter 2: Research Design**

The research had two broad aims: firstly, to gain an understanding of student drop out from the students' perspectives; and secondly, to identify any likely influences and factors affecting young people's decision to drop out of full-time education. This chapter describes the research undertaken in order to achieve these aims.

In the first section, the research questions are outlined and the approach used to operationalise these questions is described. Previous studies used to inform the research design are discussed. The second and third sections describes the process of the research itself, including the collection and analysis of the data. The fourth and final section of the chapter reflects upon the research process, issues of validity and reliability, and the impact of the research design itself upon the findings and conclusions presented in later chapters.

### **Nature of the Research**

The discussion of the youth studies literature in the previous chapter suggested that there are multiple influences upon the process and outcome of youth transitions, with education being one important factor in the equation (Bynner et al, 2002; Coles, 2000). Other aspects of education, such as participation in post-compulsory education and qualifications, are related to young people's biographical context and background (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006), and have an effect on the outcome of their journey to independence and adulthood (Bynner et al, 2002, Webster et al, 2004). It therefore seems likely that drop out is similarly linked to these aspects of students' wider lives. With this in mind, the research design sought to include as wide a biographical and topical brief as possible, and to be primarily focused on the student's point of view as advocated by, for example, Henderson et al (2007) and Chamberlayne, Rustin and Wengraf (2002). In this it differs significantly



from most previous studies in the field of student drop-out in FE, which have focused mainly on college-related factors and the drive for retention.

### *Previous Studies*

Most of the work to date concerning student drop out in FE has been conducted in relation to college practices and procedures. This focus has had two major consequences: firstly, that the scope of research has been largely limited to investigations of drop-out with a view to informing retention strategies, and secondly, that most of the research studies have been small-scale, with little funding and mostly directed by colleges themselves (Knowsley Community College, 1995; Medway and Pennay, 1994), by the FEFC or LSCs (Kenwright, 1997) or other agencies tasked with research aimed at improving policy and practice such as the Further Education Development Agency (Martinez, 1996; Martinez and Munday, 1998). These studies included consultation with students, but often this was quantitative in nature, with the aim of identifying factors which could be used in the prediction and prevention of drop-out, rather than a detailed, in-depth consideration of the role of education and drop-out in the wider context of students' lives.

The pervasive assumption that drop-out is an indication of failure on the part of the college and/or the student directs the research, and thus the consequences of drop-out for students tends to be outside the scope of such studies. Bloomer and Hodkinson's qualitative study, however, is a notable exception in this regard (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). They undertook a longitudinal study of a group of young people over the course of their time at college, relating college life to the wider experiences of the students. Bloomer and Hodkinson's findings indicated that the process of drop out was more complicated, and was influenced by wider factors, than might be assumed. Their study also challenged assumptions about the detrimental affect of drop-out:

*“As learning careers change, it is not always appropriate to finish something which was started at a time when interests and aspirations were quite different.”*

(Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: p114)

However, there were only four drop outs in Bloomer and Hodkinson’s study. Further research is required to explore the generalisability of their claims.

This research aims to contribute to the debate by investigating student drop-out in the wider context where aspirations and interests are formed, and to relate this context to the role of education in student’s transitions to adulthood and independence.

### ***Research Questions***

The research aims were twofold. Firstly, it sought to investigate drop out from students’ perspectives, taking as open an approach as possible to ensure that the findings came from the students’ experiences, rather than the researcher’s presumptions.

Secondly, the study aimed to revisit the possible causes of drop out, to test the assumptions upon which current evidence is based, and establish structural influences upon drop out. Two new areas of possible causality were explored: the students’ socio-economic and educational backgrounds, which are not routinely collected through college data, and thus have been under explored in retention studies. These were included among a broad range of factors suggested to have impact on drop out, such as advice and guidance, financial circumstances, standards of teaching, college facilities and personal issues such as transport and health.

The following research questions were derived from these aims:



1. Is the occurrence of drop out related to students' backgrounds, including socio-economic background, parental occupation or education, previous educational experiences, family composition and locality?
2. What other factors influence students' decisions to drop out?
3. How do students come to the decision to drop out or to continue with their studies?
4. How do students feel about having dropped out?
5. What are the consequences of drop out for those who choose to do so, in the short and longer term?

These questions were addressed through a two-stranded research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a detailed understanding of student perspectives, alongside a broader view of the impact of different variables upon students' decisions to leave or persist with their courses.

### ***Research Approach***

The aims of the research placed a range of different demands upon the research design. As MacDonald and Marsh note, structural studies of youth tend to be quantitative while inquiries into issues of agency and capital have been predominantly qualitative in nature. They also argue that messy, complex nature of transitions suggests that a qualitative and explorative approach is sometimes more appropriate (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). In this case, the exploration of the experience of drop out from the student perspective required a detailed understanding of individual views and histories, and therefore demands a qualitative inquiry, while the descriptive nature of the investigation into the causes of drop out suggests a quantitative study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The research aims to both describe and understand young people's experiences of drop out, and as such requires both a quantitative and qualitative approach.

The research was divided into two interrelated strands. The first constituted a primarily quantitative analysis of data concerning students' demographic details and variables to measure their socio-economic background and educational experiences. The second was a detailed ethnographic study of a group of students to explore their experience of drop out within the context of their life histories and perspectives on education and other factors which they felt to be important. The life-history approach was chosen to provide as wide a context as possible for students to share their experiences, in the hope of capturing the complexities of their choices and decisions (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997; Rutter et al, 1998).

To these ends data was collected from a cohort of students from the beginning of their courses until the time of their scheduled completion, two years later. For the first strand, student records for this cohort were supplemented with a survey to add variables not routinely collected through the college information systems. For the second strand, a partially overlapping sample of students were selected to take part in single depth interviews. Full details of the sampling and data collection and analysis strategies follow later in this chapter.

The research benefited from the adoption of a longitudinal approach, which was made possible by the part-time, long-term nature of the research. Taking advantage of this opportunity, both the survey and interviews were carried out over a period of three years. This also allowed for the continually developing findings to shape the direction of the inquiry. The longitudinal aspect of the study also helps to address one of the common problems encountered by researchers into drop out: 're-invention'. Young people may adjust their stories of the past to justify their choices (Henderson et al, 2007; Bates and Riseborough, 1993) and reasons for drop out (Martinez and Munday, 1998). It is also possible that the influence of background, or some aspects of it, could diminish or increase over time. If, as is expected, college careers are a series of choices and decisions, they therefore should be traced throughout rather than at one point in time.



Longitudinal design raises its own challenges, however. Although the idea of following one cohort for three years seems straightforward, in reality there are problems in terms of practicality and efficiency. In practical terms, it is not easy to get a longitudinal impression of students' choices without spending long periods of time with them as an observer. Unfortunately this was not possible due to the time available to the researcher on a regular basis, and could also have proved difficult in terms of the researcher's position in the college, as a staff member. However, it was possible for the surveys to be administered to the same cohort at intervals during a two and a half year span, which provided a series of three snapshots of their status and opinions. This was very helpful, particularly in that it made it possible to contrast the early responses of persistors and drop outs and monitor changes in both groups' views and circumstances over time.

The efficiency problem relates to the qualitative aspect of the study. It would be very interesting to follow one group of students through, as in the questionnaire survey, to explore in depth their concerns and perceptions, and this was initially a feature of the research design. It was revised for two reasons. Firstly, although a longitudinal interview strategy might reveal something about the changing perceptions and circumstances of a small group of students over the two to three years of the study, it would not be possible to explore to what extent these experiences might be shared by other students, and would necessarily limit any common themes or ideas emerging from the data to a handful of cases. It would also limit the experiences to the process of drop out itself and the period immediately afterwards, not allowing for any exploration of the impact of drop out over a longer period of time. While the longitudinal approach to biographical studies has proved very useful in investigations of youth transitions (for example, Henderson et al, 2007), it was not possible within the constraints of this study to do justice to the method.

Richer findings could be achieved despite these constraints, it was hoped, using theoretical sampling to build from one set of interviews to the next. This meant that individual students were not followed for two years, but more students were interviewed to explore a wider view of perspectives.

Changing perceptions over time were instead investigated by sampling different cohorts of students at different stages in their lives. This allowed a more detailed view of common processes and understandings which underpin individual biographies.

The potential difficulty with this approach, however, was that there was a risk that individuals could have re-interpreted events surrounding their drop out, especially if a significant period of time had elapsed. In addition, the huge cultural, educational and economic changes discussed in Chapter One would be expected to be reflected in the diversity of experiences the different age cohorts of interviewees encountered. The experience and outcomes of drop out might be expected to have been very different twenty or thirty years ago, when there were different opportunities for young people in the labour market, and lower expectations for them to stay in full time education beyond the age of 16. Within the scope of the research it was not possible to control for these factors, but by retaining an awareness of them as a potential weakness in the design, it is hoped that their impact on the final outcomes were minimized. For example, as interpretations of qualitative data formed, the researcher consistently used ‘personal reinterpretation?’ or ‘historical factors?’ as challenges to check whether either or both could account for or contribute to the accounts under consideration.

Although each part of the research served different purposes, and used different methods, it was important to make sure that they weren’t conducted as separate projects. The two strands were united by the common goal of collecting information from the students’ perspectives: whether it be numerical data about the reasons and circumstances of drop out; or the qualitative data about how it felt, what it meant to the students and what the process itself was like.

This process began with the operationalisation of the research questions. As the starting ideas were discussed and concepts defined, developed and redefined through discussions with students and staff at the college, a lengthy list was compiled of the variables, themes and possible



associations and relationships. This list was then sorted into items which were best approached through the survey or interview strands of the research. Some items, such as the relationship of advice and guidance and drop out, for example, fell clearly under both headings. It was still important, however, to ensure that the difference of purpose was clear and appropriate. For example, the broad categories of advice and guidance taken, and a measure of their impact, were in the realm of the survey strand, while the interview strand investigated the student's views on the biographical impact of advice, and comparisons between different forms of, and judgements made about, advice and guidance.

As the themes and variables became clearer and more distinctly defined, it also became clear that there would be points throughout the study where findings from one strand could help to inform another. These points were noted in the research timetable (included in Appendix 3). Initial data analysis took place alongside data collection to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas, interpretations and refinement of the research design. For instance, at the end of each questionnaire phase frequency distributions and cross tabs were performed to identify any trends which could be further explored through the qualitative study and vice versa. For example, when examining the findings from the first questionnaire, there seemed to be an unexpectedly high frequency of students who had truanted at school. Prompts were then added to the schedules for the forthcoming interviews to investigate why this might be the case, and if it had any impact on the decision to drop out for those students. Similarly, when it emerged from the first round of interviews that future goals were frequently mentioned as a factor in drop out, it was added to the second and third questionnaires. The extent to which new questions or options could be included in the questionnaire study was limited, because a measure of consistency had to be maintained. If this had not been ensured, comparisons of trends between the different time samples could have been compromised. However, where it was possible, it proved very useful and enriched the overall study.

The synthesis of the two strands in the final analysis and discussion of the findings was challenging, but perhaps less so because of the regular points of cross-fertilisation. The two sets of inter-related evidence were also used to challenge interpretations as the findings were developed.

## **Methods: Data Collection**

### ***Samples and Responses***

The research took place in a large general Further Education college in the north of England, which for the purposes of this thesis will be referred to as 'Thornton College'. The researcher is employed by the college, and was given full access to students and college data for the purposes of the research within the bounds of normal college policies. The research was supported, but in no way directed by, the college's senior management.

Thornton College was the result of a merger between two neighbouring colleges, a general FE college with additional HE provision, and a sixth form college. The college delivers courses for around three thousand full time 16-19 year old students each year, providing approximately eighty per cent of the FE provision in the city. The college offers a range of full-time A-Level and vocational programmes primarily targeted at 16-19 year old students, as well as evening classes and part time courses for a wider client group. Thornton College is situated on the outside of a city with a population of 186,000, of whom 120,000 are of working age. The city has a declining manufacturing industry, alongside well-established and growing leisure and tourism and service industries. Service industries currently account for 89 per cent of jobs in the city, slightly greater than the national and regional averages, while 6.8 per cent are in manufacturing, which is much lower than national and regional averages and 3.4 in construction, which is slightly lower than national and regional figures. Average levels of pay are slightly above the national average, and approximately fifty pounds a year above the regional average. The population has higher than average levels of qualifications, with



33.4 per cent having an NVQ4 or equivalent qualification or higher, compared with the national percentage of 26.5, and 83.1 percent holding an NVQ1 qualification or higher, compared with the regional average of 76 per cent, and the national average of 77 per cent. 79 per cent of those aged 16-59 are in employment, slightly above both national (74.3 per cent) and regional (73.8 per cent) averages. Of those who are not economically active, 3.5 per cent want a job (Nomis, 1995-6). Although the city does not qualify under most post-code based deprivation-indices as including areas of particular deprivation, this is a product of planning and geography rather than a reliable indicator of the existence of poverty (Kenwright, 1998). Nonetheless, as the labour market information shows, on average the city's residents are better off than some neighbouring northern towns and cities.

The definition of 'drop out' for the study was important to ensure clarity in the cohort under study, but was not as straightforward to reach as might at first be assumed. The definition used by colleges is those students engaged on a course of study who leave after the first census date of 1<sup>st</sup> November, but before achieving their qualification. This includes a range of 16-19 students, including those on part time programmes or work-based training and those who complete their course but do not complete assessments or take examinations. However, the November 1<sup>st</sup> census date was rejected as a cut-off point, as this was for most students a half-term into their course, and could exclude some students who, although they would not affect the college's targets and funding payments, might nonetheless have important experiences to help to answer the research questions. Similarly it is possible that those who complete their courses but fail to achieve have very different experiences from those who take the decision to leave. In order to keep the scope of the research within manageable parameters, it was decided to focus on full-time students who had been enrolled on and were attending a course at college for two weeks, but had left before the last half of the final term of their programme. The term 'persistors' was used to describe those who completed their course, regardless of whether or not they completed their final examinations or assessments.

A sample of a third of the total new intake of school-leavers on to full-time programmes was decided upon as the best compromise between large numbers to support a robust quantitative interrogation and the availability of research resources. This amounted to 747 individuals, with an anticipated response rate of around 40 per cent, based on similar studies at the college and elsewhere (for instance Martinez, 1996, who reported thirty per cent).

The sample was balanced for two key variables, gender and course type. Course type was defined initially as 'academic' and 'vocational'. This reflected a well-established distinction between courses intended as preparation for university and those intended as preparation for work. The former aimed to provide academic knowledge and critical skills, while the latter emphasise the learning of vocational knowledge and job-specific skills. Prior to the merger of colleges in the year before the study, the organisation was composed of a Sixth Form college, providing primarily academic courses, while the General FE college provided primarily vocational courses in its full time course offer. At the time of the survey the two types of provision were still delivered on the separate sites inherited from the merging colleges. The sites were closely located and by this time teaching staff and college procedures and services were consistent across the two sites, but it is plausible that cultural differences may have remained. The 'vocational' cohort was further broken down into five vocational clusters, reflecting the college management structure and physical location of courses in faculty buildings. All students were aged 16-17 at the start of the survey, and were in their first year of full-time post-compulsory education.

Lists of students were printed for each course in the order of their college reference number, which is randomly allocated to each student at enrolment. Students who were outside the scope of the survey, for example due to their age or being personally known to the researcher, were eliminated from the list. For each cohort, every third student was then selected to join the survey group, with balance checks for gender at regular intervals. The selected individuals were flagged for tracking via the College system. Their details were transferred to the project database, where they were assigned a unique



project reference number. This database was updated at quarterly intervals with details of changes in status and any data from completed questionnaires.

Efforts to maximise the response rate were built into the questionnaire design. A reminder and fresh questionnaire was sent to all non-respondents a week after the requested return-by date for the original. A prize draw was arranged for each sweep of questionnaires. The questionnaires and accompanying letters were written in a friendly, encouraging tone, and as described above, were designed to encourage response wherever possible.

Course Type	College Population	Sample
Vocational	1308	436
<i>Art &amp; Design</i>	228	76
<i>Business Studies</i>	177	59
<i>Community Studies</i>	672	224
<i>Construction</i>	81	27
<i>Science and Technology</i>	150	50
Academic	933	311
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	1236	412
Male	1005	335
<b>Total</b>	<b>2241</b>	<b>747</b>

**Table 2.1 Survey sample by gender and course studied.**

Alternative steps to maximise the response rate were considered and rejected. It would have been possible to ask tutors to administer the questionnaires in class, rather than using the postal method. However, this would have linked the questionnaires very firmly in students' minds with the College, and there was a high risk of them confusing the purpose and intent of the questionnaire with the routine college evaluation questionnaires which were administered at around the same time through similar methods. There was also a substantial risk that students would believe their tutors would see their responses and that this would introduce significant bias to the data.

Another option would have been to take the standardized interview route, but once again resources were not available to facilitate this. There was also thought to be a risk that the face-to-face aspect of a standardised interview might make students question confidentiality and introduce bias. Thus the risk was taken of a lower response rate in the hope of enabling students to give more accurate responses, and better understanding the purpose and origin of the study. Table 2.2 shows the overall response rates, and rates for different questionnaires, broken down by gender, course type and drop out. There are slight, but consistent differences in each group, but these are only statistically significant in the case of drop out. 31.7 per cent of drop outs had responded to one or more questionnaire, while 58.4 per cent of persistors had done so. This could be in part because drop outs are more likely to have moved away and thus not received the questionnaire. They are also perhaps less likely to feel motivated to reply out of a sense of commitment to or interest in the college or FE in general.

Questionnaire	Gender		Course Type		Drop out		All
	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Drop outs</i>	<i>Persistors</i>	
Q1	147 <b>38.5</b>	126 <b>34.5</b>	128 <b>41.2</b>	145 <b>33.3</b>	38 <b>22.8</b>	235 <b>40.5</b>	273 <b>36.5</b>
Q2	118 <b>30.9</b>	104 <b>28.5</b>	106 <b>34.1</b>	116 <b>26.6</b>	32 <b>19.2</b>	219 <b>37.8</b>	222 <b>29.7</b>
Q3	74 <b>19.4</b>	77 <b>21.1</b>	65 <b>20.9</b>	86 <b>19.7</b>	24 <b>14.4</b>	127 <b>21.9</b>	151 <b>20.2</b>
At least one Questionnaire	197 <b>51.6</b>	175 <b>47.9</b>	177 <b>56.9</b>	215 <b>49.3</b>	53 <b>31.7</b>	339 <b>58.4</b>	392 <b>52.5</b>
Total in group	382 <b>100</b>	365 <b>100</b>	311 <b>100</b>	436 <b>100</b>	167 <b>100</b>	580 <b>100</b>	747 <b>100</b>

*[Percentages in bold.]*

**Table 2.2 Response Rates by gender, drop out and course type.**

While the overall response rate is good for a postal questionnaire, therefore, with 52.5 per cent of the sample answering at least one



questionnaire, the relatively small number of drop outs among respondents (53 drop outs; 339 persistors) limited the opportunity for advanced statistical analysis. Multivariate analysis, for example, would have been useful to compare the combination of different factors relating to drop out. But by the time the sample had been broken down to include more than two variables, the individual cell counts for any combinations were too low to reliably measure correlation or significance of association. The response was sufficient, however, to allow the use of descriptive statistics and simple 2 x 2 table crosstabs. This facilitated tests for association between drop out and key variables such as socio-economic background, parents' education and various aspects of prior educational experience. There was also a useful data set for the full sample of 747 from the college database.

Although ethnographic interviews do not have the same statistical demands placed upon them, sampling is still very important. Large numbers may not be required, but it is very important to ensure that those interviewed follow a coherent research strategy, if the research questions are to be properly investigated. The strategy centred on the principle of comparison: that the interview sample should provide opportunities for generating data from different perspectives, encompassing a range of experiences. Themes and issues related to the experience of drop out could then be identified through the analysis of similarities and differences between the contributors' stories. Purposive sampling also allowed for groups to be recruited to explore new themes arising out of initial findings from both the interviews and the survey data.

It is not of course the aim of a qualitative study to undertake enough interviews to make any findings statistically representative of the sample as a whole. Rather, the overall number of interviews completed was guided by the extent to which they contributed to an enhanced understanding of the research issues, within the time permitted by the project. In the event, thirty interviews were undertaken, distributed among four main analytic cohorts, as can be seen in Table 2.3.

<b>recent drop outs: (aged 19 or under, dropped out within the last two yrs)</b> <b>5 female, 3 male = 8 in total</b>			
<b><i>Name</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Course last studied</i></b>
Caroline	F	19	A-Levels
Clare	F	17	Hairdressing
Eve	F	18	Foundation Catering
Colin	M	17	A-Levels
Katy	F	17	Fresh Start +
Tim	M	17	Construction
Fiona	F	18	A-Levels
Simon	M	17	Electrical Engineering
<b>past drop outs: (aged 20 - 25, dropped out more than two years ago)</b> <b>3 female, 4 male = 7 in total</b>			
<b><i>Name</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Course last studied</i></b>
Brittney	F	19	Fashion
Brendan	M	18	Electrical Engineering
Buffy	F	20	Hair & Beauty
Billy	M	25	A-Levels/ Business Studies
Mark	M	23	Electrical Engineering
Phil	M	22	Electrical Engineering
Nora	F	25	A-Levels
<b>mature drop outs: (aged 29+, dropped out at 16-18)</b> <b>3 female, 2 male = 5 in total</b>			
<b><i>Name</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Course last studied</i></b>
Sarah	F	35	Hair & Beauty
Dave	M	42	Access to HE
Deb	F	29	Hair & Beauty
Tom	M	32	Electrical Engineering
Bianca	F	39	Media Studies
<b>persistors: (aged 19 or under, completed course)</b> <b>4 female, 2 male = 6 in total</b>			
<b><i>Name</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Age</i></b>	<b><i>Course last studied</i></b>
Josh	M	18	A-Levels
Jack	M	18	IT/ Tourism
Crystal	F	18	Childcare
Faith	F	18	A-Levels
Keira	F	19	A-Levels
Shelly	F	19	Business Admin.

**Table 2:3 Interviewees by gender, age and course studied**



The samples for the interviews were located in three ways. The initial sample was identified from those who had dropped out among the questionnaire cohort, and who indicated that they were agreeable to being contacted for an interview. Initially four individuals were selected from four different courses, balanced for gender and with four different but common reasons for leaving as provided on their questionnaire responses. When these interviews were complete further individuals in the same cohort were recruited using the same method, chosen to fill the same criteria but in addition to cover variation in perspectives on finance and attitudes to education. A third sample was recruited through the questionnaires to provide a group of persistors for comparison to test emerging themes. Two further groups were recruited six months later from outside the questionnaire sample, to investigate the perspectives and experiences of those who had dropped out some time ago. This direction was decided upon as the findings emerging from the original data set challenged some of the key assumptions in current policy, particularly that drop out was damaging to the individual concerned and posed a threat to their future confidence and success.

Two groups of long-term drop out were selected: those who had left two or more years ago and were still not in full-time education, and those who had left two or more years ago but had recently returned. Nine of these contributors (six in the former group, and three in the latter) were referred by colleagues who thought they might fit the criteria for the study. After further investigation four of these referrals were followed up and completed interviews, two in each group. The remaining interviewees were identified through student records as having the required attributes, with the exception of one, who was initially approached upon the recommendation of another interviewee.

The interviewees were very helpful and their stories were so fascinating it was very tempting to extend the study further and pursue yet more avenues of enquiry. However, mindful of the problems the huge volume of data generated by qualitative studies can pose (Miles and Huberman, 1994),

the research sample was restricted to that which would address the terms and themes of its original remit.

## *Survey*

The survey aimed to establish a ‘snapshot’ of a particular cohort of students at three intervals over a two year period. These snapshots took the form of three questionnaires. The first collected information at the beginning of the student’s course, the second at the beginning of their second year of study, and the third in the late summer after the end of their second year. Surveys were sent to the entire sample cohort, excepting only those for whom no address was available, and those who had requested not to be part of the research. Each student was sent the same questionnaire regardless of whether or not they had dropped out, in case the college records were inaccurate, as in fact proved to be the case.

The questionnaires were designed to measure a set of core variables over the two years, and additional variables pertinent to the particular timeframe in which the questionnaire went out. These variables were derived from the overall research questions. The questions covered seven main themes:

- Advice and Guidance
- Home Life
- Education
- Drop out and Persistence
- Finance
- Hopes and Worries
- Future aims

Questions were crafted within each section to measure the variables and factors within them. A range of different scales were used, dependent on the question-type and also to provide some variety for the respondents, as it was a moderately long questionnaire. Instructions were provided for each



question, and filtering routes were explained to spare respondents from working through irrelevant questions.

Inevitably the questionnaire included some personal questions and some which covered potentially sensitive topics. Questions were ordered carefully to allow the respondent to build confidence and to allow them to leave out any questions they felt uncomfortable answering, while still answering those they did not. Question phrasing was checked to make sure that wherever possible there were no value-judgements implied in the questions or the answers available. This was particularly important for questions on subjects such as truanting, where a hint of potential disapproval at the respondents' reply might have skewed responses, as well as being ethically (and analytically) questionable.

The scales and response options for the questions were based on initial informal discussions with students and staff. They were also informed by examples from prior research. The question and response types were chosen to be appropriate for the variable being measured, but also with consideration for the respondents' preferences. For example, although the sample was never likely to be large enough to enable full-scale factor analysis, attitude statements were given with a Likert scale because the pilot study showed that respondents found them familiar and easy to answer. Most questions provided space for additional comments, to allow the respondent to give voice to their experiences and opinions, rather than simply responding to the assumptions of the researcher. In fact some of the information collected in this way proved extremely useful in helping to shape the analysis and later stages of the research.

The age-group of the cohort helped to shape the overall question phrasing and the layout and presentation of the questionnaire. It was important to strike a balance between appearing patronising and over-official; between over-friendliness and officialdom; between eye-catching design and a clear, easy-to-use document. The questionnaire went through various forms before

settling on a clean, well-spaced format, using comic sans font and clear but professional English.

One of the biggest challenges for the questionnaire was to separate it from the official context of the research tools the college itself uses. The college logo was not used, and the envelopes were hand written and stamped so as to avoid the use of the college frank, and to emphasise the personal element of the research. The accompanying letter stated clearly that the researcher was undertaking the research as a PhD student at the University rather than as a college member of staff, and was produced on University, rather than official Thornton College letterhead. Each letter was hand-signed, and the reply addresses used a PO Box number.

The first draft of the first questionnaire was shared for discussion with work and academic colleagues, and underwent considerable revision before a pilot copy was produced. Unlike the first draft, the pilot copy was fully formatted and high-quality print, and included the colour cover with graphics. It was accompanied by a cover-letter explaining the research and inviting comment on the questionnaire.

This version then underwent a further two stages of piloting. First it was presented for completion and full discussion with a mixed group of seven staff and five students at the college. This proved very useful, particularly in refining some of the attitude statements, and the lists for aims and worries. It also provided some helpful feedback on the language used and the general tone, length and appeal of the questionnaire. Encouraged in particular by the students' opinions that the questionnaire was interesting and not too lengthy, extra statements were included in the education section.

The newly revised questionnaire was then distributed to a pilot sample of 50 students, twenty about to complete the first year of their A-level programmes, and thirty coming to the end of a one-year vocational programme. It was decided not to apply the pilot sample to two-year vocational students, as many of them were away from college on work-



experience at the time of the pilot, and there was a risk of low-response. Unlike the final version of the questionnaires, the pilot was administered and collected in lesson time, to ensure a robust response and thus a better test of the tool itself. For the questions with long lists of items, random-response ordering was used to check for ordinal bias.

The pilot questionnaire included a checklist for respondents to complete for each question, asking their opinion as to its clarity, relevance to them, interest value and ease of answering. They were also encouraged to provide comments. Once again, the pilot respondents proved very helpful, and their feedback led to further refinements in the questionnaire. In general the response was very positive, which was encouraging not just in terms of the reliability of the tool itself, but also lent hope to a reasonable response rate from the postal survey (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The questionnaire was then produced in its final form and posted to the sample with a reply-paid envelope and covering letter. The covering letter included an 'opt-out' slip, to encourage those who did not wish to take part to respond in this way, rather than not responding at all. A return address was provided on the reverse of the envelope, to enable non-deliverable questionnaires to be returned to the researcher.

Each questionnaire was labelled with a number, which corresponded via a code to an individual reference number on the project database. In turn, the database number was an encoded version of part of the student's reference number on the college system. This meant that the project database could include data from the college system alongside the survey data, without identifying individual students. The only information imported from the college system was the students' course-type, gender, official date of drop out (if they had dropped out) and the first half of their postcode. Further database fields recorded the date each questionnaire response was received, the answer to each question and field notes. These included a field which allowed the researcher to select a 'questionable' option, if there were any doubts about the validity of the responses to the questionnaire, such as wildly inconsistent

responses or unclear marks or comments. This field was later used when defining missing or invalid data, to quickly highlight dubious responses for testing.

Coding frames were drawn up to code the questionnaires for data entry. The points learned through this process also influenced the refinement of the design of the later questionnaires. For example, it was noted that some respondents misunderstood the filtering instructions for questions, and while this didn't affect the data it did mean that they ended up answering questions which must have appeared inappropriate to them. It also raised some doubts as to whether or not their initial response which should have led them to the filtered path was accurate, thus threatening the integrity of the data.

In some cases responses were excluded all together and recorded as 'missing data'. This was done where an answer was incomplete in such a way as the response could be misleading; dubious for some reason; where questionnaires were returned uncompleted; and when the respondent requested their data be withdrawn from the study. In the latter instance *all* information on that respondent was expunged from the data set completely.

Where a value judgement of some kind was being made regarding the inclusion or exclusion of data, opinions were sought from colleagues to reduce the possibility of bias or interpretative errors on my part.

The numeric responses to each questionnaire were stored on an SPSS database, while responses to the open questions were recorded in a Microsoft Access database, cross-referenced by questionnaire number. This posed some problems at the analysis stage, as discussed below, but was done initially in an attempt to ensure that the qualitative data was dealt with separately, resisting the urge to code too early but rather to let the full body of open answers accumulate before summarising them in a more grounded fashion.

Once the data had been entered, full range-checks were run in SPSS to ensure that all entries were within the expected ranges and spot-checks were



also completed on a random sample of 10 per cent of entries to check for internal consistency. Only a very small number of mistakes were identified, suggesting that the integrity of the dataset overall is high.

## *Interviews*

The interviews were designed to gain as detailed picture as possible of each contributor's experience and perspectives, not just on drop out but on the broader issues of education and employment. To ensure that the focus was not restricted strictly to their college experience, and to reduce the impact of the educational setting of the interview itself, a biographical approach was adopted (Chamberlayne et al, 2002). This meant that the contributors' experiences of drop out were placed within a rich context of their life experiences as they recalled them at the time of the interview.

It was important to put the contributors at ease, and to build rapport quickly, especially as the focus of the interviews was on events and opinions which could be of a sensitive nature. The research was planned to make the interviews as unthreatening for the contributors as possible. Two venues were used: one a room in college, the other a corner in a city-centre café. The college room was a small meeting room usually used for staff meetings. It was a neutral environment, with reasonably comfortable seating and facilities for making hot drinks. The furniture was arranged in such a way as to encourage contributors to relax and share control over the interaction on an equal basis. The café appeared to be a more public venue, but the interviews took place in a corner which the proprietors kindly roped off for the purpose. The seating was comfortable, and contributors could smoke if they wished. The corner was a suitable distance from other patrons so that the conversation could not be overheard, and on only two occasions were there any other patrons in the café at the time of the interview: in both cases they were seated well away from the interview. The interviews were tape recorded (with the contributors' consent) but the small digital recorder was placed unobtrusively on the table between contributor and researcher.

Contributors were offered a choice of venues. Most of the current students chose the college venue, while those not at college chose the café. All of the respondents appeared comfortable in their surroundings once the interview was underway. Travel costs were covered for contributors with a little extra for general expenses, and those who were interviewed at the college were given a gift voucher as a token of appreciation.

One of the biggest challenges for interviewers is building a rapport with their contributors (Arksey and Knight, 1999). This research was no different: in fact the sample posed particular problems all of its own. It was feared that contributors might be reluctant and nervous for various reasons. For some, if drop out had been a negative experience, as might be expected from previous studies and the assumptions of policy makers, contributors might not feel comfortable talking about it with anyone, least of all someone connected with education. They may have felt intimidated. Most of the students would be young, and could lack confidence in talking about their lives and decisions. They were likely to have little experience of this kind of conversation. They may have felt uncomfortable talking with an interviewer who was significantly older than they were (Coleman et al, 1998). Pilot interviews with student volunteers showed a tendency the researcher had encountered before, where young students, especially males, found it difficult to open up and tended to give simple, often one or two word answers to even the most complicated questions, usually out of shyness or other forms of discomfort.

Two further pilot interviews were conducted using the 'Rickter Scale'<sup>TM</sup>. This is a tool developed by practitioners in the probation service for use with their clients. It consists of a board with ten sliding scales, alongside different aspects of lifestyle, including education, employment, drugs and relationships. In an interview the interviewee holds the board, which is designed to be attractive and tactile. They are asked to rate each aspect out of ten by sliding the slider to the appropriate number. The interviewer can then ask them to talk around their rating and encourage them to discuss more general themes, including how the different aspects relate to each other, how



they have changed over time and so forth. The physical possession of the board helps to even the power-relationship, and encourages the interviewee to take control of the conversation. The pilot interviews using the board went well, but it was decided not to use it for further interviews, for two reasons. Firstly, the ten questions were a little limiting and lent more structure to the interview than was required. Secondly, and most importantly, it transpired through the last interviewee that the Connexions Personal Adviser at Thornton College had just begun to use the board in her interviews with clients. It was decided that the risk of associating the research interview with an aspect of advice and guidance specifically targetted at some of the research issues was too great for the limited rewards the use of the board offered. The strategy was, therefore, rejected.

What was needed was a way to quickly break down the contributor/researcher barriers and establish a friendly, open tone to the interviews. While the consent process went some way to reassuring contributors, it also tended to feel a little formal and required signatures on a form, which did little to contribute to the rapport-building, however friendly the researcher. A chance remark from a friend suggested a solution. "What you need," the friend said, "is to sit down with them on the sofa and go through their photo album." This idea proved to be a very powerful tool, and a highly effective ice-breaker. A week before the interviews, the researcher met with the contributor to brief them on the project and ask if they were still happy to take part. The consent form was explained and completed, then left with the contributor to read through again at their leisure. The researcher then gave the contributor a disposable camera. The contributor was asked to use up the film taking photographs of anything that they felt was important or interesting about their lives at that time. The contributor then returned the camera to the researcher in the reply-paid envelope with the consent form, at which point an interview was arranged. Two contributors decided not to go ahead with the interviews and simply returned the empty cameras and forms with a note of apology. This was, I believe, a sign that the consent process was working. By giving those potential contributors a small task and a chance to reflect before committing themselves, they were offered a genuine

opportunity to say no. If the consent process had taken place at the start of an arranged interview, they might have found it more difficult to decline, and gone ahead with the interview even if they felt uncomfortable.

The researcher processed the film and obtained two copies of the prints. One of these was kept as part of the project data (with the contributor's permission, of course) and the other was put in an inexpensive photo album and given to the contributor at the start of the interview. The very first interview activity, then, was not to complete forms, but to sit down with a hot drink and share the photos. The contributor was invited to guide the researcher through the photos, saying why they had chosen to take each one and what the significance of it was to them.

As well as being an excellent ice-breaker, a lot was learned about each contributor from their photos. It successfully took the focus from drop out specifically, and into the broader spectrum of the people, places and events which were important to them. These perspectives were also helpful when analysing other parts of the interview, and gave a point of reference for contributors. They often went back to the photos later in the interview; for example, Billy:

*"My uncle, he was in that first photo I showed you, with his van? I spent a lot of time with him that summer."*

This made the experience more real and personal for both contributor and researcher. From a researcher's point of view, the use of images helped a great deal in retaining memory of those parts of the interview which do not appear on tape. The extract above appears in my field notes as follows:

*"Most of Billy's photographs were of his family and many related to his job... [...] He was proud to show his uncle's van and tools and often referred back to those pictures with a smile and fond expression."*



When reading back the transcripts and coding them alongside the field notes, the photographs were once again useful in adding context and a sense of reality to the data.

The interviews proceeded in an informal fashion, given shape by the interview guide but not following a list of prescriptive questions. After the ice-breaking exercise, the contributors were invited to talk about their earliest experiences of school. From there they were guided through their educational and working life to the present day. For most respondents this was not a linear journey, but diverted and flicked back and forth within their timeline as different experiences and themes were explored. The next stage of the interview focused on details of experiences, particularly any of the research themes that had not been covered in depth through the biographical part of the interview. Questions were not asked in isolation, however, but linked into the context and background the contributor had already shared. This helped to build rapport with the contributor, and to situate their responses within the histories they had offered.

Finally the interview was concluded with some general questions about the future, and contributors were asked for any recommendations or opinions which they would like the college to consider as a result of their experience. This helped to provide some distance from the more personal and in some cases intense experiences they had related, and drew the conversation to a comfortable close.

Although the interviews were not expected to last for more than 45 minutes, two hours was always allowed, in case the interview ran over (most in fact took around an hour in practice). This also meant that the end of the interview was not rushed and could be guided according to the comfort of the contributor rather than the pressure of a timetable. Field notes were written up immediately after the interview, and added to at intervals throughout the data generation and analysis process.

The recordings were transcribed within a week of each interview, earlier in some cases. This speedy process helped to maximise data capture as the researcher's memory was reasonably fresh, aiding interpretation. Once complete, each transcript was read through carefully and a list of possible codes was generated. At the same time ideas for further interviews or interrogation of the quantitative data were noted.

The transcripts were stored as password-protected Microsoft Word documents, and the photographs were scanned into the computer. Once all the interviews were complete, the documents and photographs were imported to *Atlas ti* for analysis.

## **Methods: Analysis**

### ***Analysis of quantitative materials***

The survey data was analysed using SPSS. Once the data was entered and cleaned, frequency analyses were completed on all the variables, producing raw frequencies and percentages. These were printed out and formed a 'directory' of the raw data, which was used to design the rest of the analysis. The frequency tables were scrutinised to identify early trends, and also to produce a list of possible ways in which the categories for each variable could be summarised. Questions and categories with particularly low frequencies were noted and excluded from further analysis where appropriate. The profile of respondents was produced and checked for any bias from particular categories of respondent, as presented in Table 2.2. Additional checks were undertaken to test for signs of 're-invention'. Concern has been raised in prior studies (for example, Martinez, 1996) that if a drop out is consulted after the event about factors which contributed to their leaving early, they may subconsciously or consciously re-invent the past and produce an account which better justifies their actions. This could involve shifting blame or re-interpreting or re-inventing contributory factors. As drop out is thought to be associated with feelings of failure this seemed plausible or even likely to take place in this research. In the final questionnaire, therefore,



respondents were asked a number of questions which were duplicates of the first questionnaire, on topics such as experiences at school, support from family and first impressions of college. These were then checked for consistency. No significant difference was noted between drop outs and persistors in this regard. It is therefore concluded that re-invention related specifically to the experience of drop out is not likely to have occurred.

Each variable was then cross tabulated against drop out, using a pearson chi-square test for significance. These tables were further scrutinised and a summary of interpretative statements added to each. These interpretations directed bivariate analysis to explore other, more complex associations. Questions arising from the qualitative analysis were also used to direct this inquiry. Responses to the open questions were printed out and coded as qualitative data.

Finally the interpretative statements from all the tables where trends were apparent and associations proved significant according to the chi-square test were compiled and summarised as key findings alongside the qualitative outcomes. These tables are included with test scores in Appendix 4.

### ***Analysis of qualitative materials***

The initial list of codes produced when the transcripts were made were entered into *Atlas ti* and used to make the initial coding pass through all the data, including the photographs. These codes were then refined using the counting tools and the researcher's field notes and early interpretations, and a second pass through the data was completed.

The coded quotations were then printed and further examined, and comparisons were made for different categories of items, including the interview group, gender, age group and subjects studied, as well as coded themes such as family background and employment.

By this stage some tentative interpretations of the data were emerging. These were summarised into a series of themes, including family, success/failure, identity, employment, fun and educational engagement. Each theme was further explored and broken down into strands. As ideas emerged they were tested in a number of ways:

- Within the data set, ensuring that findings from one area of the data were not contradicted by other sources.
- With alternative interpretations which could fit the data equally well: ‘how else could this be explained?’, which were then checked against the whole data set.
- With the quantitative data. Although this was of limited usefulness, as the quantitative study was designed to do a different job, it was still a helpful point of reference. Some of the answers to open questions, in particular, helped to refute or confirm interpretations, and the survey offered a wider framework of experience within which to locate the individuals in the qualitative study.
- The photographs were included in the analysis from the beginning, and often served as useful markers and symbols for the emerging ideas and interpretations.
- With further study. The analysis began from the coding of the first transcript, and each set of findings helped broadly to inform the sampling and the focus of consequent interviews.

*Atlas ti* proved very useful in providing some objective distance from the data while allowing it to be organised, coded, checked and re-coded effectively.

### ***Synthesising qualitative and quantitative data***

The analysis of the data sets resulted in a list of summary findings from each. These were then considered together, identifying and resolving points of difference and taking note of areas where the findings re-inforced



each other. At this stage the key themes and outcomes of the research crystallized and the analysis began to feel complete.

The research design also allowed for trends observed in the survey data to be explored in depth through the interviews, and vice-versa. This simple triangulation method helped to challenge and establish the validity of findings from the survey where statistical tests could not be relied upon. The process of triangulation was approached with caution, due to concerns over the limitations of the specific data types. I was careful to bear in mind throughout the research that the two strands had different, if related, purposes. Qualitative data were collected to investigate meanings and individual experiences, while quantitative data provided a broader description of trends and patterns from the wider population. Nonetheless, the fact that on key points the two sets of data re-enforced each others' findings does raise confidence in the interpretations offered.

The logical next step for the research would be to conduct a survey of sufficient scale to allow for full multivariate analysis to test the tentative findings and interpretations from both data sets presented in this thesis. Logistic regression techniques would also be useful to examine patterns of causality and consequence. However, such a study would require a sample of such size as to involve a number of colleges and is well outside the scope of the research presented here.

## **Reflections on the Research Process**

The two-strand approach afforded a useful opportunity to combine the advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods to produce data which offers both descriptive and interpretive elements. This was particularly useful for the investigation of a topic which has relevance at a strategic, theoretical and, for the students and staff involved, personal level. The design did have drawbacks, however. Chief of these are the limitations of scope imposed by

the resources available. This impacted in two areas: the sample size, and the interviewing strategy.

In the case of the sample size, it would have been extremely useful to expand the study to provide sufficient responses to enable multivariate analysis. However, there was insufficient time to deal with a larger study, especially considering the additional difficulties of gaining access to another institution. It would also have introduced many new variables which, while interesting and of value, would have been impossible to investigate properly. It would also have been useful to conduct further quantitative work to test the wider generalisability of the conclusions presented in this thesis, but once again this would have been beyond the scope of a piece of doctoral research. It is hoped that future opportunities to do so may arise.

The interview strategy was also necessarily limited. It would have been helpful to interview individuals recurrently throughout their time at college and beyond. This would enable a more accurate assessment of the impact of drop out in the short, medium and long term. However, the alternative strategy of age sampling still revealed very useful results and in a reasonable time scale.

### ***Ethical Concerns***

The research was carried out to the standards of the British Sociological Association's guidelines (BSA 2004). The cohort taking part in the research presented specific ethical challenges in addition to those usually encountered in social research. I gave considerable thought to these challenges, and discussed widely with colleagues and my supervisor to make sure I could be confident that necessary measures were taken to support the well-being of the contributors first of all, and then to maximise the quality, reliability and validity of the data.

It was particularly important to be aware of, and where possible to mitigate for, the potential power-balance between researcher and contributor.



Many of the contributors to the interviews and all the survey respondents were young people, and as students at the college could be expected to look to a member of staff at the college as a figure of authority. It was essential for the ease of the contributors as well as the quality of the research to leave the staff/student relationship as far as possible from our interactions, whether by interview or questionnaire. To this end I took care to explain my dual roles of staff member at the college and PhD student at the university, both in the letters that accompanied the questionnaires and interview invitations, and at the start and end of the interviews themselves. The confidential nature of the research was repeatedly emphasised. I dressed informally for the interviews, and did not wear my staff ID badge or any other items which might be associated with my 'day job'. The preamble to all the interviews included an outline of my desire to capture their opinions and points of view, regardless of whether or not they might concur with those of the college or myself as a member of staff.

The relationship was aided somewhat by the fact that I have little student contact outside of research settings, and when I do it is in a general informational capacity. If I had taught or advised them more personally, it might have been more of a problem than it was. There were also certain advantages in that I had previous experience of doing research with similar cohorts. It enabled me to plan ahead to overcome common difficulties, and made me feel more at ease in the situation, which hopefully communicated itself to the contributors and helped them to feel more comfortable as well.

### *Assumptions and Bias*

General limitations of the research are considered in the final chapter, but I wish specifically to document my reflections on the possibilities of bias in the results I discuss in the following chapters, to enable the reader to judge the thesis with these human shortcomings in mind.

Despite my sincere commitment to representing the perspectives and experiences shared by the contributors to the research, it is inevitable that at times my own views and ideas tried to take over. As a member of staff at the college I could see alternative perspectives on many of the topics students told me about. I have studied retention from the college's point of view, and knew that the managers who were so supportive of my work would dearly love for me to come up with a solution for drop out, rather than a thesis which challenges the very assumptions upon which the quality and funding structures of the college are based.

There is also the possibility that assumptions on the part of the students may have affected the data. Although I took every effort I could to build good rapport with contributors, and to make it clear that my research was not connected directly with the college, nonetheless it is possible that they told me to some degree what they thought I wanted to hear. I reflected on this possibility, along with my own assumptions, after each interview, and believe the impact was small, but it is nonetheless a risk that should be acknowledged. Similar biases and/or simple errors may also have guided answers to the survey questions (and indeed information given to the college information systems), and as the sample is relatively small it is difficult to statistically compensate for this.

The potential for bias was also compounded by the fact that I was acting alone. In other projects I have worked often as a member of a team, and found I missed the opportunity for grounding of ideas and perspectives that this approach offers. I was fortunate to have the support of my PhD supervisor and other colleagues in this regard, but it is never quite as powerful as being able to share and discuss data with other researchers working actively on the same project.

### *A Fresh Pair of Eyes*

However reflective a researcher aims to be, everyone has their own personal blind spots. In my case I was very aware of how 'close' I was to the



data, and to the people behind the words and numbers. I felt a strong commitment to telling their stories which, at times, crossed the line into wishing to defend or champion their cause, as I perceived it. At the same time, I found myself sometimes faced with patterns in the data which seemed strong but were apparently meaningless. At these times I was indebted to my supervisor, my first-reader and my colleagues, all of whom brought something different and challenging to the analysis, and helped to stop me going off the rails.

### *Conclusions*

The research consisted of two inter-related strands, which used survey and college information alongside depth interviews with students, in order to investigate the experience of drop out from students' perspectives.

The next chapter begins the presentation of findings from the research, with an outline of the trends and patterns in drop out for the selected cohort.

## Chapter 3: Trends and Causes of Drop Out

*“Why did I drop out? It was no big deal. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, it was just that I changed my mind. I never really got why that was a problem.”*

*(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)*

The current approach to drop out has been shaped by a set of assumptions, including the assertion that the best occupation for 16-18 year olds is full time education. Drop out has therefore been seen as problematic, and evidence collected to inform interventions and prevention strategies. Indeed, drop out is so bound up in strategic objectives that its very definition is related to the funding regime for colleges. In most college-based studies drop outs are defined as those who leave on or after the first ‘census’ date at which financial returns are made to the Learning and Skills Council, which was October, despite the substantial numbers who leave before that date (Kenwright, 1997; Martinez, 1996).

This study put these assumptions about drop out to one side, and aimed to take a fresh look at the subject, primarily from the students’ perspectives. The findings challenge the view of drop out as necessarily problematic, and set the experience of drop out within the wider context of students’ lives. The respondents, from a sample of 747 selected at the beginning of the academic year, were surveyed over a period of two years, regardless of whether they completed the course on which they embarked at the start. The analysis also considered the college perspective and the drive to increase student retention, with a view to estimating the likely impact and relevance of such interventions.

This chapter sets out the survey findings in four main sections. Firstly, it looks at characteristics that were shared by groups of drop outs, and the reasons given for dropping out. The experience of drop out is then set in the wider context of students’ lives, including an examination of the role family, friends, school and finance play in regard to drop out. Attention is then turned towards the potential for preventing drop out, discussing how drop out may be



predicted and what likely impact interventions may have. Finally I consider whether, in light of the survey evidence, drop out is, as has been suggested, an accurate indicator of failure for the college or for the drop out themselves.

Data are presented in graphical and condensed form in this chapter for illustrative purposes. Full data tables may be found in Appendix 4.

## **Who Drops Out, and Why?**

The first step to understanding the causes of drop out is to get a clearer picture of what, if any, characteristics these students share. We start, therefore, with a look at some of the basic variables that might be expected to play a part.

### ***Profiling Drop Out***

As Table 3.1 shows, drop outs and persistors were roughly equally likely to be male or female. There were some differences in drop out rates between the different curriculum areas included in the survey, which is consistent with other studies (Kenwright, 1996, 1997; Knowsley Community College 1995; Martinez, 1996). There is also a good deal of detail hidden behind these general figures: for example the rates between different A-Level courses varied considerably from subject to subject, while rates were more consistent in the Business Studies area. However, a further examination of college records showed that such variation was inconsistent year-on-year, and a look at the national data shows that there is further variation between colleges.

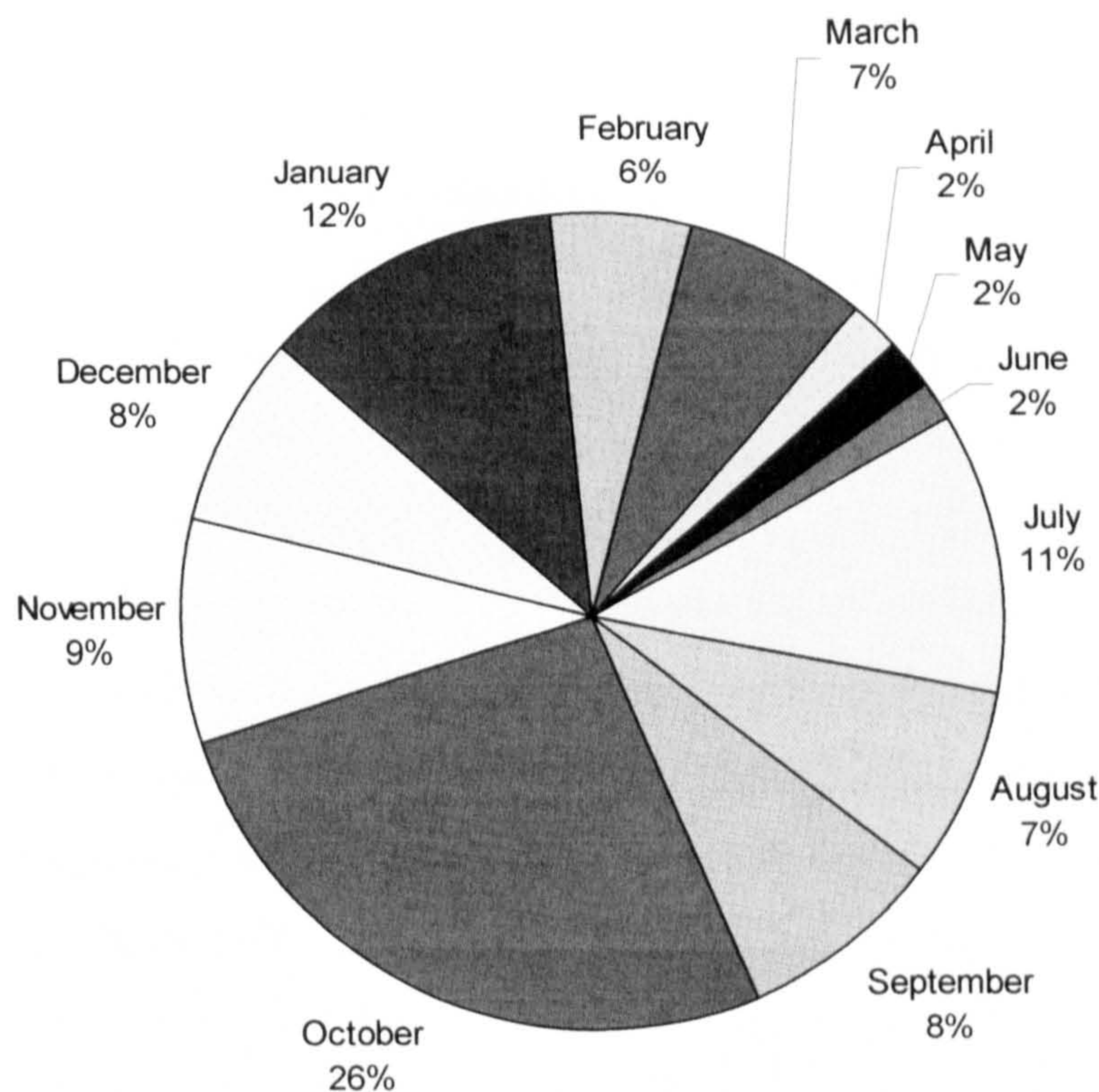
	% of Drop Outs ( <i>n</i> )	% of Persistors ( <i>n</i> )	Total % ( <i>n</i> )
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	21 (260)	79 (976)	100 (1236)
Male	24 (241)	76 (764)	100 (1005)
<b>Curriculum</b>			
Vocational - Art & Design	23 (55)	77 (173)	100 (228)
Vocational - Business	27 (48)	73 (129)	100 (177)
Vocational - Community	29 (195)	71 (477)	100 (672)
Vocational – Construction	31 (25)	69 (56)	100 (81)
Vocational - Science & Technology	32 (48)	68 (102)	100 (150)
A-Levels	18 (168)	82 (765)	100 (933)
<b>All students</b>	<b>22 (501)</b>	<b>78 (1740)</b>	<b>100 (2241)</b>

**Table 3.1: Drop out of 16-19 year old students enrolled on full time programmes, by Gender and Curriculum**  
*Source: College Information Systems, Accessed 2001.*

Drop out is more likely to occur at some times of year than others, as Figure 3.1 shows. Drop out is most common around vacation times, particularly the Autumn half term, the Christmas holidays and the summer vacation for those expected to return for a second or third year.

There are several possible explanations for this. Breaks from college give students an opportunity for reflection, to try new experiences and re-evaluate their aims and options. They are likely to be spending more time with people not associated with college, which could change their viewpoint. It is also a convenient point for detachment. Some students could find it easier to make the decision to leave when they are not in daily contact with teachers and classmates they do not wish to disappoint. Variation could also be accounted for by the characteristics of particular vocational areas. While this





**Figure 3.1: Drop Outs distributed by Month of drop out.**  
*Source: College Data, total n = 501*

might not always show up in percentage drop out rates, specific causes of drop out related to the course activities or vocational aspects could be related to vocational area. For example Hair and Beauty students seemed more likely to drop out during the work placement period, perhaps because first-hand experience of their chosen career made them question their choice, or possibly because they had been offered a job by their placement employer. There is evidence of both these instances in comments given in survey replies, but insufficient data to draw any firm conclusions.

Vacations are also milestones in the academic year: as one surveyed student commented in response to a survey question about whether or not they had considered dropping out:



*“I thought about it, but I decided to give it ‘til Christmas and see if it got better, and it did.”*

(Jack, age 18, persister, completed IT)

For some students there is a decline in attendance for some time before the formal decision to drop out is made, as noted by Kenwright (1997). Once again, vacations provide milestones and a time for reflection that could provide the final end-point for a decision-making process which has been going on for some time. This is congruent with Elder and Russell’s life course theory and the notion of a ‘turning point’ resulting from a break from one context (college life, in this case) coupled with exposure to new ideas and opportunities (Elder, 1995; Elder and Russell, 2000).

### ***Reasons for Dropping Out***

Current policy and practice concerning drop out assumes that students who leave early have quantifiable reasons for doing so, and that these reasons can provide insight into how their drop out could have been prevented at an institutional level. However, the collection of reasons for leaving is problematic for colleges (Donovan 1996). In Thornton College, reasons were commonly collected via a withdrawal form. This was completed by the student’s progress tutor (their overall personal tutor rather than the teacher for a particular class) and then passed to the college’s information systems to be recorded on the Individual Student Record. The amount of detail transferred to the computerised records varies from college to college, and within Thornton College, between different courses, depending upon the requirements of the different accreditation and funding bodies. Thornton College’s form include a range of reasons, to allow for multiple reasons to be recorded, but only one reason was entered onto the computer system, and that only for HE students. If there was more than one reason recorded on the form, the first reason ticked in the list was entered.

For FE students, no reasons were routinely recorded on the computer system. This meant that the information on drop out that college managers



were given, and that passed on to a regional and national level, was very simple – the percentage of students who have formally dropped out of each as recorded at a specific date. These figures inform national policy and are used to measure institutional performance and in some colleges (including Thornton College) managers' performance as well.

The forms used by most colleges, where they allow for the selection of more than one reason for leaving, do not invite any further detail regarding the relative importance of different reasons. Little of the published research in the area offers much information of this kind, either, although the complexity of reasons given is often mentioned (Martinez, 1996; Page, 1996). The questionnaire for this study, therefore, was designed to collect not only the reasons students identified for their dropping out or considering drop out, but the level of importance of each reason. Furthermore, the reasons are not expected to be exclusive; overlap is expected and intended to provide a more realistic and complex picture than if broader categories had been provided.

The reasons for leaving given are shown in Figure 3.2. Each of the following four reasons were given by more than half of the respondents who had dropped out:

- a) they had changed their aims;
- b) they wanted to look for a job;
- c) they were experiencing financial problems or
- d) they had been offered a job.

These reasons all cluster around the theme of *change* for the individual student, and the last three specifically imply a change from a life in education to a transition into the world of work.

The next most popular cluster, by contrast, is to do with *difficulties*. The following were given as reasons by between a quarter and a half of respondents:

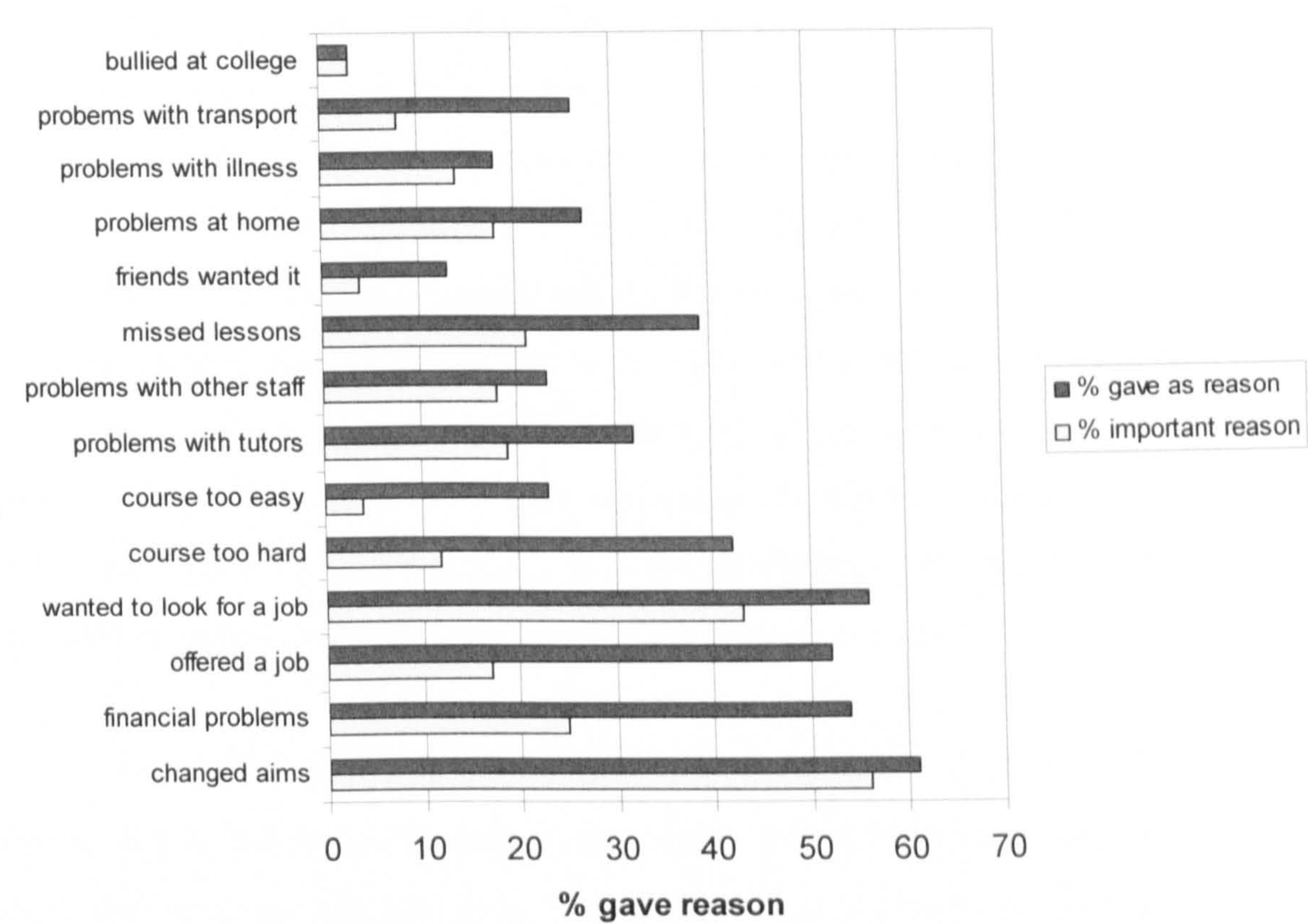
- a) they found the course too hard;
- b) they had missed lessons and were worried about returning;



- c) they had problems with their teachers;
- d) they had problems at home;
- e) they had transport problems.

The ‘difficulties’ theme is also applicable for the next cluster, of reasons given by around a fifth of respondents:

- a) that they found the course too easy;
- b) that they had problems with staff other than their teachers; and
- c) that they had problems with illness.



**Figure 3.2: % Reasons for leaving and important reason for leaving.**  
*Source: Survey data, 2001, drop outs. n=167*

Figure 3.2 also shows the percentage of respondents who selected particular reasons as being ‘important’ reasons for leaving. There is a noticeable difference in the relative popularity of different reasons when this is taken into account. While changing aims is not only the most common reason but also the most common *important* reason, others such as financial problems, being offered a job and difficulties with course or staff are much less popular. This could suggest that within the cluster of reasons there are

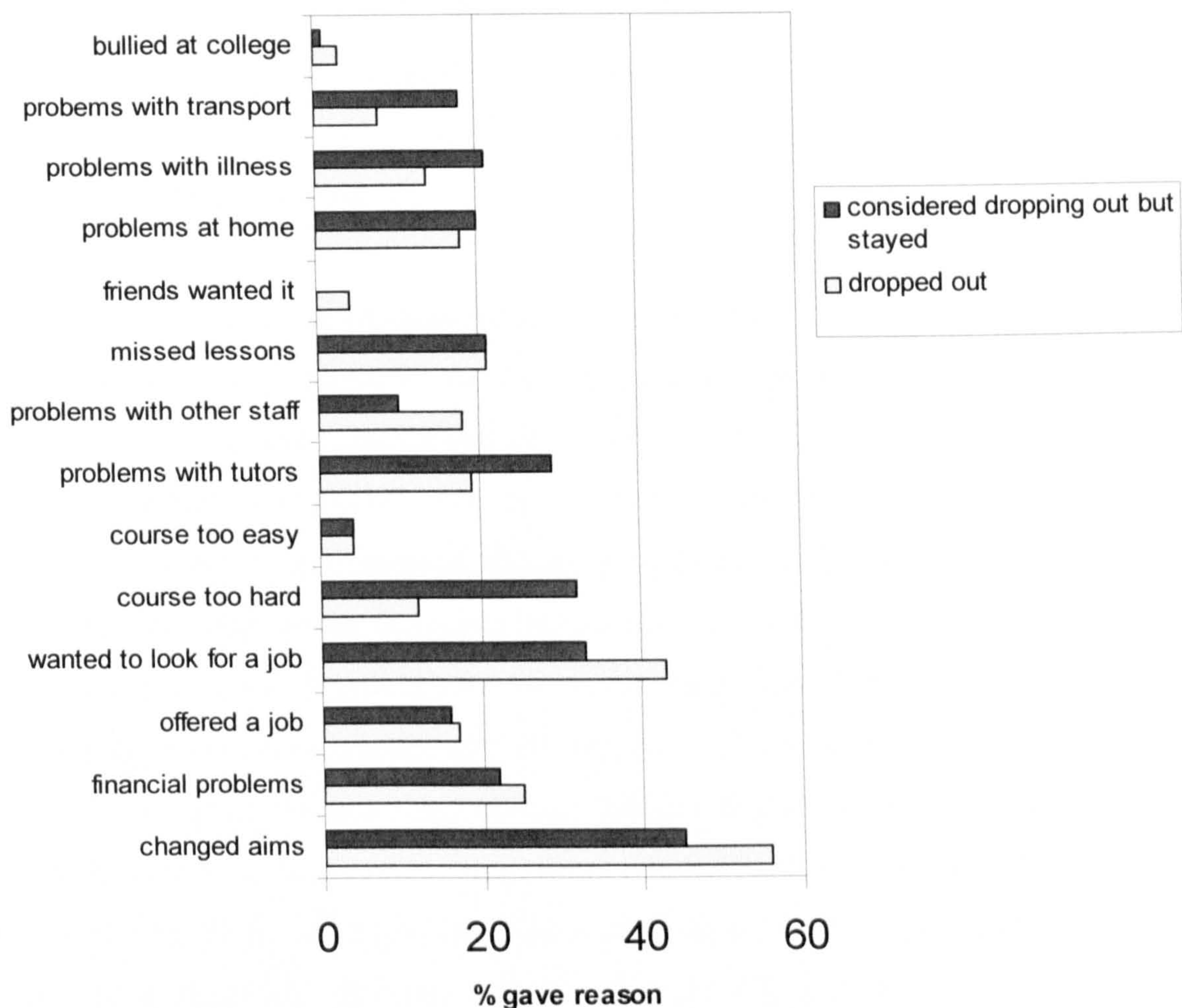


some that are a more decisive or perhaps ‘trigger’ factor, which precipitate or encompass the student’s decision to leave. Financial reasons might be one example of this, which could explain the success of EMAs. However, without further understanding the relationship between different reasons and the process of decision making which determines which reason the student finds most powerful, it is not possible from this data to suggest how the differences in importance come about.

97 per cent of respondents gave more than one reason for leaving, and more than four out of every five students gave more than one reason which they rated as important. A third gave more than one ‘very important’ reason. This confirms the paucity of the data collected through college systems. It also strongly suggests that students’ reasons for leaving are complex. The broad categories of ‘change’ and difficulty’ can also be helpful to interpret the data when multiple reasons are considered. 63 per cent gave reasons only in the ‘change’ cluster, 30 per cent reasons in the ‘difficulty’ clusters, and only 7 per cent gave reasons from both clusters. In those cases the mixture was ‘changed aims’ alongside problems with their course and/or teachers, suggesting that either they were reconsidering due to those difficulties, or perhaps that the difficulties were in some way caused by their change of aims.

Looking at how multiple reasons are clustered also demonstrates the complexity of the factors leading to the student’s decision to drop out. In the case of those drop outs who gave ‘changed aims’ as a reason for leaving, for example, more than three quarters also gave ‘offered a job’ or ‘wanted to look for a job’, while almost half also gave ‘financial problems’ or ‘course was too hard’. This suggests a scenario where, for example, a student might have been finding the course difficult, perhaps having a few money problems, and when a job offer comes along they reconsider their options and change their aims. It could also be, however, that they find their course difficult *because* they have to work part time to make ends meet, and therefore decide to pursue full-time work rather than full-time education. Either of these scenarios could have very different implications for policy and practice.





**Figure 3.3: % Important Reasons for leaving by drop outs and persistors who had considered drop out.**  
*Source: Survey data, 2001, drop outs. n=167 (drop outs) n=84 (persistors)*

Reasons for leaving given by those who actually dropped out and those who considered dropping out but stayed (49 per cent of the survey respondents) were similar, as Figure 3.3 shows. There is a somewhat greater tendency for the persistors to have considered leaving for reasons in the ‘difficulties’ cluster rather than the ‘change’ cluster. The data is insufficient to derive any specific conclusions, but it is possible that learners were more likely to overcome their difficulties if their overall aims were still the same (and presumably involved completing their course).

This consideration of the reasons given by students for dropping out, or considering dropping out, hints at a complex set of circumstances contributing to the student’s final decision. These circumstances are not limited to institutional factors, but cover many different aspects of the



student's life. It is important, therefore, to consider the students' social, educational and economic contexts as well as the specific reasons given.

## **Drop Out in Context**

Research into the educational achievement of children in schools has established a clear relationship between social and cultural background and children's progress and achievement (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). This survey suggests that similar relationships exist for young people in Further Education in relation to drop out. However, the differences are far from definitive or absolute: while the trends described below can be used to distinguish drop outs from persistors, it should also be remembered that in many, often the majority of cases, those differences do not exist. The relationships between students' backgrounds and their college life are complex and far-ranging, which can make generalisations dangerous. However, the findings from the survey can highlight some particular areas of students' lives that appear to be of particular importance in relation to drop out, and it is with this purpose that they are presented here. Interview data was used to help put meaning to the survey findings, and is included to support the interpretations suggested.

Overall, students from cultural backgrounds where education is held to be important and is supported, and where their own and their family and friends' experiences of education have been positive are less likely to drop out. Four specific areas seem to bear a strong relation to students' decisions to drop out or persist, namely a) family, b) finance, c) friends and d) school. These areas often overlap and interact with each other, but can usefully be examined in turn to identify characteristics that are likely to be of importance.

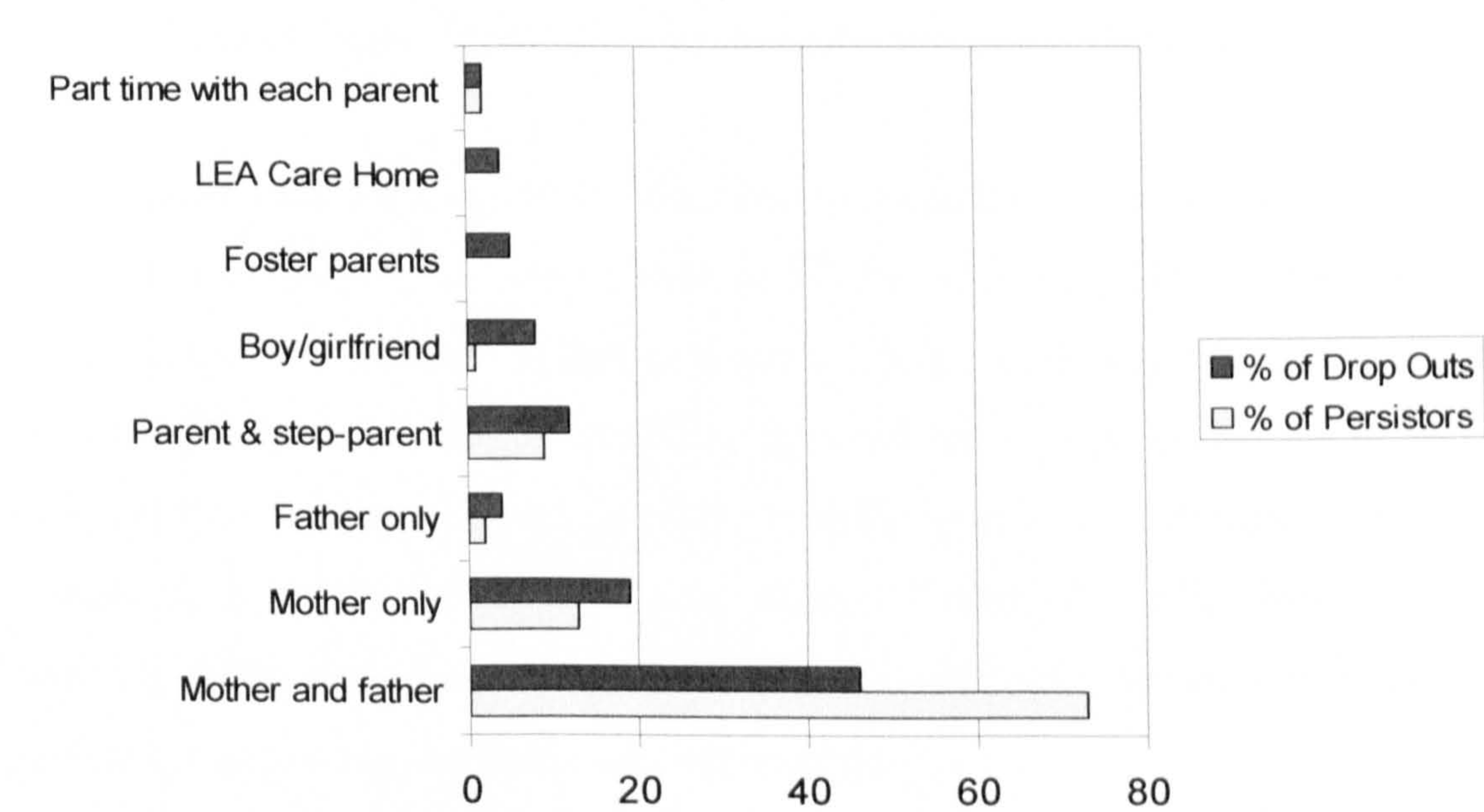
### ***Family***

Drop outs are more likely to be living with a lone parent, step-parent, boy/girlfriend or part time with each parent, while persistors are much more likely to be living with their mother and father, as can be seen in Figure 3.4. It is not clear why this should have a bearing upon educational choices, but it is



possible that young people living with both parents are perhaps more likely to be guided in their decisions by their parents; or that the apparent stability of their home life means they are less likely to pursue wider experiences. However, these are suggestions rooted in assumptions about the dynamics of different family groupings that could prove erroneous.

Drop outs are also more likely to be living with foster parents or in care. Issues of educational difficulties experienced by children cared for by the Local Authorities are well documented elsewhere, and it seems plausible that these problems would persist or even worsen during post-compulsory education (Mitchell, 1999; Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).



**Figure 3.4: Household Composition of Drop Outs and Persistors**  
*Source: Survey Data. n=159, p < 0.05*

	% of Drop Outs (n)	% of Persistors (n)
Has bedroom to self *	85 (22)	93 (124)
Has room to study in *	64 (16)	88 (112)
Has use of computer at home	69 (18)	80 (107)

**Table 3.2: Drop out and household living arrangements.**  
*Source: Survey Data, n=159 \* p<0.05*



As Table 3.2 shows, drop outs are more likely to be sharing a room with a sibling and less likely to have space at home where they can study quietly. They are also much less likely to have a computer at home which they can use. Some interviewees also reported that family life and home was not geared towards learning:

*“I never had anywhere to study at home. (...) We weren’t expected to do stuff at home. Mum seemed to think we should work at college and that was it... she didn’t get it, that with assignments like we had, it was non stop... And we live in a fucking mad house, I’m not kidding you!... always have people calling in, and TV on and my brothers charging around...”*

(Brendan, age 18, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Drop outs are more likely than persistors to have one or both parents who are unemployed, as can be seen in Figure 3.5. Drop outs’ parents are more likely to be in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs, while persistors’ parents are most likely to be in managerial or professional occupations. Figure 3.6 suggests that the area of work is likely to differ somewhat between the two groups, with persistors’ parents more likely to work in retail, leisure and banking, while drop outs’ parents are more likely to be working in social services, engineering, construction or transport.

This suggests that there could be a link between occupational class and drop out, but it is hard to explain this variation without a full examination of likely confounding variables, such as income, housing and parents’ own education. However, there is clearly a difference, which suggests that this aspect of students’ lives could influence their decision to drop out. Once again, the evidence is consistent with the literature on children’s school experiences and social class (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000).



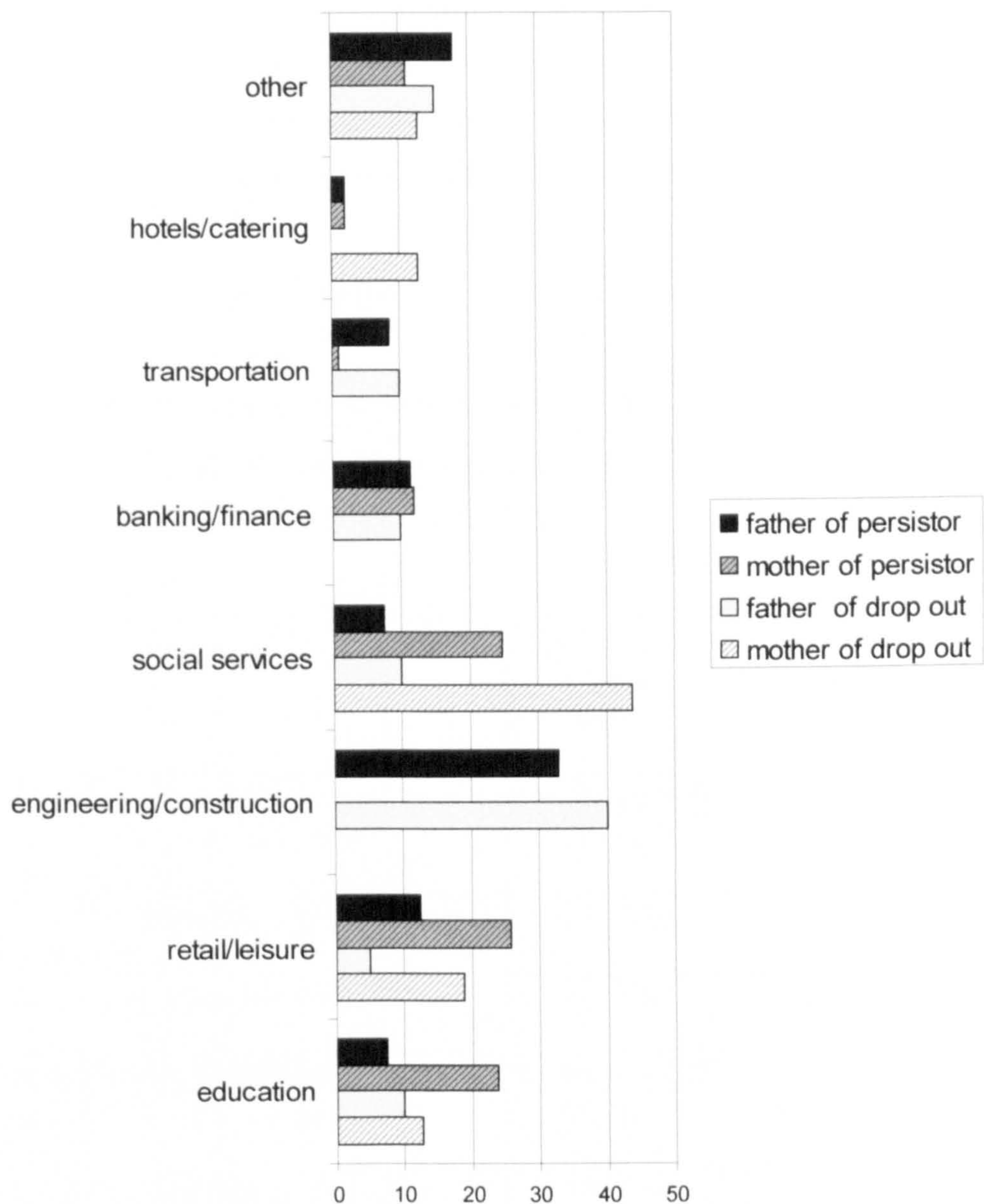


**Figure 3.5: Drop out and Parental Occupation**  
 Source: Survey Data:  $n=157$  \*  $p<0.05$

Perhaps most notably of all, Figure 3.6 also demonstrates that persistors are much more likely to have one or more parent working in education in some capacity. This could contribute to a more explicitly pro-education atmosphere at home, as Fiona describes:

*“It was the worst crime in our house, to say you didn’t want to learn. My Mother was an infant teacher until she had us and my Dad’s deputy head at [Secondary School]. It was all they talked about, and I didn’t question it, or at least not at first. If I hadn’t, if it wasn’t taken for granted so much I probably would never have even thought of doing A levels. I still feel a bit of a freak about leaving. But it was just... education was the most important thing. One reason I got pissed off with it, I think.”*  
 (Fiona, age 18, recent drop out from A-Levels)





**Figure 3.6: Drop out and Area of Parental Occupation**  
 Source: Survey Data, n=146

Although this student did drop out to follow a different path, it is easy to imagine how this cultural commitment to learning can make it difficult for some students to drop out, or even to imagine it, especially when compared with Brendan’s experience:

*“I was the first to go to College out of our family, all the rest went straight out to work. Me Dad didn’t expect it, he thought I’d get a job maybe with evening class or summat like he did. It*

*wasn't that they were anti-learning, it just didn't come up, it was like, you do your school, get whatever you can, GCSEs and that, and then you go to work. So it was a bit different, what I did, and that wasn't a choice, not really. If I could've got a job I would."*

(Brendan, age 18, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

It could also be the case that parents who had first-hand experience of educational settings and processes were able to give their children more detailed and informed advice than those who did not.

	% of Drop Outs Agreed	% of Persistors who agreed
<b>Views at start of course (total number of respondents = 160)</b>		
It's important to study and get good qualifications at school	96 (25)	99 (33)
Learning is only worthwhile if it leads to better job prospects	77 (20)	64 (86)
You need qualifications to get on in life	77 (20)	88 (18)
<b>Views at end of course (total number of respondents = 148)</b>		
It's important to study and get good qualifications	87 (21)	98 (123)
Learning is only worthwhile if it leads to better job prospects	79 (19)	61 (77)
You need qualifications to get on in life	62 (15)	82 (103)

**Table 3.3: Drop out and views on education**  
*Source: Survey Data*

Drop outs were also more likely than persistors to see education as a means to an end, i.e. qualifications improving job prospects, rather than as any sort of end in itself, as is shown in Table 3.3. It is plausible to imagine that if this is the case, a student is more likely to change their aims if they find an alternative route to their goal which appeals more to them, while those committed to education in principle might be more reluctant to make the change. Fewer drop outs appeared to believe in the importance of



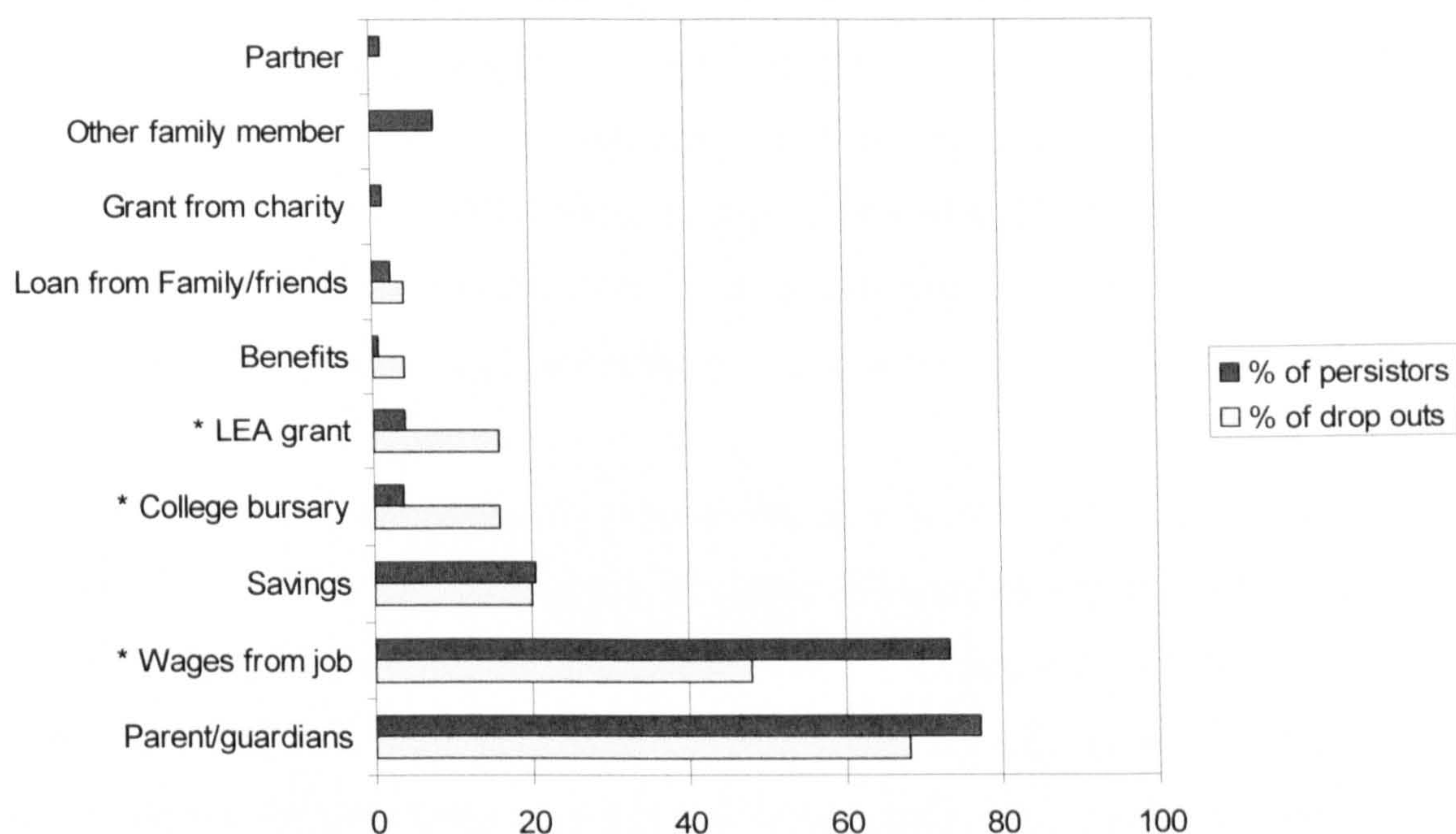
qualifications by the end of the study, while more persistors appeared to be convinced of it. This could reflect the different experiences of the two groups, one finding they could achieve their aims without qualifications, the others looking forward to the benefits of having gained them.

## ***Finances***

The relationship between drop out and finance is a complex one. Although financial problems were given as a reason for drop out by 54 per cent of drop outs (and 39 per cent of those who considered dropping out but persisted), it was only given as a very important reason by 17 per cent and a fairly important reason by a further 8 per cent. It was *never* given as a sole reason for drop out. There were significant relationships between source of income and drop out, where the learner was in receipt of an LEA grant and/or a college bursary. These learners would be those from families with extremely low income, and/or who were estranged from their parents or carers and living independently. Other variables associated with these circumstances could be compounded with finance-related variables, so it is difficult to draw concrete solutions about levels and sources of income independently. None of the drop outs in receipt of grants or bursaries cited financial difficulties as a reason for leaving.

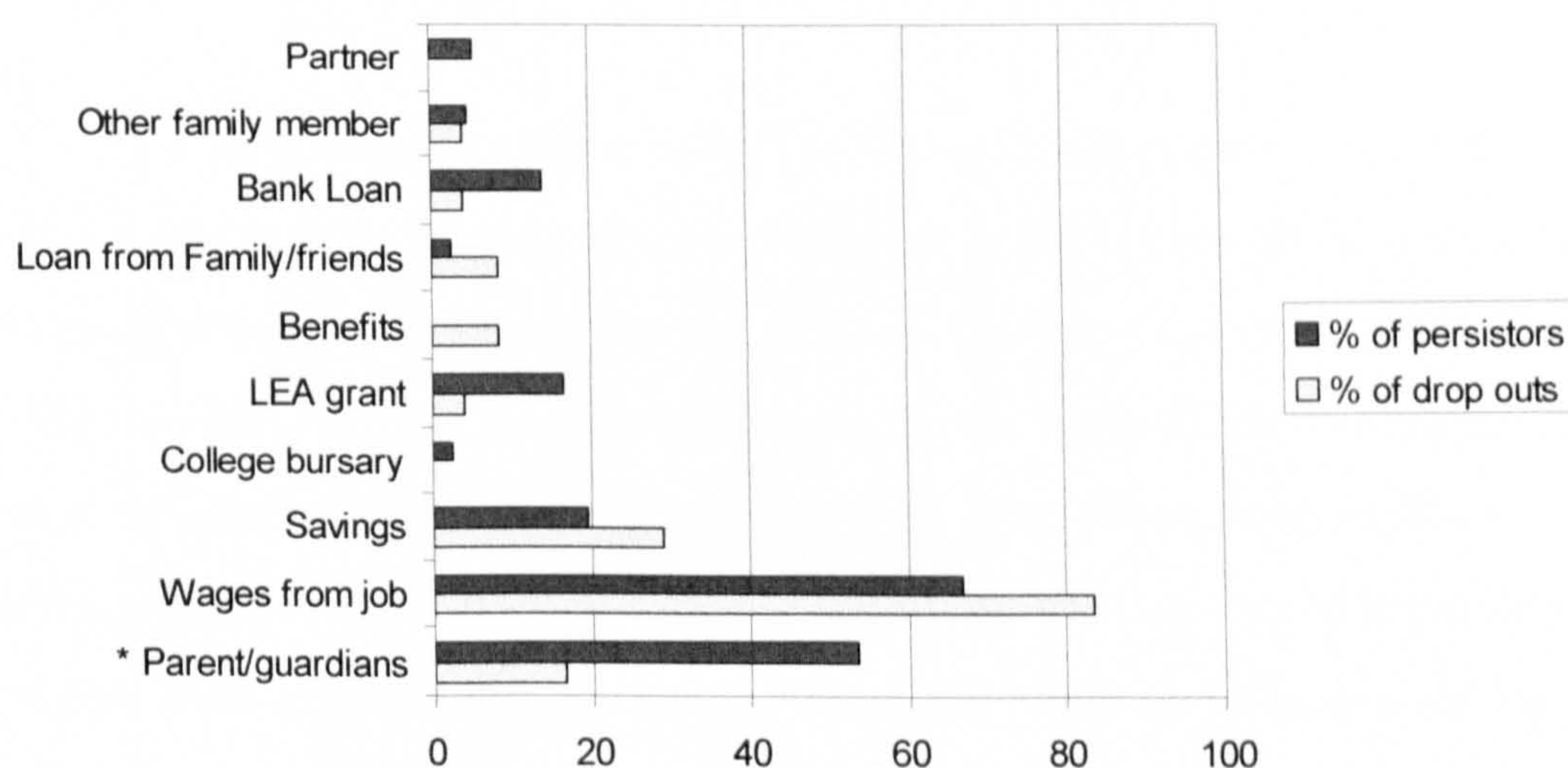
There was a significant relationship between drop out and the main source of income coming from the wages from a job. More persistors than drop outs had an income from paid employment. As the level of income of itself does not seem to be related to drop out, perhaps this association indicates that a part time job has other benefits which drop outs seek by leaving college. It could be that they miss the independence and adult environment that their peers get at work.

However, there was a noticeable change in sources of and feelings about finance over the two-year course of the study, and for some drop outs these changes differed from persistors' experiences.



**Figure 3.7: Sources of income at start of study for drop outs and persistors.**

*Source: Survey data, n=273 \* p<0.05*



**Figure 3.8: Sources of income at end of study for drop outs and persistors.**

*Source: Survey data, n=151 \* p< 0.05*



As Figure 3.7 shows, at the start of the course drop outs were less likely to give their parents/guardians as their main source of income. They were more likely to rely on an LEA grant, benefits or a loan from family or friends than persistors were. It should be noted that all young people in the survey were under the age of 18 at the time and thus would have had to prove estrangement from their parents in order to qualify for benefits. Drop outs were also less likely to get their main income from a job.

Over time things changed, as revealed by a comparison of Figure 3.7 with Figure 3.8. The relative impact of parental/guardian support declined, somewhat more so for drop outs, as bank loans increased for persistors. For those who lived with their parents, drop outs were more likely to give their parents money for their keep. By the end of the study, drop outs were more likely to be living independently, either alone or with friends or partners, while persistors were more likely to be still financially dependent upon their parents and reliant on loans for income, especially those planning to further continue their studies. This could reinforce the situation of persistors as having more stable, two-parent families with greater financial support.

These patterns imply a transition for both drop outs and persistors from dependence on parental financial support at the age of 16, to a measure of financial independence by the age of 18 or 19. For drop outs this is likely to take the form of paid work, while persistors are more likely to have moved into a measure of personal debt, supported by some measure of paid work. It seems plausible, therefore, that one factor influencing drop outs to leave might not just be to alleviate financial difficulties, but could be an active choice to seek greater financial independence as part of their overall move from youth to adulthood. For students who do not share this goal, or are willing to postpone it for the sake of others, financial issues might not be of importance. This could also explain why financial concerns are often given alongside a change in goal as reasons for drop out. Perhaps, for some of these students, this reflects a shift in their priorities: to achieve a measure of adult independence rather than pursue a particular educational or even vocational goal.

Drop outs and persistors in the study tended to have different perceptions and concerns about income. As Table 3.4 shows, drop outs were far more pessimistic at the start about how far their money would cover expenses; especially course books and equipment, transport and entertainment. Only a quarter anticipated that they would be able to more than barely cover the essentials. Optimism grew for both groups over the course of their studies, but more so for persistors. Yet by the end of the study (probably not least because most of them were working) drop outs felt equally confident as those who had persisted, and were more likely to feel they could afford non-essentials such as entertainment.

Anticipated income would cover:	At start of survey			At end of survey		
	% of Drop Outs Agreed (n)	% of Persistors Agreed (n)	% of all (n)	% of Drop Outs Agreed (n)	% of Persistors Agreed (n)	% of all (n)
Housing	30 (12)	50 (71)	46 (23)	87 (21)	85 (108)	85 (82)
Food	36 (14)	61 (85)	56 (32)	82 (20)	87 (110)	86 (91)
Bills	25 (10)	52 (59)	46 (22)	88 (22)	77 (98)	79 (61)
Course fees	60 (23)	47 (141)	49 (17)	10 (240)	85 (108)	85 (47)
Other regular living costs	40 (16)	54 (94)	52 (43)	74 (18)	78 (99)	77 (100)
Course books/equipment	39 (15)	73 (92)	67 * (74)	64 (13)	75 (95)	74 (68)
Transport	33 (13)	64 (78)	59 * (55)	72 (15)	78 (99)	77 (96)
Entertainment	33 (13)	68 (81)	64 * (72)	74 (17)	67 (85)	68 (100)

**Table 3.4: Perceptions and concerns about income for drop outs and persistors.**

*Source: Survey data, (n in brackets) \*  $p < 0.05$*



The differences and changes in goals and views on finance could also be related to other social factors such as family background and parents' experiences. It seems plausible that students who come from families and communities where basic financial security and independence is afforded high status and importance would be more likely to prioritise these goals over others. For instance they might follow a particular career aspiration or take a risk of short-term dependence (to family or credit companies) for the possible long-term returns of higher-paid work which required higher qualifications.

It seems reasonable to assume, however, that a reasonable measure of financial security is conducive to study. Persistors in the study were more likely than drop outs to feel that financial support was one of the factors which had contributed to their success while they were at College. However, it is not as clear cut as a simple relationship between income and success. Rather it is a matter of trade-off. As Faith explains:

*"I have no money as a student. None. I see some of my old mates go out night after night and yeah, of course I'm jealous. I want to do that. Sometimes when things were hard and I wanted to leave that was really tempting. But it's only a short term thing. I don't want to be stuck in a dead end job, I want to go to University and get something better, something with a future so I can have more than just clubbing, I want a nice house and holidays and all that. So it's a case of suck it up for now, and enjoy life later."*

(Faith, age 18, persistor, completed A-Levels)

And Crystal:

*"Sure, money would be nice. It broke my heart to give up my job after the summer and come back here. But I missed the people. All my mates are here and we have a laugh, and there's assignments but really, it's not as hard as proper work. You're*

*only young once. You've got the rest of your life to make money but right now my friends and my freedom are more important."*  
(Crystal, age 18, persister, completed GNVQ in Child Care)

It appears that rather than dropping out due to the financial pressures upon them, as is often assumed, finance is one element among many which the student juggles as they re-assess whether to drop out or persist.

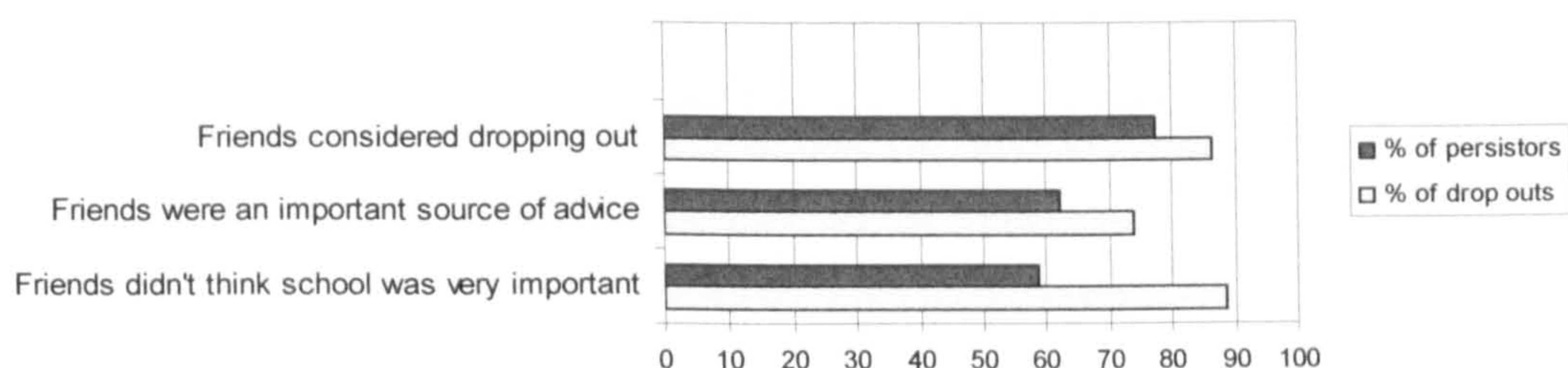
## ***Friends***

Peer influence among teenagers is well documented in the literature (Evans, 2002) and is apparent in the survey data. It was given as a contributory reason for leaving and friends were also considered a source of support and success. Peer influence could help a student to stay on and complete their studies or help them to leave.

This could work in two ways: firstly, friends might provide advice and support on an individual basis. Secondly, in the case of close-knit groups of friends, the cultural beliefs of the particular group with which the young person identifies could exert an influence on the formation of their own goals, identities and behaviour. These cultural influences might work with, or against the influences from the student's family, as Nora describes:

*"Until I got to college I never really questioned it; my brothers all went, one went to university, the other just did two years catering, but it was, well, a good thing. The group of friends I got in with in my first year weren't like that, they were all 'this is a waste of time' and it makes you question things your family and teachers tell you. For the first time, really."*  
(Nora, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels)





**Figure 3.9: Educational views of friends of drop outs and persistors.**  
*Source: Survey data, n=392*

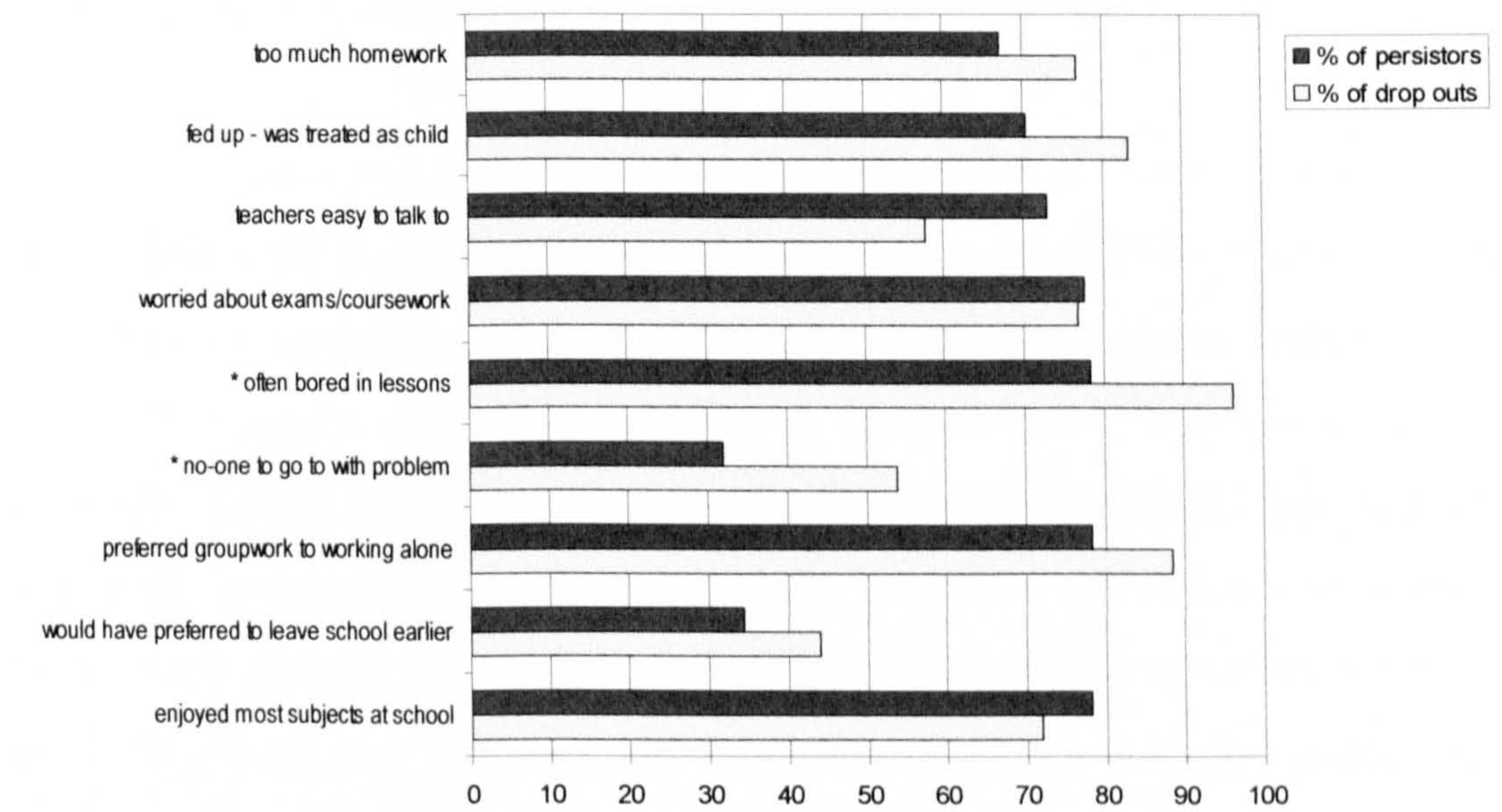
Figure 3.9 shows how these cultural aspects appeared in the survey. Drop outs in the survey were more likely to report that their friends at school didn't consider education to be very important. They were also more likely to have considered friends' advice when choosing their post-16 route, and were more likely to be looking for new friendships and social activities as one of their top hopes for College. Drop outs were more likely to cite a good social life and encouragement for friends as an important success factor for them while at College, and for those who considered leaving but persisted, support from friends was an important factor in helping them to stay. It seems that friends are a more important resource for drop outs than for persistors, who perhaps rely more on family for advice and support. Within this broad generalisation, however, it is clear that friends and peer groups do play a part in contributing to the student's decision to drop out or to stay. This could happen whether directly through advice, or more generally by contributing to the general context and culture of learning within which the individual makes their decision.

### *School*

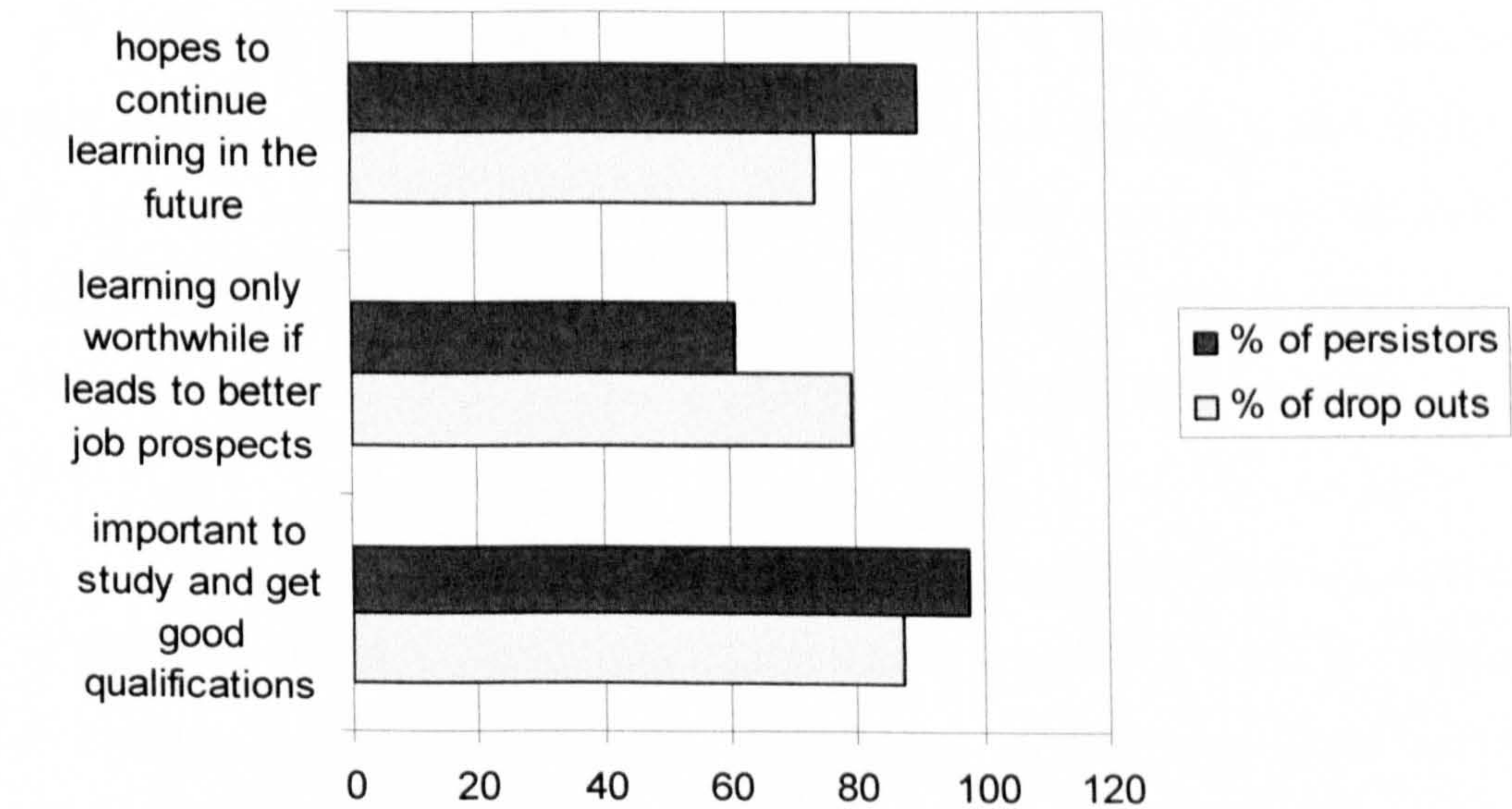
As Figure 3.10 shows, drop outs were more likely to have had poor experiences at school than persistors were. Nearly half said they would have preferred to leave school before the age of 16, compared with less than a third of persistors. 70 per cent of drop outs had truanted from school, compared to just 30 per cent of persistors. Over half of drop outs felt they didn't have anyone at school they could go to with a problem, compared with just under a third of persistors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given such negative experiences,



drop outs were also more likely to be concerned that they might not get on with teachers, cope with work or get the support they might need from teaching staff at college, thus anticipating the difficulties which could eventually be their reason for leaving.



**Figure 3.10: School experiences of drop outs and persistors.**  
*Source: Survey data, n=273 \* p< 0.05*



**Figure 3.11: Educational goals of drop outs and persistors.**  
*Source: Survey data, n=273 p< 0.05*



Drop outs were also likely to differ in their view of education as a part of their goals, as shown by Figure 3.11. They were most likely to feel that learning was only worthwhile if it led to better job prospects, and were more likely to have considered a full time job as a favourable alternative to full time education when making their post-16 choices. Persistors were more likely to have given no serious thought to a route other than full time education.

The data indicates that drop out is likely to have a number of interrelated causes, and while drop outs may share certain characteristics, these too are complex and not easily separated from the general context of the students' lives. It appears not to be an isolated event that occurs in the relatively closed context of college life, but a rather more far-reaching and interactive process. For one thing, once the individual shows signs of wishing to drop out (which they may do unwittingly before they even begin, as we shall see) they may find themselves interacting with college systems and individuals who wish to persuade them otherwise.

## **Preventing Drop Out**

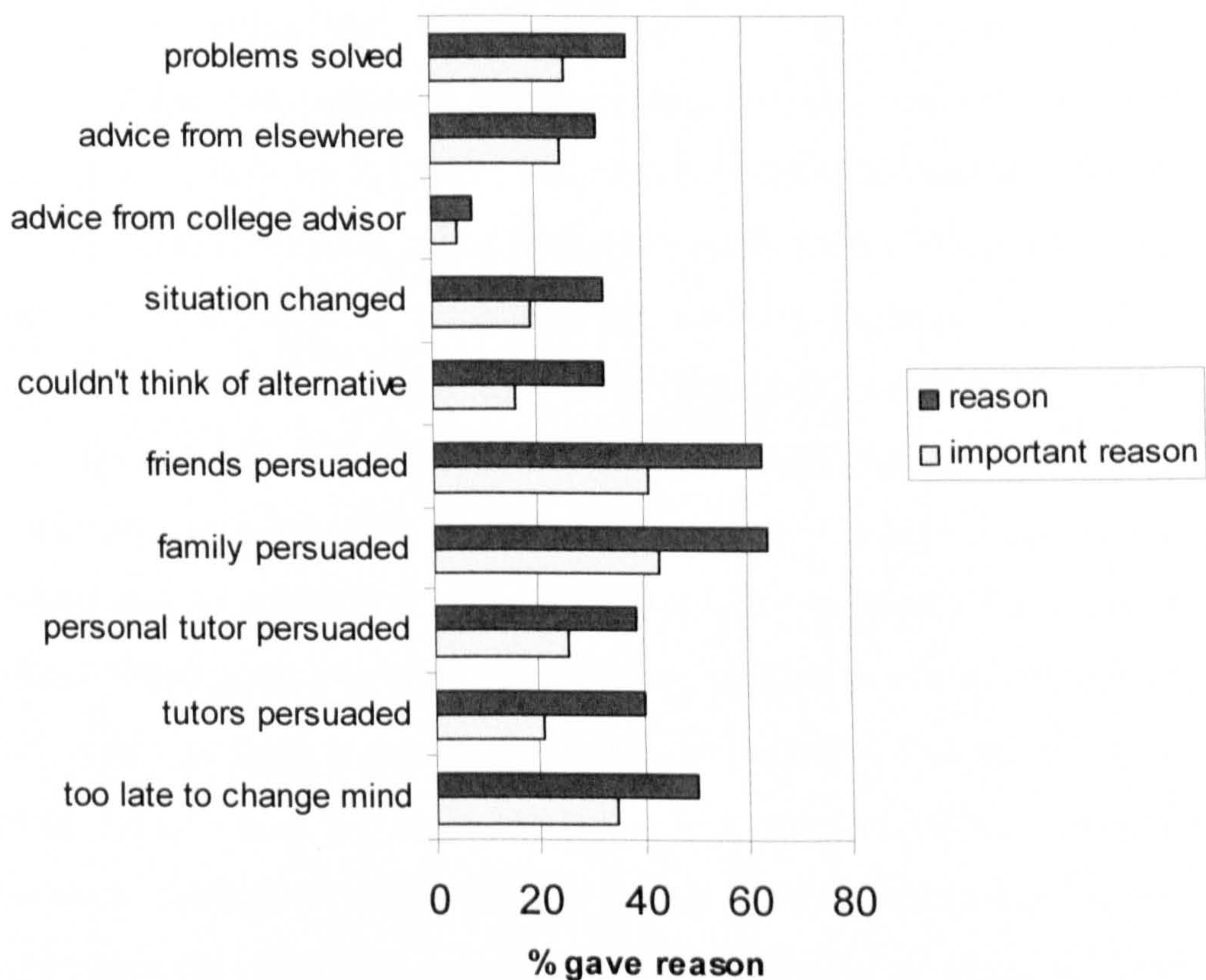
The focus of the literature and policy development around drop out has been to find a cure. Strategies for prevention have been sought, particularly through financial support; information, advice and guidance; and additional pastoral care and/or tutor support for individuals seen to be 'at risk' of dropping out. Some strategies are pronounced more or less 'useful', but the measurement of success is difficult (Kenwright, 1996; Martinez, 1996).

Most strategies begin by establishing conditions and arguments to counter the reasons students might give for leaving. But given the complexity of students' decisions and aims, as discussed above, how likely are such strategies to have an impact?



### Reasons for Staying

Students who had considered dropping out but did not do so were also asked why they decided to stay. Respondents were also invited to suggest the relative importance of each reason they provided. The results can be found in Figure 3.12. The most frequently given reasons, apart from the circumstantial reason that they felt it was too late to change their mind, were that they were persuaded by a friend, family member or teacher – the most important reasons were more often persuasion by a friend or family member. This contrasts with reasons for drop out, where no respondents at all said that they decided to *leave* because a family member wanted them to.



**Figure 3.12: % Reasons and Important Reasons for considering leaving by persistors.**  
*Source: Survey data, 2001, n=261*

Less than half of students reported that the factors that had made them consider leaving had been resolved. This implies that the majority had had to adapt to the problem rather than solving it. As one student elaborated:



*“I found the work really boring, but I need to pass to do what I want so I carried on.”*

[Survey respondent]

Support from friends, family or other sources could help with the adaptation process:

*“My mates helped me lighten up and not go off on one when the tutor picked on me.”*

[Survey respondent]

This implies that drop outs may leave not because of particular circumstances, but because they do not have the resources, will or support to adapt to them in order to finish their course. It could be assumed, if this is the case, that interventions could be designed to help them to adapt and thus avoid drop out. This would be especially the case for those students who leave because of difficulties. Those who leave because of a change of aim from an education-route to a work-route, for example, might not be expected respond so well, because the main factors suggesting they should drop out relate to overall goals rather than specific difficulties. For example, if a student's goal in taking their course is to get to university, support can be given to help them endure and perhaps overcome difficulties to achieve that overall goal. If a young person's goal is financial independence, they are unlikely to respond to support in dealing with difficulties at college if they find another route to their goal which they perceive as having fewer difficulties to negotiate, such as a job. In fact, attempts to help them to stay at college could prove problematic, as this student reported in their interview:

*“When I said I was going to leave, it was like someone sounded a siren and suddenly everyone wanted to help me. But they didn't really want to help, not help me what I wanted to do. They wanted to help me stay... that just made me feel bad, when what I needed was help finding a job and getting on with my life.”*

(Phil, age 22, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

## ***Resolving Difficulties***

The development of college retention strategies has been based primarily on the assumption that colleges can do something to prevent drop out at an institutional level. This could be solution-focused: providing additional support structures and services to help potential drop outs to change their minds; or it could be fault-focused: identifying a weakness in the service provided to learners which made them consider leaving in the first place. In both cases, the strategies are targeted at solving *difficulties*.

The reasons for leaving presented earlier in this chapter show a range of such difficulties which learners reported, including that they felt their course was too hard, were worried about catching up after missing lessons or had problems with tutors or other college staff. These are reflected to some extent in their overall view of their college experience, as shown in Table 3.5. Drop outs were particularly less likely to have enjoyed most of their courses or to have felt their teachers were easy to talk to, and more likely to feel fed up because they were treated as a child, to feel they were given too much homework most of the time, and that they would prefer a more structured learning programme. Persistors, meanwhile, were more likely to report that they were often bored in lessons, or worried about exams or coursework. This could be because drop outs did not complete enough of their course to get bored or worry about exams, or perhaps they did not place sufficient importance on lessons or exams, especially if their goals were not linked with course achievement. This focus on life outside college, free of homework and in an adult environment, might also reflect this difference in goals.

As Table 3.5 shows, however, it is only a small proportion of respondents who represent this difference of opinion. The question of why such feelings lead to drop out for some learners, and not for others, remains unanswered, and it could be that confounding variables are at work. For example, learners' prior experiences of education, family attitudes to education, learning difficulties, motivation for learning and conflicting



priorities could all feasibly influence their attitudes to college provision, as well as other support issues they may have.

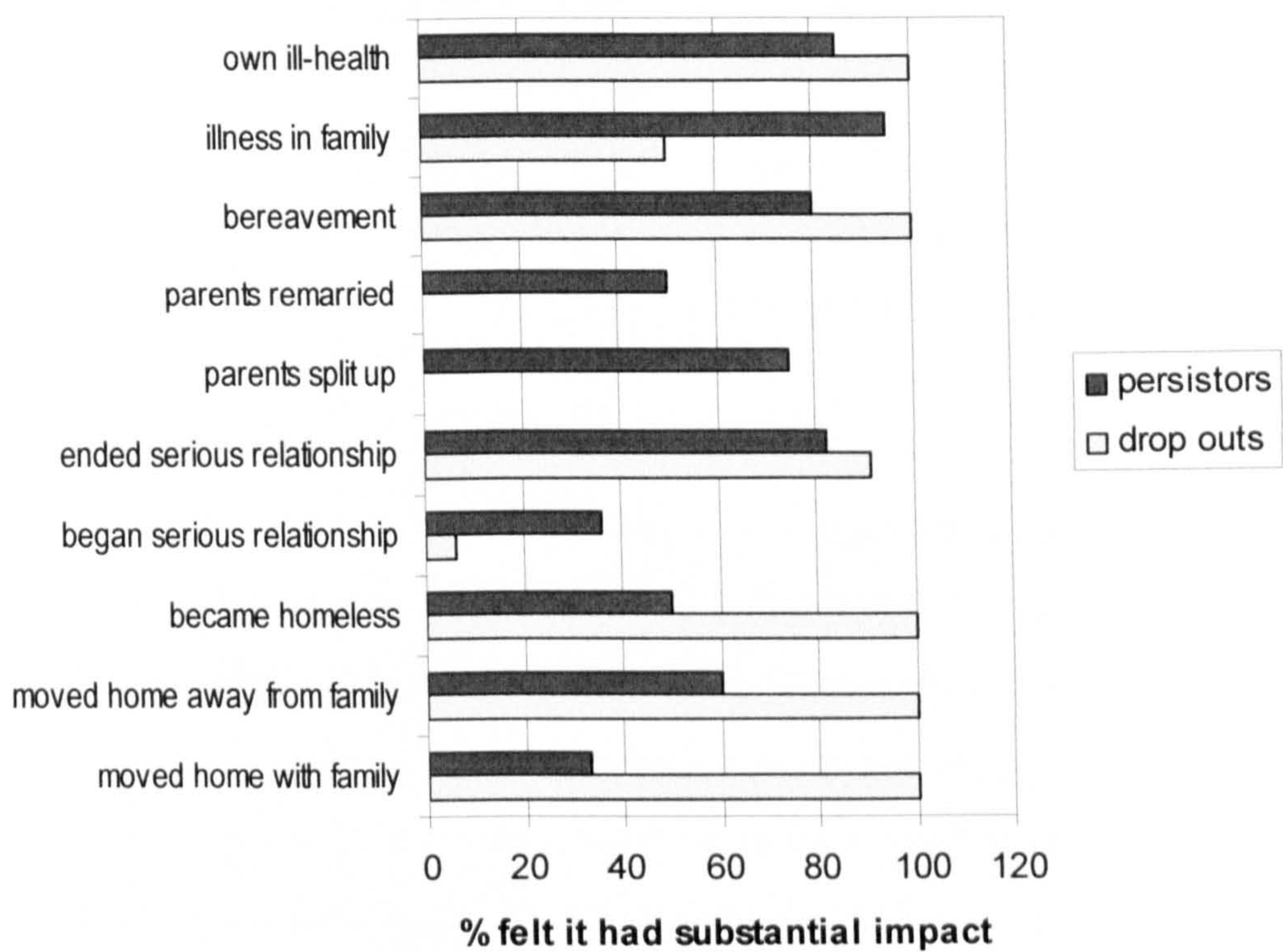
<b>Views on course and college provision</b>	<b>% of Drop Outs who agreed</b>	<b>% of Persistors who agreed</b>	<b>% of all who agreed (n)</b>
I enjoyed most parts of my course	79 (19)	93 (118)	90.7 (163) *
I never had anyone to go to at college if I had a problem	38 (9)	35 (44)	35.3 (53)
I was often bored in lessons at college	62 (15)	71 (90)	70 (105)
I worried a lot about exams/coursework	63 (16)	75 (95)	73.2 (109)
Most tutors were easy to talk to	75 (18)	83 (106)	81.3 (122)
I got fed up because I was treated like a child at college	42 (10)	31 (39)	32.7 (49)
We were given too much homework most of the time	67 (16)	53 (67)	55.3 (83)
I would prefer a more structured learning programme	79 (19)	70 (89)	79.2 (118) *

**Table 3.5: Statements on Aspects of Course and College Provision**  
*Source: Survey data, 2001, \*  $p < 0.05$*

Students also reported a range of personal difficulties such as finance, health, transport, family problems and life events. Although there was no significant difference in the number of such events reported by persistors and drop outs, drop outs reported the events as having more impact on their studies, as shown in Figure 3.13. These might appear to be outside of the remit of the college, but nonetheless were taken seriously when strategies to improve retention were designed. Counselling services, negotiations with public transport and trained advisers in housing and finance were available for students. There is no indication, however, how effective these services were for the students in the study, or what impact they had on retention. The college itself tended to measure the success of its support services in very



basic terms of overall drop out rate trends, with no analysis by reason for leaving or other factors.



**Figure 3.13: Impact of Difficulties and Life Events Experienced by Drop Outs and Persistors**  
*Source: Survey data, 2001, n=151*

There were some indications that more learners would have dropped out for these reasons had intervention not occurred. The figures for considering leaving due to course difficulty and problems with staff are higher for those who eventually stayed (32 per cent and 29 per cent respectively) and for these learners the resolution of those problems was what enabled them to stay. In these cases college systems appear to have kicked in effectively, disputes were resolved, educational support was provided and in some cases students were transferred to different courses.

However, access to these support systems is reliant on a number of events taking place which are by no means assured. To start with, either the student or a member of College staff must identify that there is a problem. The earlier this takes place, the more likely it will be successfully resolved. Once identified, the problem must be communicated to the right person at the right



time. This can be complicated and require high levels of confidence on the part of the learner. They also need to know who to talk to and when to get the best quality help. For many learners this may be the first time they have encountered this difficulty, or it may be the latest in a long line of ‘failures’: either way it can be very hard for them to take action in a timely fashion. Similarly the attitude and experience of the member of staff who identifies the problem, or to whom the problem is taken, can be extremely variable. This point is demonstrated by the following contrasting stories taken from the interview data:

*“I didn’t really ask for help until the assignments were late and I was already in trouble. And by then... [my tutor] was okay about it, but I was in trouble with the head of the course, like, he was a stickler for deadlines, and no-one really got me any help, just more time – if you don’t know the answer, waiting around isn’t going to help you find it.”*

(Phil, age 22, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

*“I had problems with homework early on. My little brother was ill and I had to baby-sit a lot. But I told my tutor and they were very understanding. I did get behind but they let me have time in lessons to catch up, so it was alright.”*

(Shelly, age 19, persister, completed Business Admin)

### ***Supporting Change – Information, Advice and Guidance***

There were also college mechanisms in place to support students who had uncertainties about their vocational and educational aims. All students had access to careers advisers, impartial student advisers and a range of teaching staff from whom they could seek advice and information about choices available to them. Careers advisers had a specific remit to prioritise assistance for students deemed to be ‘at risk’ of dropping out, as did the Connexions advisers who joined the college team in the year after the survey took place.

Just over half of all persistors and drop outs felt that support of this kind had contributed to their success while at college. However, only 9 per cent gave support from college advice services as a reason for staying, and only a quarter gave advice from outside the college as an important reason for staying. There are also no significant differences between drop outs and persistors as to the sources of their advice before coming to college.

It appears from the data, therefore, that while formal information, advice and guidance from these sources are likely to contribute to students' success while at college, it has little impact on their decision to stay or leave. This could be because the decision is made, or at least largely formed, before the student seeks advice. By the time the discussion between advisor and student takes place, the focus is more on how to achieve their desired change, be it a different course, vocation or lifestyle, rather than whether or not to make the change in the first place. The job for the advisor is not one of encouraging the students to stay, but rather to ensure that they can achieve their changed aims – providing the student can decide what those aims might be, and that they relate to an 'approved' route of action in terms of education or work. If the student is unclear about what they want to do, or have aims that seem unrealistic to their advisers, the role of information, advice and guidance is less straightforward:

*"I didn't know what I wanted to do, just anything except hairdressing. I hated it. I didn't know what else I liked, just that I didn't like anything I'd done at school. So careers couldn't do nothing for me. I told them I wanted to be a singer, but they just laughed."*

[Survey Respondent]

*"Once I knew what I wanted careers was very good, but I had to work it out on trial and error first."*

[Survey Respondent]



## ***Predicting Drop Out***

Previous studies on student drop out have been widely used to identify ‘predictors’ of drop out. Colleges have sought factors which, if monitored, may help them to identify ‘types’ of student who are most likely to drop out. This is a widely recognised strategy, although not without its critics (Kenwright, 2002). Criteria commonly used for such a purpose include the student’s prior achievement, date of application (late applicants are notoriously likely to drop out), previous history of exclusion or drop out, postcode of residence (a crude indicator of social inclusion, poverty and likelihood of educational participation) and references and predictions from school. Those variables that do prove a strong association with drop out do not necessarily indicate *why* students fitting these criteria are likely to drop out, and thus what the college (or anyone else) could do to help them stay. There is also the ever-present assumption that persistence would be in the best interests of the student, and that their ‘risk factor’ is a problem to be overcome, or a deficiency to compensate for, rather than a valid reason for considering alternative routes.

This study found no wholly reliable predictors of drop out, although there are indications of possible relationships with, for example, household composition, parental employment and other variables. However, while for some there are differences in social, educational and/or attitudinal factors, *most* drop outs share the same mix of characteristics as persistors. While differences between persistors and drop outs for any of the variables in the questionnaires do exist and are significant, at least half, and often more of drop outs in fact responded in similar ways to persistors. These associations can give interesting clues as to why individual students might choose to drop out, but falls a long way short of enabling us to predict which students will leave, never mind planning interventions to prevent this from happening, even if it were universally appropriate to do so. In some cases students had taken steps actively to hide any hint that they might be ‘at risk’ of drop out from their tutors and advisers, because they did not want ‘special treatment’, or attention:

*“It was always going to be hard for me going back to college, but I wanted a fresh start so I didn’t tell them I’d tried before and dropped out from [the other] college, I said I took a year out. I didn’t want my tutors breathing down my neck all the time waiting for me to cock up again.”*

(Faith, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels)

## **A Sign of Failure?**

So far the data has shown us that drop out is complicated, and while it can indeed be related to college affairs, it is most likely to be a result of interaction between a number of different factors in the student’s life. In the case of those students who leave because they experienced difficulties, especially those who had difficulties to do with college itself, it could be said that the institution itself, or the education system in general, has failed them. However, this is the case for only a very small number of drop outs. The majority left because they changed their aims, and those aims no longer required them to attend college full time. If college is not relevant to those students any more, can it really be seen as a failure on the part of the college to let them go? Similarly, if young people choose not to complete a course they are having difficulty with, or which no longer fits their goals, is drop out a sign of failure on their part? Yet colleges and individuals’ performance is measured by drop out. A course with high drop out rates will lose funding. The impact on young people is not so easy to evaluate - while a failure to complete a qualification could constitute a black mark for employers, it could equally be imagined that employers have little interest unless the course was directly relevant for the job they are recruiting to. The drive for colleges to prevent or at least minimise drop out is fuelled by the assumption that full-time education is the most desirable route for young people to take post-16, and that those who leave this route are likely to experience low-self esteem, reduced work opportunities and be more at risk of social exclusion.



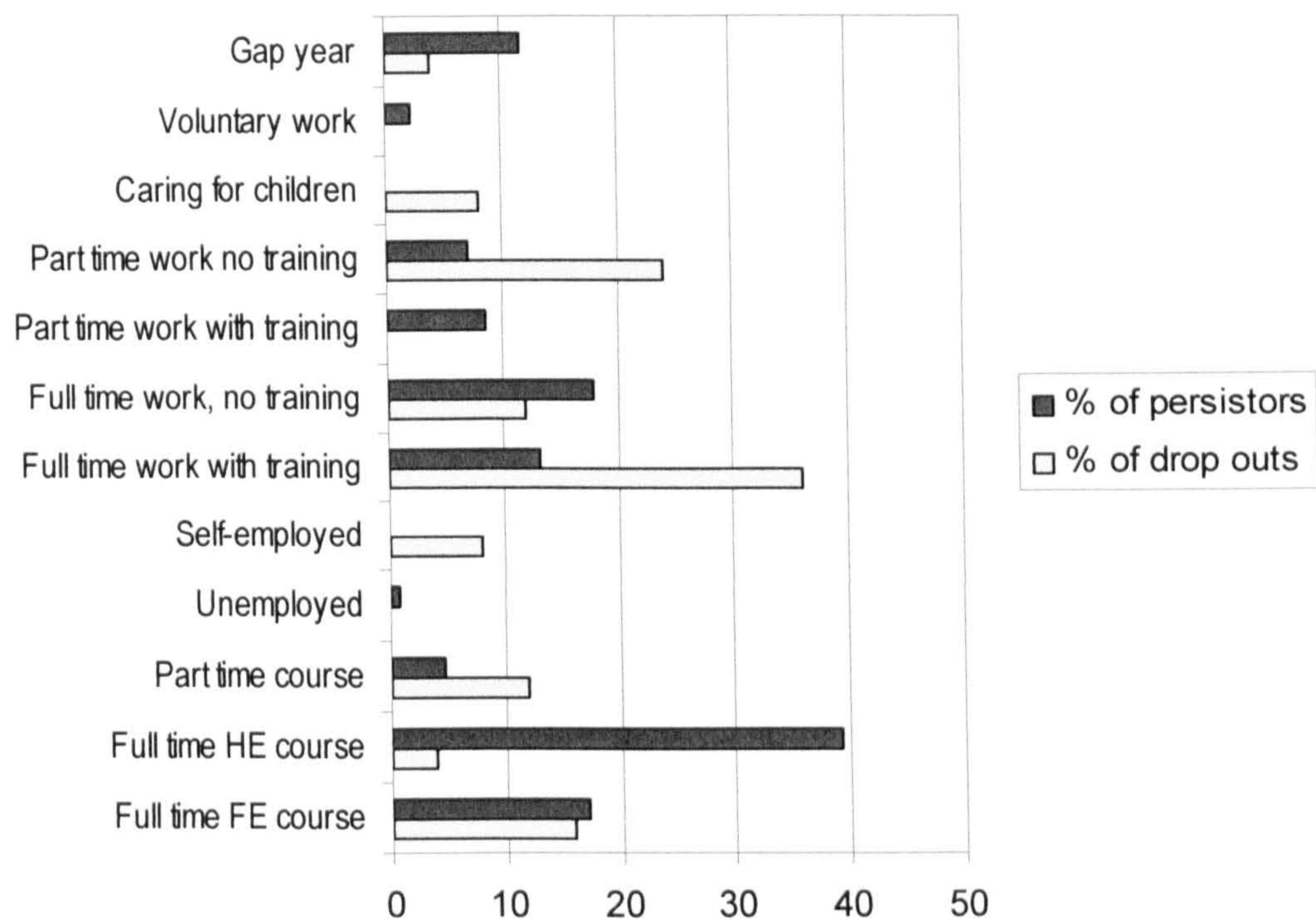
## ***What Happens to Drop Outs?***

The survey asked respondents for information about their hopes, worries and activities after they had left college, in the hope of gaining some insight as to whether or not drop out could be seen as a sign of failure on their part, or the college's.

As Figure 3.14 shows, drop outs were most likely to be working, either full or part time, and most were still involved in some kind of education, either training at work, a part time course or else they had returned to full time education. Drop outs were more likely to be receiving training at work than persistors, possibly in part because persistors were doing casual, temporary work prior to returning to full time education. None of the respondents who had dropped out were out of education, training or work by the time of the final questionnaire. Persistors were far more likely to be starting HE courses, but it should be noted that if a drop out had returned to full time education with the aim of continuing to Higher Education, they would be likely to have had to wait until the start of the academic year after they dropped out in order to do so. This would place them at least one, and possibly two years behind those who didn't drop out, and thus they would not show up in these figures. However, as Figure 3.15 shows, fewer drop outs included Higher Education in their hopes for the future.

81 per cent of those in the survey who dropped out felt at the time of the final survey that they had made the right decision, not that far from the 88 per cent of persistors who felt they had made the right decision in completing their courses. For most learners drop out was not seen as a failure, but a matter of having a change of heart. This is reflected in the large proportion of drop outs who gave reasons in the 'change' rather than 'difficulties' category. By the end of the survey period, drop outs are just as likely as persistors to feel happy with what they're doing - 96 per cent of drop outs and 92 per cent of persistors said they were 'mostly' or 'fairly' happy.





**Figure 3.14: Destinations of Drop Outs and Persistors at end of survey**  
*Source: Survey Data 2001, n=153 p<0.05*

Rather than signalling a failure in a chosen path of action, drop out could occur because the student finds a new opportunity to follow a previously favoured route. Drop outs in the survey were more likely than persistors to have considered a job rather than college before they started their course. They were less likely to have found school interesting or to be interested in learning for its own sake. A student who enters College to gain a qualification strictly as a means to an end (for instance, to improve their job prospects) and who then takes another route to that same aim can hardly be said to have failed.

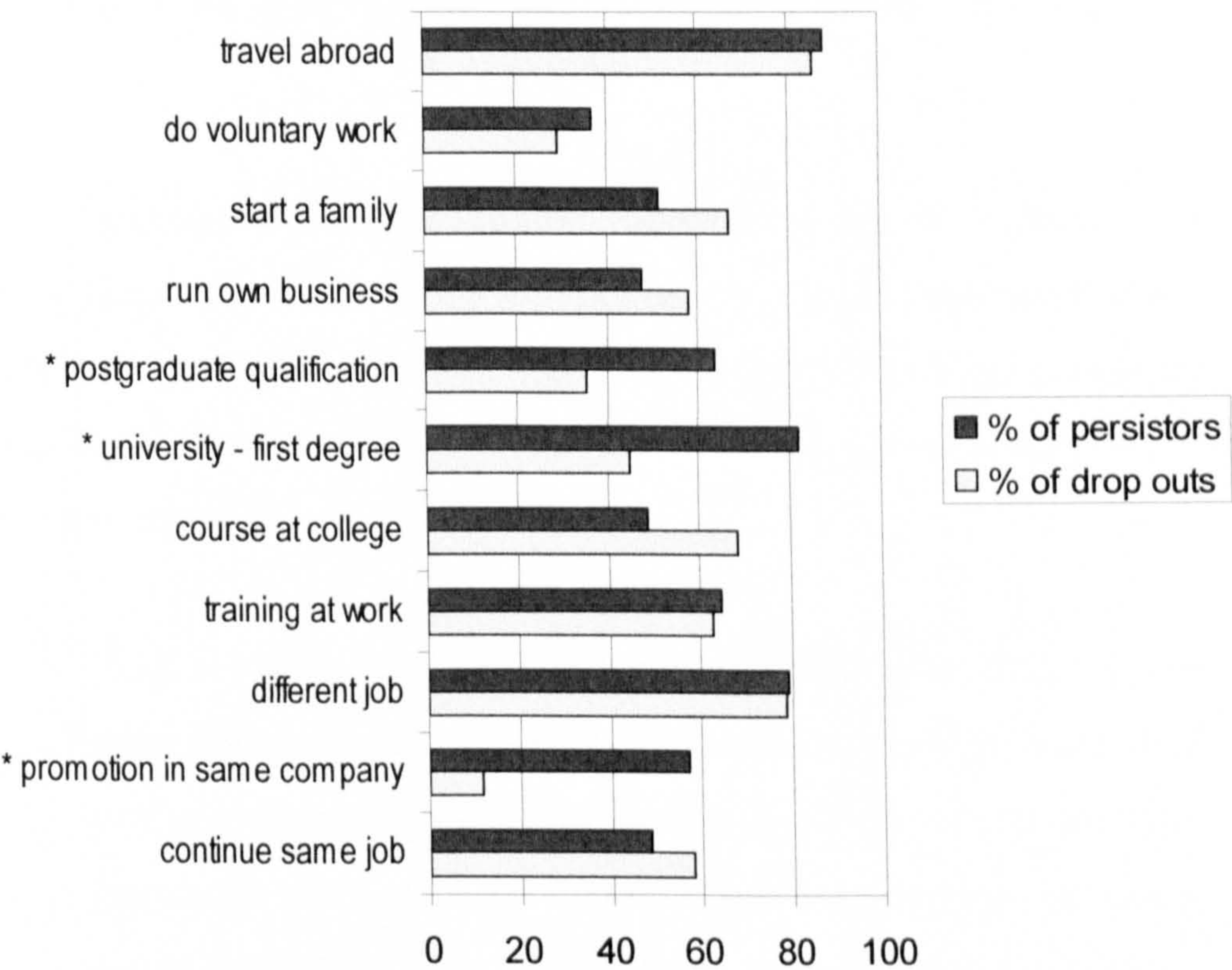
As we have seen, there is some evidence in the study to suggest that drop outs may have a wider view of the possibilities available to them, and to be less worried about taking risks and alternative routes. This difference in attitude was also evident in the interviews. Bianca, studying Media Studies at the time of her interview but previously a drop out from college at 16, observed that she was “always more laid back” than her friends who stayed at college:



*“They didn’t seem to think outside of school, college, university... it was like there was no other option. I was bored of them options. I wanted different things, so when they came along I was ready to try them, I think.”*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Drop outs aren’t alone in changing their minds, either. 20 per cent of persistors changed their course in a major way at some point, some more than once, usually because they had changed their aims and/or found that their course no longer suited their goals and/or educational needs.



**Figure 3.15: Hopes for the Future: Drop Outs and Persistors**  
 Source: Survey Data, 2001, n=157 \* p<0.05

Drop outs were no less ambitious than persistors. As Figure 3.15 shows, most were looking forward to promotion and to starting their own businesses, while persistors were more likely to be focused on future study.



Both groups were equally likely to be aiming towards foreign travel and future job-related training.

While the government funding authorities and (to a lesser extent) the College itself measured the usefulness of College education mainly in terms of qualifications obtained, students in general, and drop outs in particular, did not necessarily share that view. 63 per cent of drop outs (regardless of when they dropped out) said they had got what they wanted out of college, without getting their qualification. This compares with 82 per cent of persistors, implying that nearly a fifth of those who did get their qualification hadn't got what they wanted - perhaps they'd hoped for a higher grade, or perhaps they had found their qualification didn't open the doors they had hoped for. This fits with the consumer model where students attend college to get precisely what they want, rather than fitting in with the college and/or government agenda.

Beatrice, who dropped out of college at the age of 17 and had returned eleven years later to retrain for a new industry, also felt that she had got a lot out of college regardless of the fact that she didn't finish her course the first time. She had taken almost a full year of an A-Level programme before leaving to start her own business.

*"I didn't want to go to University. I didn't need A Levels for what I wanted to do, but I wasn't ready to start right from 16. I was too young, I needed to mature a bit, get a feel for how businesses worked, and get some things out of my system. Get a bit of confidence. So I don't regret going, and I don't regret leaving. It was right for me."*

(Nora, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels)

Although in a small number of cases drop out can be seen as the result of poor service from the College, schools and/or Guidance Services, there is no clear relationship between the two in statistical terms. In many cases



students leave simply because they have changed their minds, and have nothing but praise for the services they have enjoyed.

### *Conclusions*

Martinez' (1996) suggestion that students exist in a state of perpetual questioning where they are regularly re-evaluating the benefits they are deriving from their studies against the risks and costs is supported by this research. For some thoughts of leaving were more serious than for others, but they were experienced and re-visited by most students. A third of those who completed their course had thought of leaving at some time or another, usually for similar reasons to those who eventually did leave.

The process of reaching the decision to drop out is complex. Even where particular variables may be identified such as a previous history of disaffection or a lack of vocational commitment, they are hard to define and measure in such a way as to predict drop out or compensate for it; yet this is the goal of many college strategies to improve retention. The most powerful factors involved in the decision to drop out are beyond the control of the College. These include family background and the clarity and focus of the student's personal goals related to their learning.

Why, then, when students share key characteristics, will some end up choosing the drop out route while others complete their courses?

The indication from the data presented in this chapter is that there is considerable variation in students' experiences, because of the number of different influences and variables that could come into play. While the reasons given in response to surveys or recorded on official college forms give a hint of the general nature of drop out, they do not adequately explain how the decision to drop out is reached, or what contextual factors are involved. To attempt this, we need a deeper understanding of what drop out means, not in general, statistical terms, but in the context of individual students' experiences.

In the next chapter I present four case studies, each of which serve to demonstrate how the themes identified above relate to individual students' stories of drop out. Then, in the following chapter, I will look more generally through the interview data to establish in detail how the decision to drop out is made, and provide greater insight into the factors involved.



## Chapter 4 - Case Studies

This chapter examines the place of drop out in the context of the transitions of the young people interviewed in the study. Four case studies are presented in detail to demonstrate four key models or typologies of drop out which are common to other young people in the study. These are then discussed in the context of the complex and fluid nature of young people's transitions.

As MacDonald and Marsh (2005) assert, 'risk factors' derived from large-scale statistical analyses of young people's careers from school to work cannot and are not intended to be relied upon to account for the true complexity of young people's experiences. Conversely, although the qualitative case study approach used in this chapter does not intend to present a straightforwardly generalisable account, it does allow us to explore the depth and richness of understanding provided by individual experiences. As the cases presented in this chapter demonstrate, there are many circumstantial, cultural and personal influences involved in the decision to drop out, and transitions are, as MacDonald and Marsh suggest: "a complex set of twists and turns" (2005:196). The case studies are discussed in relation to the themes discussed in Chapter 1, and are further examined to produce new interpretations of the causes and consequences of drop out based on the individual experiences of the young people interviewed.

The four case studies considered in detail have been chosen because they each typify a particular model of drop out which was shared by other students in the study. As the key themes emerged from the quantitative and qualitative analyses, a matrix was produced to map the occurrence of common themes, processes and experience among different respondents and groups of respondents. As the thesis developed the matrix was consistently referred to, following the inclusion model advocated by the grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). At the end of the process four cases were identified as being 'ideal types': typologies of drop out which demonstrate and illustrate the collective experiences of the cohort as a whole.

Although there are some ethnographic similarities (for example two of the case study subjects have similar occupational areas) this is co-incidental to the selection of their stories for case studies. The focus of the case studies is to examine the nature of different journeys through the process of drop out. They should not be considered an exhaustive representation of routes to and through drop out, but rather a vehicle for illustration and discussion of the key themes that emerged from the data. These themes are further developed and examined in Chapter Five.

## **Billy's Story**

Billy lives with his parents in a four-bedroomed house on the outskirts of the city. His mother is a teacher, his father a solicitor. He has one older sister who is in her final year of University.

Billy was brought up in a home where education was always considered to be very important. He enjoyed school and did well, gaining ten GCSEs, eight at Grade A (three A\*s) and 2 Grade Bs. He felt confident of his abilities and got on well with his teachers. He had a small but close group of friends, all of whom were very able academically.

Two teachers in particular were inspirational for Billy: his maths teacher in secondary school, whom he felt had recognised his abilities and helped him to achieve his best, as well as being a trusted mentor; and his Year 4 primary school teacher, who inspired him with a love of music and drama which he still pursues as a hobby. He particularly enjoys set-building and backstage work.

Billy liked school and had no real difficulties with his studies, although he found the constant pressure of exams hard to handle. During the last year, in particular, Billy found himself getting increasingly bored with “books and writing that didn’t mean anything useful.”



Both parents were supportive of and actively involved in Billy's schoolwork. There were set homework times in the evenings and weekends, and a system of rewards for Billy and his sister for academic achievements. As a biology teacher his mother also helped him with science subjects and maths, which were Billy's weakest.

Billy's family and teachers all assumed that he would continue his studies at A-Level, go to University and enter a profession: his family hoped he would become a lawyer, and from childhood this was a goal which Billy shared. His mother was the first in her family to go to University, and Billy said he was brought up to see it as a privilege.

During his last year at school Billy helped out his cousin, who had his own electrical business, running a shop and working as an electrician on some large housing developments. Billy found he really enjoyed the work, and found it very satisfying to feel he was doing something practical and useful. He liked it so much, in fact, that he decided he would like to pursue a career as an electrician himself. However, when he sought advice from the careers advisor at school he was convinced that it wasn't the right route for him. The advisor, his parents and his friends all argued that he had such capacity for success at University and beyond that it would be a 'waste' for him to become a lowly electrician. Finally a compromise was reached whereby Billy agreed to take A-Levels at Thornton College and apply to University, on the grounds that he could always retrain as an electrician later on in life if he still wished to do so once he had his degree.

By the time his exam results came through some six months later, Billy said had mostly forgotten the idea of becoming an electrician himself. His cousin had moved to Australia and Billy once again set his sights on a distant career as a lawyer. He remembers feeling excited at the prospect of college, particularly of learning in a more adult environment, and welcomed the opportunity to focus on fewer subjects. His close friends from school were all at college with him, his two best friends taking the same courses. He didn't

make many new friends, probably, he thinks, because he was already “in a bit of a clique from school”. He got on well with his tutors.

However, quite early on in his A-level course Billy began to have second thoughts. He found himself easily bored in lessons, and particularly with reading and writing. He enjoyed more practical activities, but as his course was heavily academic the opportunities for these were few and far between. By the end of the first half term, Billy decided he had had enough.

*“I could do it, sure, but I didn’t want to. I didn’t see the point. I might have made it to the exams, but where would that get me? Another three years of the same at Uni, four or five minimum if I wanted to practice law... I knew it would bore me senseless. It just wasn’t what I wanted.”*

Billy’s decision wasn’t an easy one to make, even though he was very clear in his own mind. He knew his parents wouldn’t approve, and there were a series of family rows before they finally accepted that he wanted to leave college. His mother was particularly upset, which he found hard; he knew how much his education meant to her and that she had his best interests at heart. At first he accepted her persuasion and went back after the half term holiday and continued until Christmas, but he still wasn’t happy. He noticed a widening gulf between himself and his friends, who were enjoying their courses and looking forward to University, and found himself skipping lessons and getting lower grades for his assignments. This time he went to the College’s Student Services Adviser for information and advice on his options. He explained his disillusionment with academic study and his desire for more practical work, while still hoping for a professional career in the future, and possibly University, if he could find a suitable path. After a long session the Adviser suggested that Billy take a break from studying and return the following year to take an Advanced GNVQ in Business Studies with a ‘top up’ A-level in Maths (his favourite subject and the only A Level he still felt an interest in) alongside, which would be enough to gain University entrance should he wish to take that route later on.



After lengthy discussions with his parents, Billy took the decision to follow the Adviser's suggestion and dropped out at Christmas, on the condition that he would return the following September to take the Business Studies GNVQ alongside a Maths A-Level.

The rest of the year was a difficult one for Billy, for all that he was relieved once the decision had finally been made and he had left College. He took a series of temporary jobs, mostly working in his father's office. He was pleased by the income and experience, but didn't enjoy office work; neither did he discover much interest in the legal profession. By the time Billy returned to college in September he was no closer to finding a vocation he was really motivated to pursue, but had established that he didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps.

However, on his return to College Billy found that not only was the course not what he had hoped for, but he had lost touch with most of his friends from the first year. Most of his lessons were on a different campus and his timetable worked differently. He did make some new friends at college, one of whom he is still in contact with. He also maintained a close friendship with one of his school friends who lived close to him at home. But on the whole he found college a lonelier experience the second time around. He liked his teachers and felt the teaching was of a high standard, but he had little interest in Business Studies and felt that the work didn't challenge him. He found he could achieve reasonable grades without turning up to many of the sessions, but this was unsatisfying too: *"It was like a choice between being bored in the classroom or bored at home; I don't like to be bored. I like to be doing things."*

Billy wasn't happy at college but he felt he needed qualifications and an occupation. The crunch came when the spectre of a work placement loomed on the horizon: Billy couldn't face another period of office work after his experience in his father's firm, and made the decision to leave the course.

Billy didn't take advice before dropping out this time. He was sure that his parents and tutors would try and persuade him to stay, and didn't want to go through the explanations again. His self-confidence was low; he felt frustrated and blamed himself for "not being able to settle at anything." His parents were angry when they found out he'd left, and Billy felt too ashamed even to call in to say goodbye to his tutors, whom he liked and respected. He got a job in a local supermarket as a shelf-stacker on the night shift and entered a difficult period of depression and low self-esteem.

In the summer following Billy's drop out from the Business Studies course the previous winter, his cousin returned from Australia and offered him some part-time work to supplement his income. This proved a turning point for Billy. His interest in electrical work was re-ignited and he found, at last, a job he was both good at and enjoyed. Over the next few months he recovered his confidence and with advice and support from his cousin he secured his own apprenticeship with a small electrical firm in the city centre. The apprenticeship included day-release study at college, which Billy found difficult to contemplate at first: he was frightened that, based on his prior experiences, he could face further boredom, disillusionment and failure. However, once he started he found he enjoyed the course and excelled at it, getting regular distinctions in his work and achieving Level 3 and 4 qualifications in record time. Billy was particularly grateful for the support of his tutors on the electrical courses; he worried that they might think he was 'too bookish' for the course, based on his prior academic achievements. However, he was encouraged to succeed and praised for his hard work and accomplishments: *"when I applied I thought they'd say it wasn't for me, that I should go to university, just like everyone else, but [the course tutor] didn't, at all. I confided in him that my parents and the careers people hadn't been keen on the idea, and he said 'look at it this way, son. Would you rather have an idiot do your wiring while some clever sod swanned around at some university, or would you rather have the clever guy re-wire your house while the idiot kept out of everyone's way on campus?' You know, there's some truth in that!"*



Aged 25, Billy is now fully qualified and working as an electrician for the company he apprenticed with. He is saving up and looking forward to going into partnership with his cousin in the not-too-distant future.

Billy's parents have, according to Billy, come to terms with their son's change of direction and, once they realised that he was happy in his chosen vocation have been pleased for him. Billy still feels that his mother might secretly wish he'd gone to University, or perhaps hopes that he will in the future: *"I think she still thinks it's 'just a phase', you know?"*

### ***Analysis – The Seeker***

Billy's story is dominated by two key themes: expectations and persistence. Billy said several times during his interview that he found it very frustrating that he had 'forgotten' what he wanted to do with his life – to be an electrician – and that it had been such a tortuous route back to rediscover and realise his aim. However, looking in detail at what happened when Billy was making his initial choice of what to do after school, it is clear that it was more than his memory that took him away from his preferred vocation. Everyone around him - his parents, teachers, friends and even the careers adviser assigned to his school – had clear expectations that he was destined to become a lawyer or similar professional. These assumptions – grounded in Billy's academic ability, his family background and his own initial indications – guided his choice not only at that stage but for two years to come, and served to put him off the trail of the choice that had inspired him during his last year at school.

Billy's enjoyment of his experiences working with his cousin was the only hint he had to suggest his preferred choice might not be the one everyone assumed was right for him. Unsurprisingly, this limited experience and an absent voice (as his cousin was in Australia by the time Billy seriously considered his options) proved insufficient to overcome the weight of opinion pushing Billy towards the orthodox middle class route he had always accepted as his fate.

In retrospect, there were other clues that Billy might not eventually follow an academic career. He described in his interview how he had always had a 'practical streak', preferring to build scenery and props for school plays while his sister took the starring roles; spending hours making detailed working models with his grandfather and tinkering with his bicycle. He was very able academically, but he felt he had lost interest in 'book learning' towards the end of secondary school. However, he was strongly motivated by a desire to please his teachers and parents, which he had accomplished throughout his school career. This was not simply out of fear or pressure; Billy was keen to point out during his interview that he held his parents' and teachers' opinions in high regard and respected their experience and desire to see him make a success of his life. He referred to their own experiences of education as 'hard work, but worth it', helping them to 'carve out a very good life and security for us kids'.

In some ways it was Billy's maturity and determination to stick to his decision which contributed to his 'forgetting' his aims. Even when his first attempt at college started to go wrong he did not give up easily, sticking it out for a term when he felt during the first week that things were not going to work out. Having dropped out once he was keen to return and try something different, and happy to take the suggestions of the advisers who tried to help him. Once he had chosen another course he waited patiently for September to come around again rather than being tempted away by the possibilities of long-term work or the distractions of an education-free life.

In some ways, however, Billy was not making the clear decisions he appears to have. He was influenced heavily by the opinions of teachers, family and, early on, his friends, and like many young people he had little by way of his own life experience to put into the decision making process. In other words, he didn't know any better. Thus he went through a trial-and-error sequence of choices that didn't work out before he finally found the one that was right for him. As another interviewee commented: *'the one thing they never taught me was how to make decisions. How to look at myself and what I*



*was like, what I wanted and what I might want in the future. It was all about how good I could be, how high I could jump, not where I wanted to jump to.'* (Clare, 17, recent drop out from Hairdressing).

Billy felt he had learned something useful during both abortive periods at college, even though he hadn't achieved any qualifications: he had found out that what he was good at wasn't necessarily what he wanted to do. However, this new knowledge came at a price. Billy had always been confident in his academic abilities and had a positive experience at school. It was in some ways a shock for him to experience anything other than success, and he felt keenly that to drop out of one course was a failure – to drop out of two was a disaster. He worried that he might never find an area in which he could achieve, and as a boy who had always gained a good deal of his self esteem through academic success this seriously shook his confidence. This was especially the case the second time, when he felt he had nothing positive to move towards. He felt his parents' despair at his situation and, at that point, shared it.

His shaken confidence even threatened his final return to college to get the qualifications he needed to become an electrician. For all that he reported in the interview with a wry grin that he was 'third time lucky', when Billy first returned he was by no means certain that things would work out differently. Having been told all his life he was by nature academically able, he wasn't sure he could adapt to a more practical course, for all that it appealed more to him. He was worried that the college would treat him with suspicion after his two previous exits, and he was also concerned whether he'd get along with his new classmates. These factors could have affected his chances of resisting drop out for a third time; but for Billy his determination, the clarity of his goals compared to his prior attempts, and the support of his tutor, plus the acceptance of his father and, to some extent, his mother, helped him to overcome these difficulties and stay the course.

Billy is a 'seeker', who is committed to the notion of further education but is having trouble working out a career or educational path. Ultimately the

reasons he chose his course (in Billy's case, persuasion by his family and professional advisers) are not enough to sustain his motivation in the long term, and he drops out to re-direct his search elsewhere. For Billy, third time did prove to be the charm – other seekers might be lucky second time, or may take much longer to find the motivation they need to tip the balance. Some may find that path in routes that don't involve further education until much later, if at all, and some may lose the determination to decide what they want to do, in which case they could turn into 'drifters'.

## **Brendan's Story**

Brendan lives with his mother and father, and is the second youngest of four children, having two older sisters and one younger brother. His father, a lorry driver, is away from home a lot; his mother works in the local corner shop and off-licence. Both his parents left school before the age of sixteen, but thought education was important and hoped their children would do well.

The family moved house when Brendan was eleven, meaning that he went to a different school from most of his primary school friends. Brendan remembers this as a catastrophic event for his younger self – he'd enjoyed primary school but found his new school lonely and intimidating, and said he never really settled there. He made friends outside school, through his sisters and neighbours. By the time he was fourteen Brendan had come to hate school, and couldn't wait to leave. He truanted regularly with his older friends (who had already left) until his parents found out. Even after they and his school had taken measures to make sure he attended regularly he would truant whenever he could, to spend time with friends and occasionally do odd jobs to make extra money.

Brendan found it hard to be specific about why he disliked school so much, but there were many general reasons. He found many of his classmates to be 'too serious' and although he got along with most of his teachers he felt that some individuals, and the school in general, was 'too strict'. He didn't



feel there were any particular teachers in whom he could confide or go to with difficulties. He enjoyed music lessons at first, but found the curriculum at GCSE not to his taste, focusing too much on classical music and the theoretical rather than practical aspects. When planning his truancy he quite deliberately chose to miss lessons where he didn't feel the corresponding GCSE was attainable, or would help him in the long run. When he did turn up to class he worked well. In his interview he reported spending some of his 'truanting' time doing homework for his favoured lessons. This meant that although he was seldom seen in a Music or French class, he got reasonable grades in Maths, English and Science, enough for him to gain a place on a full time Electrical Engineering NVQ course at college.

Brendan didn't recall having any careers advice at school until the final year where he had one 1:1 session, which was directed towards helping him to apply for a college course. No other options were discussed, although he did have his own ideas:

*"by then I was into the DJ-ing and wanted something like that, something musical but practical music, but they could see my attendance for music and they scoffed at it. And it had to be full time college, no jobs or 'owt, just college, like there wasn't a choice."*

Brendan started the Electrical Engineering course the following September, but he never really imagined himself finishing it. From his point of view it was a stop-gap, "something to keep me off the streets until I got a job", although he wasn't actively job-seeking at first. He wasn't very interested in his course, however; he felt that his tutors "didn't like him" because he "couldn't be bothered much" and always seemed to be getting into trouble. He enjoyed the freedom that college gave him in comparison to school, but looking back he feels that he wasn't very well-equipped to make best use of that freedom. He had trouble occupying himself outside of lessons, and found private study difficult. His course required a lot of written portfolio assignments to be done outside of the classroom, and this posed a particular

challenge to Brendan. He didn't like being in college much and found that the Learning Resources Centre was often full: "I know they said we could use it, but it's for the clever kids really, those that need books and that, I could do my work anywhere really". However, working at home also proved difficult for Brendan as there was no free desk or table space to write on and the household is a busy and noisy one: "it's mad, our house, can't hear yourself think most of the time."

Brendan spent all of his free time, and increasing amounts of his timetabled college time, with his friends. He got a part-time job working in the kitchens of a large hotel in the city centre alongside one of these friends, and very much enjoyed his new spending power, which allowed him to go out clubbing most nights.

By the start of his second term at college, Brendan was spending his nights clubbing, his weekends and the odd afternoon working and his mornings sleeping. His college attendance dwindled to almost nothing, and when he did turn up he was often very tired and reluctant to learn. More than ever he was biding his time until that elusive full time job turned up.

In fact, Brendan never really engaged with his college life at all. In his interview he talks about "sitting there biding my time til I get home" and "just passing the time, really, I used to spend a lot of the time arseing about or sleeping until I could get off and see my mates, get back to real life." He didn't make any friends at college, saying he "didn't see the point" because "they weren't ever going to be really good mates, they were just kids to hang around with in breaks, you don't make friends that way."

Brendan's course tutor and his mother both tried to persuade him to change his ways, and Brendan says he did try, but his heart wasn't in it and in the end the call of the clubs and a wage were too much for him. When it became apparent that he was going to fail his course he made the decision to drop out. His job at the hotel had by this time ended, but he had been offered labouring work alongside another friend, which was well paid. He has worked



on various short-term building projects ever since. At the same time he is trying to build up his DJ-ing business and has secured a weekly residency at a pub in a neighbouring town, although the pay is very poor.

At the time of his interview, two years after he originally started his course, Brendan has no regrets about leaving, but does regret that he didn't get better information about his options. He feels very strongly that education isn't right for every young person, but that information about other options wasn't available. He had no contact with the careers service after he left school, and didn't feel he could approach anyone at college before or after he left; he thought they "didn't know [him] well enough" and was concerned they would 'just think it was excuses' for his problems at college. However, Brendan still hoped to realise his ambitions one day, and had not ruled out a return to college at a later date if it seemed appropriate to him.

### *Analysis – The Drifter*

Brendan said in his interview that he had an "uneasy" relationship with education. He said that he had a "curious mind" but that he got bored easily. He felt that his youth was a time for him to be "cutting loose" and "enjoying life", as well as making money to secure his future and that of his potential family. But he didn't think of the future much: "if you can't live in the moment when you're young, when can you?"

Whereas Billy was actively looking for the ultimate goal which would unlock his pathway through education and training to a job he would enjoy, Brendan was happy to let life unfold in front of him. Providing he had enough income to sustain his leisure activities he didn't perceive any need for him to pursue education or training. That is not to say, however, that Brendan didn't have goals - he very much wanted to be a professional DJ, preferably on national radio or in a large London club. But he wasn't sure how to progress towards attaining those goals, and many of his expectations appear unrealistic: in this regard Brendan's goals were really little more than dreams. This

contrasts with Billy, who was able and willing to plot and take a route - but didn't know where he was going.

Brendan's disregard for education began at secondary school and one gets the sense that he never recovered his enthusiasm. This could be rooted in his negative experience of his change of primary school. It could even be the case that this early experience led to his later drop out from college; by the time he'd left compulsory education Brendan was only biding time. There was no sense that college was in any way a 'fresh start' for him, or a means to achieve his aspirations; it was something he was doing to please his parents and occupy his time until he found his dream job. Brendan was a consumer of education, taking what he needed from his life at college, and disregarding the rest, as he had done to some degree at school (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006).

This disengagement is made even more powerful by Brendan's reluctance to make friends at college, preferring to socialise with his old friends in his neighbourhood, all of whom were out at work. Brendan appears a likeable and sociable young man; it seems that he made a conscious decision not to make particular friends at college simply because he wasn't expecting to stay there very long.

It would be easy to consider Brendan to be lazy or simply not interested in education, but that isn't the whole picture. Although Brendan said he was 'crap' at Electrical Engineering, he secured a distinction in the one assignment he handed in and got marked. He got good grades in the GCSE courses he actually took exams for at school. But he had a very poor opinion of his own abilities, and low self-confidence in general when it came to study skills and organisation. 'You have to turn up and know where your pencil is, and I was always crap at that. Plus, I didn't give a fuck.'

Brendan's lifestyle was a key obstacle to his continuing in education, especially on a full-time course. He was out late and tired in the mornings, and while this may not be uncommon among people Brendan's age, it probably contributed to his poor performance on his course, and particularly



his attendance. Brendan's experiences at school had been of strictly timetabled sessions, with homework (which he says he rarely did) used to provide extension activities. At college Brendan found he was expected to take more control over his own learning, and that out-of-lesson assignments were no longer an optional extra but vital for success. Early on, and after a couple of motivational talks from his mother and tutor, Brendan did try to study, but found it very difficult to do so. Brendan's family were keen for him to succeed, but could not necessarily provide him with the resources to do so. Compared with Billy - who had a study/bedroom to himself at home, with plenty of books, a computer and parents who could, for his first two courses at least, serve as back-up teachers - Brendan lacked support outside of the classroom. This could have served to reinforce the marginalisation of education in his life.

It was also a concern for Brendan that although his mother was keen to support him financially and emotionally through college, he had his own concerns that money was tight at home and he was a drain on resources. However, at the same time he acknowledged that when he did have money, from the hotel job, for example, he tended to spend it on clubbing rather than contributing to his keep: 'I always meant to give her something but I'd get in the club, and y'know it would go, so I thought, oh well, next time, like.'

It wasn't only Brendan's disengagement from education that led to his drop out, however. After all, he had been on the edge of school for five years before he came to college, and still managed to achieve some qualifications. He didn't actually leave college until the start of the third term of his first year: technically he actually persisted for longer than Billy did on either of his courses. So although his disengagement may have predisposed him towards leaving, he did not make the actual decision to do so for some time. Two things seem to have precipitated this decision. Firstly, his tutor had set him specific targets which he had failed to meet; Brendan believed that this failure would lead eventually to him being 'kicked off the course', and felt 'it's better to jump than get pushed'. Secondly, he had the promise of work, which

although not quite the occupation he had hoped for, did satisfy his initial aim of a pay-packet to support him until his DJ-ing dream came true.

## **Brittney's Story**

Brittney lives with her mother, one younger brother and an older sister. Her father left the home when she was five, and she hasn't seen him since he moved out of the area when she was seven. Her mother is a hairdresser in a successful salon in the city centre, and her father was a satellite television engineer. Both her parents had learned their trade through apprenticeships with day release to college. Her sister successfully completed a beauty therapy course at college and worked in a large department store on the perfume counter. Her brother was finishing his GCSEs at the time of the interview.

Brittney loved primary school, and believes this is largely because of the opportunities it afforded her to be creative:

*"They didn't make me think, it was just messing about with cardboard and scissors and drawing, things I love. I was good at it. It's when they made me write things down it all went wrong. [Laughs.]"*

Although she enjoyed primary school, particularly art, music and drama, Brittney says she was aware from an early age that she didn't enjoy the same academic success as her friends.

*"I always felt thick doing anything serious, as long as I can remember. I'm just not very bright, I guess, not at school work. I got used to it. It's not like I'm a retard, I can get by. I wasn't interested."*

Brittney arrived at her local secondary school, a large comprehensive, and remembers her first day vividly. She described it almost hour-by-hour in



her interview, and with considerable sadness. She particularly remembers her dismay at being separated from her friends from primary school, as they were put in different classes. She thought at the time it was because her entry test scores were lower than theirs, but said that since she had discovered that it was mostly a quirk of the alphabet, by which children were divided up into form groupings.

In her interview Brittney identified that day as the one where she lost interest in education: *“it sounds a bit drama-queen, but I don’t think I ever recovered. I was lost. It was like everything that was good about school was gone and I was left with everything I hated. There wasn’t anything left except the bad stuff.”*

As time went on, however, Brittney settled down and made new friends among her classmates, whose company she enjoyed. *“They made it bearable, really. They were very loud, always in trouble. Nothing serious, but you know, they were a laugh. Always a laugh. Cheered me up. I was the quiet one, compared to them. We were always getting told off, but truth is I wouldn’t have even bothered going the last two years if it weren’t for them.”*

The other highlight Brittney remembers from her days at secondary school was the annual drama festival, when each class put on a play. She frequently got good parts and was praised for her performances: *“not to be bragging but I did well. Everyone said so, my mates, teachers, everyone. I loved it. It was the only time I remember at school feeling I’d done something well. If I’d done an exam in it I would have passed! But you don’t do exams in acting, like that. Even Drama GCSE, which I did, there’s all this bloody writing.”*

As Brittney went through school she found herself falling further and further behind. She attributes this partly to her dyslexia, which wasn’t officially recognised until she entered college; partly to her lack of “intelligence”; and partly to the fact that she didn’t pay much attention in

lessons. Things came to a head for her when she got the results of her mock GCSE exams:

*“It was awful. I knew I hadn’t done brilliant, but they was all Es, all of them, even Drama. I remember going home crying and Mum and my sister were all ‘don’t worry, you can get better, that’s what mock exams are for, shake you up a bit’. They didn’t understand. There wasn’t time to get better. Not from an E. And I suppose... looking back, I always knew I wasn’t working hard enough, or whatever. I should have gone for help. The teachers were good, if you were willing to put in the effort. But I was embarrassed to ask. I never understood when they did tell me, not really, still couldn’t do it... I knew I’d fail anyway. The thing is, I’d worked really, really hard for those exams, hardest ever. But it didn’t work. I couldn’t be bothered, after that. What’s the point? I just enjoyed the last few months with my mates.”*

Brittney considered leaving education altogether after school, but her mother and sister persuaded her to take an NVQ2 course in Fashion Design at the college. *“They persuaded me it was, like, a second chance, and it was, really.”* At first things looked optimistic: Brittney was identified as having dyslexia and felt “for the first time I wasn’t stupid, I just didn’t see letters right.” She was given extra time for assignments and support to help her with her written work. At first this made a big difference, both to Brittney’s confidence and her achievement. *“It was like a door opening, I could concentrate on the things I was good at, and that was better. No-one thought I was thick, not at first.”*

However, by the end of the first term Brittney was struggling again.

*“There was this one assignment, it was about health and safety in the workplace. I couldn’t see what the fuck it had to do with fashion, frankly, and I couldn’t do it. It was hard, everyone said so. But they all did it, handed it in and I just couldn’t get it done.*



*I didn't even understand what I was supposed to do. It was stupid! And eventually I got left behind. Everyone else moved on to the next one and I was stuck with this; I didn't dare go into college because I'd had that many extensions and bollockings for not getting it handed in, I knew I'd get told off again. It sounds stupid now, looking back, but I just... I couldn't do it, so I gave up."*

For Brittney, 'giving up' meant a gradual disengagement from college. At first she continued to attend, avoiding only classes held by the teacher for which that particular assignment was due. "I still liked some of the others, they was alright and I had a laugh in them." Then she decided to stop going to some of the classes she found easier "to try and get the hard stuff done." Typically she would still come to college, but instead of going to lessons she'd intend to work in the library to catch up on her assignment work. However, this didn't work out very well. "I still couldn't do it, and I got bored. I'd wait in the coffee shop until my mates came out of class, hang out with them until after dinner then I'd go home or into town or something."

Eventually, after a near-miss when one of the tutors who's sessions she'd been most persistently missing nearly caught her in the coffee shop, she stopped going to college at all. It was a further month or more, however, before Brittney finally decided she had dropped out, and then "only because my Mum found out. They sent a letter to say I wouldn't get my materials allowance any more because of poor attendance. Then I got sat down for a long talk."

Brittney then set about finding work, but encountered difficulties.

*"The jobs I could've had were shit, cleaning and stupid hours and no money. I was getting desperate, there was nothing I wanted to do. I felt bad. Money was tight at home, I couldn't go out or anything, totally lost touch with my mates. I think it would've been alright if I'd been able to get dole or something,*

*but with no money, Mum wouldn't give me anything she said no, not if you're not earning it, you've got to grow up... I don't think she really forgave me for giving up, you know? [My sister] gave me some pocket money, and I did babysitting for her."*

By the summer of that year after Brittney dropped out, she was feeling under pressure from her family to return to college, which she didn't want to do. "I don't see the point in going back. I would only have fucked up again. I couldn't face it." However Brittney was "saved at the eleventh hour" when a job came up at the salon where her mother worked for a junior. Brittney compromised with her mother, agreeing to take the job for a three month trial period, on the condition that if she didn't like it or was dismissed before the end of the three month period, she would return to college.

Brittney didn't like the job much, but she didn't leave. "I didn't like it, it's just hard work really, all sweeping and dealing with chemicals, not very glamorous, but I had to stick at something. I think I was proving something to myself, as well." However, the salon included a nail bar which Brittney took an interest in. When a trainee manicurist position came up she applied, and at the time of her interview she had completed the first year of a two-year NVQ 2/3 training course on day release with a private training provider. It was important to her that the training didn't involve going back to college: *"too many bad memories and that, I needed a fresh start."*

Looking back on her college experience wasn't a happy experience for Brittney, but at the time of her interview she was looking forward to a career as a manicurist, thinking that she might set up her own business one day to specialise in manicures and pedicures for weddings and other special occasions. She liked the job because it was creative and situated in the fashion industry. Asked whether she regretted dropping out of college, Brittney said:

*"Yes and no. Yes, because I'll always feel it was a failure. Looking back now I see maybe I should have gone for help, but at the time I just felt so stupid... No, because, well as [my sister] says, all's well that end's well. I like*



*my job, and it is sort of in fashion, in fact it's better, I get to do what I like a lot of the time. If I'd stayed on the Fashion course, it's daft but I wouldn't have walked into a job like this. Not without doing a lot more college. You can't do nothing with an NVQ2 in this business, no way. I'd have ended up on reception or sweeping floors, or making coffee for someone. So, it all came out in the wash, really. But that's luck. Really, it's all been luck."*

### ***Analysis - The Stopper***

Brittney, like Brendan, traced her disillusionment with and disengagement from education to a relatively early point in her school career. However, whereas Brendan focused his attention outside school, Brittney had a strong social motivation for attending, and although she didn't enjoy school work she did enjoy being at school. This continued to college, where she remained engaged with network of friends long after her studies had come to a halt. One of the common themes noted among interviewees who had persisted was this commitment to a social network of friends. For example, Keira, who considered dropping out on several occasions, said: *"thing is, I would have missed everyone so much. What was the point of sitting at home on my own while my mates were all there, having a laugh? And they encouraged me, too, they didn't want me to quit. So I stayed."* (Keira, age 19, persister, completed A-Levels)

For Brittney, however, this wasn't enough motivation to keep her on her course. Her experience contrasts with another student, this time from a childcare course. Crystal was also dyslexic, and had not received any additional support before she came to college. She described this as a turning point in her education, not just for the welcome recognition of the nature of her difficulties, which Brittney also described, but further:

*"It made the biggest difference, having help. Having someone there I could ask, not just to help me read and that, but other stuff. It was like having a tutor all to myself, sometimes. Thing is, I give up easy. If I get to a difficult bit in a test or an exercise*

*or a portfolio evidence thing, I panic. All I see is that I can't do it, that everyone will think I'm stupid. I never used to ask for help. I'd hide it, like I hid that I didn't read well; I just stopped and decided to myself, 'oh, that's rubbish, why do I need to learn that?' But then when I had [my learning support assistant] with me, she'd just say, oh, don't worry about that for now, why don't you try this other bit and then you can ask the tutor about this other thing at the workshop.' Or sometimes, she'd know the answer and she could teach me. She reassured me that no-one thought I was stupid for asking, for needing things explained again. That made a big difference to me. I think that's how I got grown up about it."*

[Crystal, age 18, persistor, Child Studies]

Brittney, however, didn't feel there was anyone at college she could trust with what she saw as her failure and inability. As time went on the obstacle grew, finally forming an insurmountable barrier.

From an educational point of view it seems clear that Brittney needed support, and it could be argued that a good teacher should have recognised that need. Written work is of great importance to educational success (Wilkinson, 1995). However, Brittney went to lengths to cover-up her perceived shortcomings. She described acting up in lessons, partly out of boredom, but also: "to draw attention away from what I can't do." She also felt that the school didn't take learning difficulties such as dyslexia seriously:

*"They refused to believe it was a real, thing, you know? I think it was just whatever, their rules to ignore it."*

It is possible that at the time Brittney was at school the LEA did not have a particular strategy or policy to identify and support students with dyslexia, or it could be a school approach, and the account is of course from Brittney's perspective alone. It is hard to make any clear conclusions, but the fact that Brittney felt her school did not take her difficulties seriously seems



likely to have contributed to her low self-confidence in her school work and later on at college, even when her difficulties were identified and support given. In this sense Brittney took personal responsibilities for her failings: she saw her difficulties in completing certain tasks for assignments as a result of her own lack of skill and talent, and quickly took the blame for her own lack of success, and its consequences. Even the criticism of her school, quoted above, was a throw-away remark, with no particular tone of resentment or disagreement.

Seifert (2004) cites Dweck's assertion that "students who feel confident will engage in mastery-like behaviour, while *a perceived threat to competency will lead to performance-oriented, helpless behaviours.*" (Seifert, 2004: p145, citing Dweck, 1986, my emphasis.) This fits Brittney's story especially well: as soon as she encountered a barrier in her college work, she stopped engaging in tasks, believing them to be futile as failure was certain; as she said in the quote above: "*It sounds stupid now, looking back, but I just... I couldn't do it, so I gave up.*" This learned helplessness (Seifert, 2004) persisted in Brittney beyond her time in education, also affecting her entry to the job market, until she had built up confidence enough, with considerable support from her family, to consider a career route she wanted and could imagine performing well in.

Another notable theme from Brittney's experience is the role of critical moments (Thompson et al, 2002). At several intervals in her story, a particular event signals action which precipitates decision and action, and changes the course of her life. The first that she spoke about was the day she started secondary school, when she found herself adrift in a class without her friends, feeling intimidated by the academic tasks ahead. She describes this at the point where her attitude to school fundamentally changed. Another occurred when she encountered the assignment at college which she felt unable to complete. Again, this event changed her attitude to college; she gave up at that point, not just on the assignment, but on her whole course. A third critical moment can be observed when her mother gave her the ultimatum of taking the job at the salon or returning to college. Fortunately for Brittney, this

turning point proved more positive for her, ultimately leading to her finding a job with training which she enjoyed.

## **Buffy's Story**

Buffy's parents split up when she was a toddler, and she lives with her mother. Her mother stayed on at school to study A Levels and currently works as an administrator for a legal firm. She encouraged Buffy to study and do well at school:

*"Mum brought me up to be independent and I always wanted to make my own way. I was brought up to see school was important to get what I wanted in life."*

Buffy did do well at school, leaving with ten GCSEs, eight of which were grades A-C. She enjoyed school, although she was bored by some subjects. She truanted once or twice with friends but was frightened of getting caught. She got on well with most of her teachers, and had an especially good relationship with one of them, whom she saw as a mentor. This particular teacher helped her to be formally identified as dyslexic, and to get her support which she said made all the difference to her:

*"It's not too bad and I could get by, but it was the difference between just passing and getting good grades."*

Buffy had a small circle of friends at school and another group, including her boyfriend, who were two years older and in final year of sixth form when Buffy was finishing her GCSEs. She had wanted to stay on into the sixth form herself, but this didn't fit with her vocational aspirations:

*"They said I could've gone to Uni, and a lot of my friends did, but I always wanted to go into hair and beauty. It's creative, and*



*I know it's hard work but I really wanted to do it. Maybe have my own salon one day, do hair and treatments and nails and everything. So I decided to come to college instead. It was hard to leave them behind, though."*

Buffy found the careers advisers she spoke to were very helpful, and her mother helped her to get information about different courses, and to make a choice that suited her: a full-time Level 3 course in Hair and Beauty, with additional units in Business. However, once she had left school, her plans were disrupted.

Buffy chose her name for the study from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, a popular TV show whose eponymous hero has to drop out of college when her mother dies, leaving her to care for her younger sister. Buffy the interviewee felt she had a similar experience, in that she had to leave college to care for a family member – in her case her daughter. She found out she was pregnant the day she left school. Her boyfriend was about to go to University, so she made the decision not to tell him until he'd started his first term:

*"Like I said, I know how important education is, he's a bright lad and he had a place at a good Uni. I didn't want to mess things up for him."*

When she did tell her boyfriend he was supportive at first, and visited the baby often for the first few months, but then their relationship faded:

*"He was caught up with his new friends and his new life, and his parents had moved away so we called it a day. It was amicable, it's his loss. I could get child support I suppose but he's still a student, he's got loans and all that. Besides, I'm too... I'd rather do it on my own."*

Having found out she was pregnant, Buffy "took the next year out" to have her baby before taking up her planned place at Thornton College. Unfortunately the College nursery was oversubscribed, which meant that

Buffy was reliant on her mother for childcare “which was difficult, she had to work too”. Buffy’s attendance record in the first term was poor, leading her to lose her local authority grant. When appealing (successfully) against this decision to the College finance panel, Buffy explained her childcare problems. An appointment was arranged for her with the Welfare advisor, who helped her claim further financial support to enable her to place her daughter with a local childminder.

This seemed to work well for a few weeks, but by the second half term of her course Buffy ran into problems with attendance again. “The childminder’s was an extra bus ride so I was always late after dropping her off. Then I had to take time if she was poorly and teething.” Finally Buffy decided she wanted to leave college:

*“I didn’t enjoy it any more. I knew I’d miss my friends, and going out and doing something for myself, but what surprised me was I was missing out so much of my daughter’s growing up. She first talked a proper sentence at the childminders, no family with her. [...] I liked the course, and I still want to do hairdressing, but maybe when she’s at school. I’m happier now, even though I was living on benefits, which I said I’d never do. Still now I’m working in a café nights so I’m back into work, at least.”*

Buffy hadn’t made many friends at college. Although they were only a year or two her junior, she found them “too young, too immature,” and said that most of them had come together in “school cliques” and “weren’t interested in making new friends.” She has also drifted apart from her school friends since having her baby, and doesn’t feel she has much in common with them any more. She has made new friends with other mothers she met through toddler group, and has become very close to another slightly older single mother who had her baby in the same maternity ward on the same day as Buffy.

At the time of her interview, a year after she dropped out, Buffy seemed happy with her choice. However, she was anticipating being able to



return to full time education when her daughter was at school, and was unaware of the different levels of financial support available to over-19s. She felt there had been a rush to push her back into education as soon as possible to make up for lost time, when really she wanted to spend some time enjoying motherhood.

### ***Analysis - The Changer***

Bynner et al suggest that pregnancy for young women may be associated with social exclusion and poverty:

*“Teenage motherhood, perhaps more than any other status, epitomises the problem: early school leaving, no qualifications, poor job or youth training, pregnancy and child birth, poor prospects of ever getting a decent job, family poverty.”*

(Bynner et al, 2000, cited in Bynner et al 2002: p25)

Buffy's story is different, primarily because she did leave school with qualifications, and although her family background is not particularly well off, it doesn't show an extreme of poverty. However, even from a comparatively advantageous position, continuing her education did not work out for her. If Buffy lived in an area of high unemployment, had less positive school experiences and less encouragement and support from her family and local community, it would be very easy to imagine a different outcome for her. As it is she is currently living on a very low income, and although she has firm plans to return to college, this is still several years in the future for her.

Despite this, Buffy's experiences were not told in a negative light. She very much enjoys motherhood, and it was this, rather than the difficulties involved in continuing her studies, that she felt caused her drop out. Unlike Brittney, Buffy shows high levels of control over her choices: rather than learned helplessness, she fits Seifert's "mastery pattern" of motivation, driven by belief in her own abilities, determination to succeed and "internal, controllable attributions for success and failure." (Seifert, 2004, p145) Like

Brittney, she felt personally responsible for her position and choices, but showed less inclination to chastise herself for these:

*“There’s no point whining about it. I made a mistake, yeah, but I have a lovely daughter, and it’s up to me to make the best of it, make it work. So, no, it’s my responsibility, but no regrets.”*

Like Brittney, Buffy’s story includes critical moments, the most obvious of which was her pregnancy. There were other moments, however, less dramatic but still a turning point for her. When her LEA grant was stopped due to poor attendance, it highlighted her needs and opened up a range of new resources and support for her, without which Buffy was sure she would have left earlier, and “in a much worse way. I would have felt a failure, it wouldn’t have been a choice.” Another critical moment was when she realised she had missed out on hearing her daughter’s first words, which made her realise she wanted to focus on sharing her daughter’s early years and postpone her education and training: “it had been coming for a while, but that made my mind up.”

Buffy’s experiences and aspirations changed dramatically following the conception of her daughter, and she went through a long and continuing process of adjustment to her new circumstances. This wasn’t just a matter of the logistical and resource needs of her new family unit, however. It changed not just her financial priorities and responsibilities, but her goals and outlook on life:

*“My old friends, school friends, used to say: ‘oh, you’re stuck at home with the baby, poor thing, can’t your mum babysit and we’ll go out’. But I honestly didn’t want to. I didn’t think it would, I thought I’d be only too quick to do that [laughs] but I really, really like spending time with my daughter. She’s amazing. It’s more worthwhile than any job I can ever imagine doing, or any college course. It’s a whole new life.”*



## Discussion

These case studies present us with four different pictures of drop out, and broadly represent the experiences of most of the drop outs in the study. They also serve to highlight some key themes emerging from the study as a whole, while challenging some of the assumptions upon which current policy around education and social exclusion is based.

### *Individualized Routes to Drop Out*

The case studies show four individual routes through college drop out. Each of the stories shows a different and complex route, driven by a range of influences and circumstances. They vary in the degree of agency and control the young person has, or uses. Each comes from different family backgrounds, and has different outcomes to their drop out, although they are united in that all of them feel drop out was the right decision, do not regret it and feel positive about the directions their lives have taken after drop out.

Such complex experiences of drop out are not easy to record. A check of the college data on these four drop outs revealed that all four had the same box ticked on their withdrawal form: course unsuitable. This is accurate, in as much as the students had each, for their own reasons, found the course did not meet their needs. However, apart from Buffy, who also had a tick in 'personal problems', there is nothing to indicate the context of the young people's decisions, or the detailed set of circumstances which led to their drop out. For Thornton College, these four (with the possible exception of Buffy) would be classified as a failure, either of those who placed the students on their courses, or of those who designed and delivered the courses themselves. However, there is no evidence to suggest how things could or should be done differently from the data collected by the college. Only Billy's personal record included any detail of his leaving: in the case of his second course, there were some additional tutorial notes kept, as he had been considered an 'at risk' student due to his previous drop out. However, these notes were brief accounts of discussions in personal tutorials, and as Billy had been reluctant to talk about

his difficulties with his tutor, there was very little information which could have informed future policy and practice for the college.

All the drop outs interviewed felt, as those in the case studies did, that their drop out was their own responsibility and rooted in their own opportunities and choices. That is not to say they did not feel that external forces contributed the world in which their choice was made; but that ultimately they made a decision and felt that, for better or worse, it was their decision. Three of them also acknowledged external influences, and were critical of them: for example, Brendan felt it unhelpful that college courses only started in September, making it a long wait for those who decided to change programmes; Billy felt he had been given inappropriate advice and guidance; and Buffy felt she might have been able to continue with her education if part-time evening courses were available. Although Billy and Brittney had had poor experiences at school, they were not especially critical of the provision they had been offered, and spoke in terms of their reaction to school as being the problem rather than the other way around.

### *Confidence*

Perhaps the most striking theme to emerge from the first three case studies is the lack of confidence the drop outs had in their own academic abilities. Nearly all of them felt that this lack of confidence had resulted in them making mistakes which contributed in some way to their dropping out. Most of the drop outs interviewed volunteered that, like Brittney, their lack of confidence had stopped them asking for help and advice when they needed it. This lack of confidence appears to have had two main consequences: firstly that the young people concerned have deferred their decisions to family members and/or professionals, and secondly that they have withdrawn from situations where their perceived lack of ability might be discovered. For some, like Brittney, this resulted in a total withdrawal from education and a strong resistance to resuming their studies, while for others such as Billy, it formed a barrier that was eventually surmounted. However, in all but two cases (Billy being one of them), the drop outs said that their loss of confidence predated



their college experience. Buffy was an exception, feeling consistently confident in her ability to complete the course she had chosen. This could be because she had been told repeatedly when making her choice that she was university material, with the implication, she felt, that taking a vocational qualification, even at an equivalent level to A-Levels, would not make best use of her abilities. Billy had similar experiences when considering a vocational route.

While the levels of self esteem among drop outs varied, between interviewees and along the course of their experiences, for most of them it led to some degree to their dependence on external influences to determine their future. Three such influences came into play: family, professionals and 'critical moments'; that is, points where a decision or action was forced through events, such as Brittney's pressure to withdraw from college due to her sighting of her tutor in the coffee shop, or Brendan's impending assignment. Some or all of these influences may contribute to a young person's decision to take a course, and then whether or not to complete it.

### ***Vocational Goals***

With the exception of Buffy, the drop outs had a less clear vocational goal in mind when they started their course than persistors in the study, or if they did, felt in retrospect that they weren't sufficiently motivated to complete it. This could in part be a measure of reinvention on the part of the drop out as they rationalise their decision (Martine 1996), but the survey also showed that those who had a clear vocational goal in mind were less likely to drop out.

There are assumptions running throughout policy steering the provision of Further Education that the main goal of education and training is to give young people the skills and qualifications to enable them to contribute to the future labour market. It is also assumed that this will be the goal young people have when they take a college course. However, this goal seemed distant to most of the young people in the study, and particularly those who dropped out. For them college was simply the 'next step' from school. They

hoped for a good job in the future, but they didn't have a clear idea of what opportunities were available to them, or necessarily a realistic picture of what would be required in terms of qualifications, experience and location for them to get their dream job. For young people like Billy, the dream of what they want to do is very different from the educational path they find themselves on. This could potentially lead to conflict with tutors, who expected young people to be committed to the vocational area they were studying in. As Billy said: "They could tell I didn't want to work in an office. Towards the end, even the tutors had an attitude of 'well, why are you wasting your time doing this when you're not even interested'."

Parents seemed to hold more generalised assumptions, based on their own educational experiences as well as their aspirations for their children, probably coloured by their children's school careers as they perceived them. The parents' perceptions of local job markets also played a part and influenced the advice and direction they gave their children.

There were also assumptions held by the key professionals with whom the young people had contact at various stages through their school and college careers. From the students' reports, careers advisers and teachers seemed to believe in a hierarchy of post-16 routes, related not just to learners' aptitude but also (and in some cases more) to their abilities. Top of the list was A-level study leading to university (with its own sub-hierarchies of which institution was to be aimed for); then a full time Level 3 vocational qualification, either a BTEC National Diploma (preferably leading to an HNC or HND) or failing that, NVQs or GNVQs. Learners are commonly categorised throughout FE as 'vocational' or 'academic' learners, and 'academic' learners are considered to be the brighter group with wider and higher opportunities available to them (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) despite evidence to the contrary (Cowling, 1997). These assumptions had influenced the choices of many of the drop outs in the studies. They showed up in some of the language used: 'I was no good for A-Levels so I got sent on a BTEC'; 'I wasn't very bright so I ended up taking



[NVQs]'; 'I was in the top stream for everything so it was taken for granted I'd do A-Levels'.

As well as young people like Billy, who felt in retrospect that these assumptions had led to him choosing an inappropriate route, it served to further diminish the confidence of some learners who took a vocational route and felt that it reflected poorly on their abilities. This was further compounded in some cases where young people found themselves in a vocational area to which they believed they weren't suited. As Brittney said: *"it's alright for them who are bright enough to do A-Levels. If you don't like English, you only have to stick it for two years then you get to Uni and do what you want. If you take Hairdressing and you don't like Hairdressing, you're stuck. You can't decide when you're 18 and qualified that you want to be a joiner, can you?"*

From the point of view of most of the young people in the study, college was a part of growing up for them, and that included deciding what they wanted to do by way of further study and a job when they left at 18. They didn't necessarily relate their college course to their future career outcomes, or at did not see it as the only possible route. In that sense, it was simply a continuation of school, but one with a new option - if they didn't like it, they could leave.

### ***Critical Moments***

Although for most of the drop outs dropping out was a long and quite gradual process, all of them could pin point a particular set of circumstances which they felt formed a decision to leave. Like Brittney, they didn't necessarily tell anyone of their decision or even stop attending college at that point (or conversely they may have stopped attending some time previously but always with the intention of returning 'some time') - but in retrospect were clear that there had been a specific moment when they 'gave up'.

Critical moments took a variety of forms, but typically constituted a challenge to the young person's identify as a student. For some this came

from inside; for example, finding an assignment too challenging and thus believing they weren't capable of continuing with their course, or finding an alternative route they preferred, such as a different vocational goal (like Billy), a route linked to the home and/or family strand of their transition (like Buffy) or a work opportunity (like Brittney). For others it was impact from outside, such as persuasion by a teacher, parent, friend or employer.

### ***Social and Cultural Capital***

The social and cultural resources available to the four drop outs in these case studies shows significant variation, and it can be seen how this affects their experiences of education and drop out. Buffy, for example, resists drop out the first time with help from a support network which includes her welfare advisor, the Financial Assistance Committee, her tutors and family. She does not tap into this network, however, until her lack of attendance triggers the system into action: she seems unaware of its presence prior to her financial crisis.

Billy has a good deal of support and resources to help him with his education, which helps him through two course changes and his career search, whereas Brendan did not benefit from this support, although his parents were enthusiastic about his education and keen for him to succeed, and did not recognise some of the support which was available through college. Good educational support at home and at school is powerful, even having the capacity to overcome the influence of poverty upon educational outcome at school, (Bynner, 2001). At college, where students are expected to adopt a more independent style of learning, it could also be expected to have a significant impact.

The value of contacts is also highlighted by the study, especially in the form of knowledgeable family members with a capacity to make job introductions, as Billy and Brittney, in particular, found. Buffy mentioned two important mentors in her life, her mother and one of her school teachers, both of which she felt had guided the formation of her own identity and continued



to be a source of inspiration and guidance when she came to make her own life-choices.

### *Conclusions*

This chapter has examined in detail the experiences of four students, including their educational and family background, their life at college, their decision to drop out and the immediate consequences. This analysis has highlighted the individualized nature of the young people's pathways, although the influence of structural factors has also been noted. Issues of confidence and vocational aspirations have been identified as important for the students, and as playing a part in the process and consequences of drop out. The role of 'critical moments' in the process has also been highlighted.

In the next chapter, the data from all thirty interviews will be considered, with the aim of further investigating these and other arising themes for the research.

## Chapter 5 - Drop Out and the Student Experience: Decision Time

*“The money wouldn’t have mattered if I’d really wanted to be an electrician. It was what I wanted that made me drop out, the money was just the kicker.”*

*(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)*

The survey data indicated broad trends in drop out, and identified some common reasons given for drop out. The case studies showed how these trends related to individual students’ experiences. Together, these findings show that students leave for complex reasons, and that their decision to drop out is related to a set of circumstances set in the context of their wider life experience. Much current policy and practice is rooted in the assumption that generalisations can be made from overall trends and common causes of drop out. However, the fact remains that causes can not be reliably converted to predictions. For example, for some students’ financial problems prove an insurmountable barrier, and they drop out, while for others they are a difficulty which they live with as an acceptable burden in exchange for the compensations of continuing with FE.

As Martinez argues (1996), drop out is very rarely a one-off, out of the blue event. Although it may appear, especially through interpretation of the trends-based quantitative data that colleges use to inform their policy and practice, to be an individual, localised decision, in fact as both Martinez’s data and the survey data presented in Chapter 5 suggests, most students are contemplating drop out to some degree throughout their time at college. It may be a more idle thought for some than for others, but it is a choice that is constantly available. So what is it that pushes some students to take that choice a step further and actually make the decision to drop out, while others take the opposite route?

The true cause of drop out, I suggest, is not a particular circumstance or event, but rather a set of contextual factors which at some point precipitate a decision-making process with the consequence of drop out or persistence. It



is not the factors themselves which cause drop out. It is the individual's interpretation of their position: their aspirations, capacity and the available opportunities for taking different courses of action which are the crucial factors.

In this chapter I take a closer look at how the decision to drop out or persist was made by the students in the interview study, by identifying and examining the four most important themes arising from the analysis. Firstly I consider the *aspirations* which young people hold, which guide their decision to drop out or persist. Then I look at the various *influences* which help to form and support or change these aspirations. Thirdly I examine how *confidence* is built and diminished and how it relates to drop out and persistence. Finally I consider the *critical moments* described by interviewees: the defining event or circumstance which triggered their decision.

## Aspirations

Aspirations and goals were central to decision making processes for all the students in the study. Those who had dropped out did so either because their goals were no longer (or had never been) dependent upon their completing their course, or because they did not have a clear goal in mind. Persistors reported that they had finished their college courses either as a goal in and of itself, or because it contributed to achievement of other goals. In both the survey and the interview data, those students who persisted and completed their courses were those who cited their determination to achieve their goals as one of the most important factors that had stopped them from dropping out. For drop outs, one of the main drawbacks they saw to leaving early was when it prevented them from following a path they had hoped to follow.

Students' aspirations affected their perception of college and its purpose and place in their lives. Young people starting college carry

aspirations formed over their lifetimes, influenced by many social experiences and other factors. By examining the various dimensions of young people's aspirations we can better understand the role aspirations play in the decision to drop out or persist at college.

### *Perceived opportunity*

One of the most important things guiding aspirations for the interviewees was how likely it was that they thought their goals could be achieved at any particular time. For some this was a practical matter: when a course was available or whether a particular job could be secured. For others it was a more abstract notion of plausibility.

Aspirations are formed within a framework of what appears plausible and desirable to the individual. The interviewees sometimes distinguished between 'dreams' and 'goals'. The difference between the two was the likelihood of the aspiration being achieved. *Dreams* were far-off things that were either not expected to happen at all, or if they did happen, the individual expected this to be the result of chance (e.g. winning the lottery and being able to live without the need to work; their band being spotted by a big-time agent at a local gig) or in the far distant future. When interviewees spoke of dream-aspirations, they did not have a strategy to achieve them. They were still important, however, not least in informing the individual's identity, as discussed below.

The achievement of *goals*, however, appeared far more plausible to the individual. This was not necessarily a decision based on any external measure of likelihood, and what appeared to be only a 'dream' to one person could be a 'goal' to another. For example, two of the interviewees in the study longed to work as DJs in clubs. Both had similar backgrounds, experience and qualifications and, apparently, opportunities. But one felt that DJ-ing was just a dream, while the other saw it as a goal which he expected eventually to achieve.



The difference between the two is important, because while goal-aspirations were explicitly involved in the decision-making process of drop out vs. persistence, dream-aspirations were not. Dreams might be part of the way the interviews saw themselves, but by definition they were unlikely to impact on day-to-day decisions. Some goal-aspirations were well-suited to the educational context available, such as ‘to go to university’ or ‘to go to Oxford’, or ‘to be a teacher’. Others were more ambiguous, such as ‘to be a plumber’, where there was an element of choice, as it is possible to become a plumber through a number of routes involving varying degrees of educational participation. Some were distant from college life, such as ‘to be a singer in a rock band’, while some were considered alien to it, such as ‘to get a job and never have to study any more’.

All of these options could appear highly plausible to the individual student, but the question was whether they saw an opportunity to pursue their main goals at any one time. It was notable that drop outs frequently took their courses to ‘bide their time’ while waiting for an opportunity to pursue their goals. For some drop outs and some persistors, college was a way of gathering goal-related skills, experience and qualifications which would contribute in a general way, but which they were willing to give up if a ‘short-cut’ opportunity came along.

Interviewees’ aspirations changed as they encountered new experiences and the dimensions of aspiration shifted, leading to new options and choices:

*“I might’ve dropped out, if I stayed on Tourism. I used to like it alright to start with, but then we did this module on IT, to help us use booking systems and that. It was really interesting, and the teacher was wicked. All our teachers were good, but I really hit it off with this person. I’d never thought of doing IT before, I avoided it at school because it was nerdy and I hated maths. But*

*it was different from what I thought, and I'd never have realised otherwise."*

(Jack, age 18, persistor, completed IT)

*"I got this work placement at an insurance office and it was all right. I'd never had a proper job before, only weekends in a shop and I didn't like that much. But this was totally different. I could see myself working in an office like that, doing the policies and seeing people, getting them a good deal. I could see other places to go than university and I suppose I got hungry for it."*

(Shelly, age 19, persistor, completed Business Admin)

Like the aspirations themselves, the young people's perception of opportunity was a personal viewpoint, influenced by their experiences, family, friends and others, rather than a measurable entity. Even if there was an opportunity, such as a job-offer in the desired field, the young person may not feel they were able to take that option at that time, perhaps due to low self-esteem. Some young people were waiting for opportunities which to an outside observer could appear highly unlikely.

### ***Autonomy & Bounded Agency***

Even if opportunities came along which they felt willing and able to take, young people do not necessarily have the freedom of choice and capacity to take them.

Young people's motivations and aspirations are rarely static or consistent, and are subject to a range of influences and drivers. It could be argued that while this is true for anyone, it is particularly so for this cohort. For many, leaving compulsory education marks the beginning of a process of transition, during which the young person is increasingly making independent decisions about their life choices, taking on new, adult roles and experiencing major changes in the people they are most likely to turn to for advice, leadership and censure. This change in autonomy and influence may be



turbulent in itself, meaning that decisions are more difficult to make. In addition, young people are making decisions about living in an adult world in which they are relatively new and inexperienced (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006).

Nora summed this up neatly from her own perspective:

*“I didn’t know what I wanted at 16. Nobody knows what they want at 16. I didn’t even know who I was. Everything was changing. I wasn’t so close to Mam, she was shouting at me all the time about I should do this, I should do that.... Suddenly I was listening more to my friends, and especially my boyfriend. I had all these new things I could do because I was older, and I wanted to try things out, find out who I was. I didn’t want to say ‘oh, I’m going to be a teacher’, or ‘I’m going to have kids’. I needed to find out who I was first.”*

(Bev, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels)

## ***Identity***

Young people’s sense of identity, likely to be undergoing radical change (Jenkins, 1996), will have been formed through their lives at school, at home, through their relationships with family and friends and the wider communities in which they grew up. By the time they enter college there are new factors to challenge and inform their identities: new friends, teachers and a new status as a ‘student’ which is very different from that of a pupil at school. As Katy says:

*“I loved being a student, that part of it was great. Not just because you get free stuff [laughs], I mean, the whole thing of it. It’s like you feel grown up, and you get freedom you haven’t had before, college is much more informal than school, but there’s this whole thing about you’re young, having fun, carefree, having a laugh with your mates, not a care in the world. I liked*

*that very much. Yeah, I liked being a student. Just not the studying part!”*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

Some interviewees didn't particularly identify with the 'student identity':

*“No, I never thought of myself as a student, it was always a means to and end, not part of who I was, like.”*

(Eve, age 18, recent drop out from Catering Foundation)

Some mature students who returned to college much later having dropped out at 16 or 17 found it different the second time around:

*“First time, it was just a pain in the arse. I didn't really buy into the whole student thing. I wasn't interested. But this time... I love just being here, going to class, even stupid things like having a Student Card. But now I've got the experience, you see, I can appreciate it. There's something about... well, it beats being a convict, you know? [laughs]”*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

There seems to be no single student identity, although some common features included an element of freedom from adult responsibility and a certain social status different from and preferred to those of school children and some types of work. (Specifically what could be termed 'poor work'.) Different groups of students associated different features and benefits of the student identity. The A-Level group (leavers and persistors) saw themselves as scholars, as well as fun-loving young people, and recognised elements in their current identities which presaged their anticipated future identities as University students. Vocational students, on the other hand, talked more about the freedom from the responsibilities of work. Mature students described a sense of achievement and self-worth as an important part of their identity as students. Whatever the precise characteristics for a specific student, however,



there was a definite sense of currency in the student identity: a student was a good thing to be, and had clear advantages over many of the alternatives. This in itself was a motivation for many of those in the study to resist drop out. In some cases, such as Brittney, discussed in the previous chapter, the student identity was so valuable as to perpetuate beyond dropping out for as long as possible.

Those who do not aspire to, value or associate themselves with an identity as a student may be more inclined to drop out either when difficulties arise, or when something that fits their perceptions of themselves better comes along. For example:

*“My Dad’s a joiner, my uncle’s a joiner, my brother’s a brickie. I’m not interested in being a student, I just need training for the job. Soon as I could, I was out of there and into the real world.”*  
(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

### ***Notions of success and failure***

The interviewees’ aspirations were also influenced by their personal notions of success and failure. For most of them, studying at college was in itself a mark of success, either for the future opportunities it promised, or for barriers that had been overcome to gain admission. For the drop outs in the study, however, other notions of success and failure were more or at least as important. Like other students, the achievement of qualifications was a success factor. But for them, success was also likely to be defined by attendance, behaviour, and social relationships with other students and friends outside of college, relationships with teachers and pleasing parents, friends and boy/girlfriends. These terms of success were often related to their experience at school, where they had been set targets by parents and/or teachers. For example, [Bert] was very concerned with his attendance rates:

*“I know I didn’t do well with coursework but I always turned up. I went through all that at school, being on report, truancy officer*

*visited home once, she [his mother] was mortified. So that part, I was always there, not one day off, not even a sick day."*

(Jack, age 18, persistor, completed IT)

Other interviewees found success in pleasing teachers and feeling liked by them:

*"I always got on well with teachers, I liked it when they talked to me like an adult, got along with me. I'd work hard for the right teacher, someone who was nice to me, and I hated when I got in trouble or fell out with them."*

(Fiona, age 18, recent drop out from A-Levels)

*"If you don't do what teachers say, you won't get anywhere. That's what they're for, to teach you, and you're there to do as they tell you. If they're pleased with you, you know you're making progress."*

(Josh, age 18, persistor completed A-Levels)

While some sought deeper knowledge of their subject:

*"Exams are important, and I'm lucky I'm good at them, but they're only a test. [pause] They're not important in themselves, they're not the same as really understanding things. That's where the real sense of achievement is, in getting to the bottom of something and understanding it, not just rattling off exam answers."*

(Caroline, age 19, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Some interviewees, both drop outs and persistors, described their notions of success or failure in terms of their parents' expectations:

*"I want to do well, to please my Dad. He's always encouraged me and I know it would mean a lot for one of his kids to go to*



*University. That's what kept me going, really, knowing how happy it would make him."*

(Keira, age 19, persister, completed A-Levels)

*"My family always said just do your best. I think they're right, you can get yourself in a total stressed state if you're always aiming for an A in this or a B in that, always worrying about exams and the like. I know if I've slacked off too much, then I feel guilty, sure. But if I'm working okay, if I can say yeah, I give it my best shot, then that's all I ask."*

(Josh, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels)

Meanwhile for some students, who saw college as a primarily social experience, making friends was a sign of success:

*"I made loads of wicked friends at college. I was worried I might not, with it all being so new, didn't know what people would be like, but the mates I made were brilliant. It was the best part of college, for me. I was never that popular at school, but suddenly I got on with all these wicked mates. That made me feel good, yeah, and sad to leave. But I still see nearly all of them."*

(Brittney, age 19, past drop out from Fashion)

Two interviewees did not see gaining qualifications, or less specific academic achievements, as being a sign of success. For these young people, both of whom dropped out, success was related directly to working status and earnings. One of them said:

*"College is for waiting. You hang around there because there's nowt better to do. It don't get you nowhere. It don't get you work, not like they'd have you believe... all my mates who are earning most now never went to college. If you work hard you*

*don't need qualifications, and that's where the big money is.*

*College is for people who can't get a job."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

While it could be argued that this point of view could be to some extent a defensive reaction, a justification for that individual's own drop out, it could also be a more general point of view, especially from that young person's observations of his or her family and peers. If young people's interest in college is a means to an end, which for many it is, then if the end becomes available (or apparently available) through other, more preferable means, college becomes an obsolete choice. Thus their personal success is no longer related to college, but to the other route to the young person's goals.

The interviewees agreed that drop out meant failure in some sense. Some felt it was primarily a failure of 'the system': that they had been given poor advice, insufficient opportunities, inappropriate courses or facilities. For most, it was a failure at the time because they felt they had disappointed parents, teachers or friends. Persistors who had considered dropping out cited the 'fear of failure' as a key motivator for completing their course, and defined this mostly in terms of academic failure. However, looked at after the passage of a year or even less, most of the drop outs felt that any sense of failure had been temporary, and looking back they saw it as a choice rather than a sign of defeat. There may be an element of historical re-invention in these views, but the fact that most of them seemed to have moved on and found what they considered to be success in other ways, supports their perspectives.

Similarly, when talking about the drop out of friends or others on their courses, both drop outs and persistors saw it as primarily a positive choice, and a personal one which they felt should not be considered as a 'failure':

*"At the end of the day it's up to them, you know? It's not for me to say what they should do, or anyone else, it's their decision.*



*Everyone should stand by that, it's not the end of the world. It's usually for the best, I think. Yeah."*

(Crystal, age 18, persistor, childcare, speaking about a course-mate who dropped out)

The young person's aspirations, then, are framed by what they deem available, desirable and within their power. It will fit who they think they are, and who they want to be. Aspirations will help to define what the young person perceives as relative successes or failures.

Strong aspirations can help a young person to persist when times are hard:

*"Yeah, there were times when I felt like giving up. Like when I split up with my boyfriend - he was in all the same classes as me, always around, and then he started going out with this other girl on our course. It was in my face all the time. I wanted to give up then. Money has always been tight. There's been times when coursework was so hard, I got headaches... yeah, I'd be lying if I said I never thought about it. But what else could I do? I've always wanted to work with kids. Always. It's not just a fad, like for some girls, they think it's easy. I want to work in a nursery, work my way up, run my own one day. It's my dream. I can't imagine ever wanting anything else."*

(Crystal, age 18, persistor, childcare)

They can lead a young person to engage only marginally in FE which does not contribute directly to their aims:

*"I was happy enough, jogging along and that. It was okay. But I didn't want to be an electrician, so to me - and nobody seemed to get this, still don't - I wanted to work in the music industry. Not just be a DJ, that's just the start - I've got big plans. So for*

*me, going out and doing gigs wasn't distracting. It's my career.*

*If anything, school was the distracting thing."*

(Brendan, age 18, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Students without clear, strong aspirations could lack the drive to attend, complete assignments and ultimately, to achieve:

*"I didn't like it much. It's boring. The best bits were having a laugh at lunchtime, and even then... I don't know, really. Just couldn't be arsed to get out of bed for it most mornings. Didn't see the point."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

And students with goals which were not linked to college at all would give up on FE when an opportunity came along:

*"I wanted to join the army from the start, but I didn't get in first time. College was just something to do while I waited."*

(Survey Respondent: drop out from Hospitality course)

Aspirations were at the forefront of young people's minds when they make the decision to leave. However, as well as their own goals, there were other influences upon their aims which played an important part.

## **Influences: Information, Advice and Guidance**

Most of the interviewees had taken explicit advice from others before they started their college course. All of them talked about other people who helped to shape the various dimensions of aspiration outlined above. It is widely believed in the FE sector that professional advice and guidance is vital for young people, and that much drop out could be prevented if students were



given better information and assistance in making their choices. However, the interview data shows a more complex pattern of influence, often more powerful than the professional input received.

### ***Family and Friends***

Family and friends helped to shape the young person's choices in an indirect way, by having a general influence upon how the individual had grown up and formed their views, opinions and goals:

*"I was brought up to believe in education. There's a lot of teachers in my family, and my friends are all intelligent. I think it's very important."*

(Fiona, age 18, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Interviewees also went to family members for explicit, personally-tailored advice, and sometimes to friends-of-the-family. This was particularly the case if the friend in question had vocational experience along their lines of interest. Parents were very influential. Some encouraged and guided the young person through their choices:

*"my Dad was great, he sat down and talked to me, then we got all this information and went through it together. He didn't push me to go one way or the other, he respected my decision. Even when I changed it later on, it wasn't an issue, like."*

(Claire, age 17, recent drop out from hairdressing)

Other parents made specific suggestions based on their own wishes and aspirations for their child: *"it was all about university. Mum was the first in her family to go, and she wanted that for me too. Nothing else was on the agenda."* (Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies).

Some suggestions were more forceful than others:

*“the only option was college, all the way through. If I’d dropped out rather than transferring I would have been chucked out of the house, really.”*

(Faith, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels)

*“I wasn’t so bothered at first, but Mum and [my sister] said give it a go, no pressure really, just try it, and I found I did like it after all.”*

(Brittney, age 19, past drop out from Fashion)

Sometimes advice from parents did not achieve the intended goal, as their child deliberately rebelled against it. Sarah was the most extreme example of this:

*“I don’t know why, looking back, I was just a kid I guess and that’s what kids do... but I didn’t want to be like my parents. I didn’t really know what I did want to be like, but I wanted to be different. Their lives seemed boring to me. Well, it does, when you’re young, right? [...] My Dad, especially, he was all about getting a trade, the last thing he wanted was for any of us to be on the dole like he was when he left school. We’d all heard the story over and over, how hard it was, raising a family on twenty quid a week and how his life changed when he went into the building trade. But it doesn’t mean anything when you’re sixteen. I just didn’t want to be like them, working all hours for a house and two weeks holiday a year. So I went out of my way to do the opposite. [laughs] I wish I’d listened to him now, like, but then that’s kids for you!”*

(Sarah, age 35, mature drop out returned to take Hair and Beauty)



But other interviewees described smaller instances of rebellion, such as:

*“Mum always said I would like salon work, but I wanted to be different, so I went for fashion instead.”*

(Brittney, age 19, past drop out from Fashion)

*“Everyone said I’d drop out, so when I realised I was thinking of it I hung on for a long time just to prove them wrong.”*

(Eve, age 18, recent drop out from Catering Foundation)

*“There was a lot of pressure for me in my last year at school to give up on the idea of A-Levels and do something more practical. Especially from my Stepmother. She did my head in, always on about it, ‘there’s more than one way’. We had big fights, and I was determined not to let her win. Even when I realised she was right, kind of, and I signed up for the Business Admin [GNVQ] I still took an A-Level in English just to prove her wrong. [laughs]”*

(Shelly, age 19, persister, completed Business Admin & English A Level)

One way or another, however, family and friends helped to form and inform the development of the young person’s goals and the strategies and abilities they had to achieve them. They were also often involved in the decision making process directly. Only one of the interviewees had not discussed their potential drop out with her family before deciding to leave.

### ***Professional Guidance***

Various different professionals affected the young people’s aspirations by explicitly providing advice and information to help them make choices. At the most specific end of things were careers advisers. Most of the interviewees

recalled seeing a professional adviser of some kind during their last year at school, and many also sought help from the careers team at college. However, the interviewees felt that these services were primarily informational, not least because of their professional nature:

*“Yeah, careers were a help. The one I saw at school, she told me what was on offer, like, and what I needed to get what. The one at college gave me more information about other courses than the school woman did. But they can’t really advise you, not properly, because they don’t know you. You’re with them for what, half an hour? How can you know someone long enough after half an hour to tell them what to do with their life?”*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Similarly, Caroline found the careers advice she received:

*“useful for ideas, like, and for information. They try to match what you’re like to what you could do, they did this test thing on the computer, but it’s all a bit mechanical. It doesn’t account for you changing, changing your mind and your attitude, your life [...] and I changed a lot in them few months after school.”*

(Caroline, age 19, recent drop out from A-Levels)

The other main source of advice and guidance for the interviewees was their school teachers. This came through in two ways: the interviewees, like those in the survey explicitly said so when asked about advice and guidance, but also when they told their life stories teachers (usually specific teachers whom they felt had made a big impact on them) often came up in relation to decision-making, aspirations and planning for their futures. They were seen as offering a complementary resource to family members:

*“If I wanted to know what my personality was suited for, what would make me happy, I’d ask Mum. But if I wanted to know*



*what I was capable of, what I could do well at, I'd ask [my teacher]."*

(Josh, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels)

Advice was sought more often from teachers than careers advisers because, like family members, they were more accessible and thought more likely to be able to give accurate advice based on their usually long-term relationship with the student.

### ***Information, Experience and Popular Culture***

While family members and teachers were often sources of advice and guidance, and in some cases put boundaries in place concerning what choices they felt should be available to the young person, information was often gathered from a wider range of sources. This included personal sources such as teachers and careers advisers, but also from information resources such as web sites, books, open days and leaflets. Some young people had accessed a range of information, while others had either only looked for what they needed to achieve the goal upon which they already felt firmly set, or else were so lost for ideas they didn't know where to start and looked at very little, preferring to 'go with the flow' and be guided by others.

Information on careers and educational opportunities was thought to be widely available, but information on the process of dropping out and changing direction was not so easy to find:

*"I was thinking, well, okay, this isn't for me. I need to get out. But then I hung around for ages because I wasn't sure how to go about it, or how to decide what to do until I could start another course or get a job or anything. That wasn't in the manual!"*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Most of the interviewees had some experience of work before they started college, and of course a good deal of experience of education. This experience played an important part in their decision-making processes, helping them to decide what their capabilities, preferences and inclinations were. Some had also called directly upon employers for information about qualification routes and requirements for particular vocational options.

Popular culture also played a role in helping to form young people's aspirations and how these goals could best be achieved. Some had accessed information via television or radio programmes (fictional and factual), or had been inspired by some cultural aspects with which they identified, such as music, fashion or a desire for travel.

### ***Role Models***

In some cases specific individuals served as positive or negative role models: examples for the young people of pathways through education which they wished to emulate or avoid. For example, Tim said: *"I saw my Dad struggle for years to get on at work, just making do, and one of the things that stopped me from giving up even earlier was that I didn't want to do that. Partly for his sake, but for me too. I didn't want to follow in his footsteps and never do anything more than break even."* (Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

Meanwhile Keira was inspired to follow in her sister's footsteps:

*"I always wanted to go to university. [My sister] went the year I started at college, and she was having such a great time. I went to stay with her and it was brilliant. That helped get me through the bad times, knowing that she'd done it before me and it was worth it."*

(Keira, age 19, persister, completed A-Levels)



Role models did not always provide a reason to persist, however. For Phil, it was just the opposite:

*"I knew that you could get on without, like. There's loads of people don't do nothing at school and drop out of college, but they do just fine. Famous people, like, and my mum and dad, my eldest brother, they all left at sixteen and they're making good money, happy lives. That's all I want, so I'll do that, like."*

(Phil, age 22, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

As well as the professional aspect to teachers' advice, some teachers had also helped to form the aspirations of many of the interviewees through inspiration. These relationships could be particularly powerful and long-reaching; for example:

*"Buffy: Mrs B, she was my teacher in Year 6, primary school. She was amazing. She didn't care where you came from, what you'd done before, she just wanted to help you do the best you can. I suppose I really clicked with her, although she was very popular all round... She made me believe in myself. When I did work for her I really wanted to try, because I wanted her to know I liked her and the faith she had in me... I'd never had that before, always hid away in the back causing trouble [laughs] but yeah, she was an amazing teacher. I cried buckets when I left for big school. I never did quite as well after that, but sometimes even now when I feel low about things I can hear her saying 'stop it, you're worth more than that'. God, it sounds so sappy! But it's true. She'll always be an influence on me, I think."*

*Interviewer: What do you think she'd have thought about you dropping out?*

*Buffy: Oh, I actually thought about that at the time [...] I think she'd have been right disappointed. I mean, I love my baby and I don't regret it, it was the right decision. But she showed me what I can do and I'm not going*

*back on that now. I want to get what I set out for. That's one reason I tried again, and I know eventually I'll come back and finish."*

(Buffy, age 20, past drop out from Hair & Beauty)

One interviewee had kept in touch with his last teacher at school, with whom he got on particularly well and who had encouraged him to go on to college. When he started to have difficulties with his coursework he went back to his school and saw his old teacher for advice:

*"Mr S was great like that. He was very informal, so I knew he wouldn't mind. I wanted an opinion from someone who wasn't so emotional about it, but who knew me well. My Mum was all 'whatever makes you happy', which is fine, but it doesn't actually help - it's not all about being happy, really - and my Dad was all 'start what you've finished, Son'. But Mr S went through things more logically, like what I was finding hard and what I could do about it. It helped me realise it wasn't the subject I didn't like, it was the way I was being taught. I wasn't used to being left on my own so much. I wouldn't have seen that, but he always has a way of showing me things about myself I didn't know."*

(Josh, age 18, persistor, completed IT)

For some interviewees a teacher at college took on this role:

*"I'd never been bothered at school, never really got on with the teachers. I mean, I wasn't a trouble maker or 'owt, just never bothered much. But the teachers here, especially Tom, are different. Tom respects us. He's always got time for you and I really respect what he says. He's been out there in industry, he knows what he's talking about. I know I can learn a lot from him, not just lessons but about what it's like [...] what I want to be."*

(Jack, age 18, persistor, completed IT)



It was noticeable that interviewees who didn't have a particular teacher who inspired them in this way were also the ones who described feeling disengaged from school:

*"The teachers were alright but I never really bothered about them, just stayed out of trouble, kept my head down and counted the days [until leaving]."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

Although some of those who did have an inspirational teacher were still not interested in all aspects of school:

*"I got on okay in Mr F's classes, because he was a good teacher and I really rated what he had to say. He was more than just a teacher, really, he was like, I'd go to him for advice and stuff. But in other classes I got bored a lot, played up a bit. He was an exception, the rest of school was pretty crap, actually. The best part was break time when I hung around with my mates and had a laugh."*

(Caroline, age 19, recent drop out from A-Levels)

And some teachers had the opposite effect altogether:

*"There was this one teacher at my last school, Miss P. Maths teacher. I'd always done okay at Maths before, but she hated me. Absolutely hated me. No matter what I did, it was wrong. She spent most of the time yelling at me for stuff. Some of it I'd done, fair enough, but she decided I was a trouble maker and a know-it-all, that was that. It wasn't just me, there were other kids as well, but I just thought... why bother? So I didn't go to her lessons no more. By the time we moved up and got another teacher I was behind. Totally killed maths for me. I failed GCSE."*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+ GCSE Re-take)

The various sources of information, advice and guidance with which the interviewees came in contact played an important part in shaping their aspirations and goals. They helped to define what the young person wanted to achieve, and give them some measure of indication as to how to get there. When the young person considered a change of direction, they helped to redefine the possibilities and routes that could and should be taken.

Another important factor was the level of confidence the young person felt in their ability to make their aspirations a reality.

## Confidence

Confidence was a strong theme in the building of young people's aspirations. As the extracts above reflect, many interviewees felt that teachers had contributed significantly, positively or negatively, to their confidence in education in general, and/or with specific skills or subjects. Some interviewees said they had chosen modest aims which reflected their perceptions of their abilities:

*"There's no point trying to be better than you are. I'll be lucky if I get a trade, I'm not clever enough for anything like University."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

While others appeared more confident and had set their sights accordingly higher:

*"I know I can do well if I set my mind to it. I'm going to have my own company one day. I just need to find the right start."*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)



## ***School Experiences***

Many interviewees related their school experiences to their confidence as FE students. One area in which this was evident was in relation to dyslexia, particularly undiagnosed dyslexia, as Brittney's case study in Chapter 4 illustrates. However, long-standing problems with learning of any kind, whether due to learning difficulties or disabilities, social and/or behavioural issues around school and the classroom, or consistent or specific low attainment in one or more subjects, often led to low self-confidence when entering Further Education, and consequently low aspirations:

*"I've never done really well, however much I tried, so I didn't expect too much."*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

*"I always thought I was crap, expected to be crap at college too. I can't write, barely. I had, like, zero self-confidence about studying and passing exams. But when I got [to college] and found out I was dyslexic, it was like a light came on. Suddenly I found I could learn things after all, and I started to pass things. I got much more confident after that."*

(Jack, age 18, persister, completed IT)

## ***Self Perception, Feedback and Identity Choice***

Students' perceptions of their abilities also played a part, whether or not they appeared to be borne out by their actual achievements:

*"I know I did okay at GCSE, but it was only okay. It was luck really, I'm not that good. I have to work really hard and it was luck... I'm not like some people who can sail through things,*

*always get the best grades. I'm not really good enough for A-Level, I don't think."*

(Faith, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels - 8 Grade A-C GCSEs, 5 As)

*"I always thought I was crap, I don't know why really, I just did, right through secondary school. I was average at best. Didn't expect to do that well, to be honest. Same at college. Same old thing, I just never felt at home in a classroom, you could say. Always felt I was crap. But when I started work at the garage, and training on cars, that was a different thing. Totally different. I knew what I was doing. That made all the difference, to be honest."*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Perceptions were also shaped through parents and teachers. This happened partly through the influence of role models and adviser-figures, as described above. It also happened through direct feedback, especially from teachers.

The perceptions and aspirations which students described as having affected their confidence in their abilities were highly subjective and related to the individuals' personalities, past experiences and individual expectations, and those of their families and friends. For example, all of these students got very similar GCSE results before coming to college; at least 8 grades A-C, which would normally be associated with a potential for Higher Education and were more than adequate for the courses they had chosen to apply for at college.

*"I was thrilled. Right up to the last minute my teachers kept saying 'don't get your hopes up, just keep working' and my Dad said 'just do your best and we'll be pleased'. So that's what I did. I never thought I was up to much, really, going on my track*



*record before... you know, the day I got my results was one of the happiest days of my life."*

(Keira, age 19, persistor, completed A-Levels)

*"It was a new low for me, when I got my GCSEs. I wanted all As. I was crushed. I didn't realise I was so thick."*

(Shelly, age 19, persistor, completed Business Admin)

*"It was just what I expected. I've always been average."*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Confidence was not only a theme in relation to perceived ability and attainment. Some of those interviewed felt they had low self-confidence due to other aspects of their life histories, including both school and home experiences:

*"I never had friends at school, I was always the odd one out. I kept meself to meself and I did alright in exams, but I wasn't very confident. Never spoke out in class in case someone took the piss. I was bullied a bit, nothing serious, but.... It really doesn't do much for your belief in yourself, does it?"*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

*"I was alright at school, but when my Dad left I was really, really upset. I didn't recover for a long time, I thought it was my fault, you know, I think most kids do, don't they? But I remember feeling really alone and depressed. I didn't think I was good for much, including schoolwork..."*

(Sarah, age 35, mature drop out returned to study Hair & Beauty)

Some described FE as a 'fresh start', when they could put past difficulties behind them and reinvent themselves.

*“I’d never felt that good about school. But college was a new start. A whole new subject and new people. I decided things were going to be different, and they were. This time I was a winner, not a loser.”*

(Shelly, age 19, persister, completed Business Admin)

Some interviewees, however, talked about how their lack of confidence at school (and often the circumstances that contributed to it, where they were related to education or the educational institution) continued through their college experience.

*“I hated school, I was crap at everything, I knew I was crap, teachers said I was crap, even my mates, they’d say Si, you’re a thick bastard but you’re a laugh. [laughs] I’d stopped trying by the end. College was supposed to be different. I convinced myself the course was different, the teachers were different, I was different. I wouldn’t have the trouble I’d had before. But of course I did. I’m just not that bright.”*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

But low self-confidence wasn’t necessarily carried forward to FE. In some cases the students’ experiences at college challenged their perceptions of themselves and their abilities, leading to an increase in confidence, such as the student with dyslexia quoted above - or a decline:

*“... it was a shock to the system, dropping out the second time, that was a killer. I thought it was my fault, that I’d never settle to anything.”*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

Confidence was important in helping to define students’ aspirations as they chose their college course and routes. It could be the difference between an aspiration being thought of as an unrealistic ‘dream’ or a feasible goal they could work towards. It was also crucial as a part of the decision-making



process. A lack of confidence could lead to a student wishing to give up on their course, but it could also prevent them from taking action, and was often given as a reason for putting off the decision to leave.

The students' aspirations, influences and confidence interacted and shifted throughout their college experience, and for some raised serious doubts in their minds as to whether they wished to continue their course. It seems likely that for some students, this continues at some level or another throughout their college careers, until they complete their course. One further factor appears necessary in the turn of events, however, to translate those doubts into drop out or persistence: an event or realisation which leads directly to the decision to leave or stay.

## **Critical Moments**

For a young person's aspirations to come into play and precipitate a decision to drop out or persist, there was usually some kind of crisis or 'critical moment' which could be pinpointed in their stories.

The notion of 'critical moments' is related to Giddens's notion of 'fateful moments', when the individual stands at a crossroads in their lives, and consequently their identity, aspirations and lifestyle will change. (Giddens, 1991) Thomson et al (2002) describe 'critical moments' as a related concept, but derived from biographical narratives rather than being a theoretical construct.

Thomson and her colleagues describe a number of such critical moments experienced by the interviewees in their study, one of which is dropping out of school or college. Other education-related critical moments include starting college, conflict with a teacher, exclusion from school, failing exams and careers advice. The interview data in this study, however, shows that as well as drop out being (for some) a critical moment in its own right,

there are also one or more such events which have precipitated the young person's decision to drop out.

Before considering these events in more detail, it is useful to clarify the difference intended in this study between a 'critical moment' and other events that contribute towards the young person's decision to stay or leave. As can be seen from the stories related through the case studies in Chapter 4, and the analysis presented earlier in this chapter, for most of the young people in the study there were multiple events, circumstances and influences which they experienced during their time in FE. However, sometimes these experiences led to drop out, and sometimes they did not. What the interviewees' stories shared, where drop out had been considered, was one or more specific events which had led directly to their consideration of their circumstances and aspirations, leading to a conscious decision to leave or to stop considering leaving at that time.

It is these 'decision-prompting' moments which are referred to as 'critical moments' in the discussion which follows.

The critical moments described by the interviewees fall into four main categories: life events, sudden opportunities, crises and 'Eureka moments' of self-discovery.

### ***Life Events***

Life events are essentially out of a young person's control, but can be very influential. Examples include: health issues, theirs or someone else's; major financial issues; housing changes and 'milestone' events such as marriage, divorce, birth or death. It may be that a life event brings the issue of drop out up out of the blue:

*"I was going along happily, and then suddenly I was pregnant.*

*The whole world changed."*

(Buffy, age 20, past drop out from Hair & Beauty)



Or it might be the final factor at the end of a longer period of consideration:

*"I wasn't happy to start with, but when Dad lost his job and there wasn't any money to support me that was the last straw, really."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

Life events were also considered to legitimate drop out. By their nature they were seen as outside the young person's control, and not associated with any lack of commitment or ability on their part. They were often adopted as the 'official' reason for drop out:

*"I put on the form that it was family problems, you know with Mam's divorce...."*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

However, this does not necessarily identify the event as the defining factor or 'critical moment' in the process of drop out:

*"... but that was just the easy answer. I'd never really been happy with my tutor. He was a bit of a wanker and he hated me. I got into big rows with him and it was one of those, where he'd failed me for an assignment and then picked on me when I was pissed off about it, said he didn't like my attitude. That's when I decided to go. Mam's divorce was just a good thing to put on the form. I didn't want no confrontation after I'd decided."*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Thus this individual has chosen a life-event as the 'official' reason for leaving assured of impunity as the event was not of their making, unpredictable and outside of their control, rather than the crisis event which was in fact their 'critical moment'. This spared them from any implication that they could have taken another course which might not have ended in drop out,

and from the responsibility of blaming others, saving them from possible confrontation or challenge which could be uncomfortable for them to consider.

### ***Sudden Opportunities***

Sudden opportunities are similar to life events in that they tend to occur suddenly and require a swift response, but are related to the student's personal goals and motivations, and the response to them is far more in the student's own control. Opportunities are possibilities, not directions. The most usual opportunity described by the interviewees was a job offer. For example:

*"I'd only been working [in the store] over the Christmas holidays, but they thought I was good, offered to take me on and consider me for their young managers' training scheme. I've always wanted to do retail management, so it was a no brainer, really, of course I left."*

(Fiona, age 18, recent drop out from A-Levels)

In some cases the opportunity was a 'release point', which removed a barrier to dropping out, rather than simply the offer of a better choice to College. This could be in the form of an 'excuse' which justified leaving in the drop out's eyes or, more commonly, that of their parents:

*"I wasn't doing very well, I'd been thinking of leaving for ages, but I know there's no way my parents would have let me. Then my brother said he was going abroad for a year, he had this great job in Germany, and he was given a two bedroom flat. So I could go and do that with him and take a year out of college. That's what I did, although I never went back, never meant to. But a year on I got myself a job instead and it didn't matter by then. Me Mum and Dad were happy enough, they liked the idea of travel and that, and I could get out of school at last.."*

(Caroline, age 19, recent drop out from A-Levels)



## ***Crises***

Crises can take many forms, from a conflict with a tutor to a more personal social situation, including changes in friendships and alliances. For some it might combine with a life event, such as for this student whose parents were in the process of splitting up:

*“It was hell at home, had been for a long time. Then one night I had a huge row with me Mam’s boyfriend, couldn’t take it no more. So I dropped out to go and stay with my Dad down south for a while.”*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

For others it might be the break up of a romantic relationship:

*“I’d been thinking about it for a while, but there was this complicated situation with this boy I got off with at a party; his girlfriend found out and told the lad I was seeing at the time... it all got very messy. Coming to college was no fun at all after that.”*

(Claire, age 17, recent drop out from Hairdressing)

Crises related to learning were also common, especially assignments and exams:

*“I knew I’d only go into that exam and fail, so what was the point?”*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

*“The assignment got later and later, and I got more and more worried because I couldn’t do it, and then eventually I got the ultimatum: go see my tutor about it or fail the course. I knew I couldn’t do it. It was the last straw. I’d been struggling for weeks. So I left.”* (Brendan, age 18, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Sometimes it was a crisis apparently unrelated to college:

*"I wasn't getting on with my Mam at all. She was always pestering me about this and that, tidying my room, where I went, who I was with, was I doing drugs - it right did my head in. So I rebelled, kind of. Dropped out of college.... Meant I could earn some money too, because I thought then I could maybe get a flat or summat, get out of there all together."*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

### ***'Eureka' Moments***

'Eureka moments' describe points in the young person's lives where they learn something about themselves that changes their aspirations or self-identities in a substantial way. For example, Josh, who had been thinking of leaving for a while, decided he wasn't prepared to be ashamed of his sexuality and intimidated by homophobic bullying any more:

*"...it wasn't just a moment because I didn't drop out. It was about being gay, I think. I'd always taken whatever people threw at me about it but a few days before I'd been down to this club at the Uni, they organise a helpline and I wanted to volunteer. The people there were out and proud and it made me stronger, I think. So that last comment, that 'pouf', was the one that made me stop and say 'fuck you. I'm gay and I'm going to do what I want. You can think what you like.' I guess that's what they call a life moment!"*

(Josh, age 18, persistor completed A-Levels)

Sometimes eureka moments are less dramatic, but still mark a turn-around in the young person's self perception that informs their final decision:

*"I was all set to leave, I had the form signed and was taking my books back to get signed off. She sat me down and said 'do you*



*really know why you're doing this'. I think I was in her office for about an hour, I was in tears and everything, and you know, by the end, I'd changed my mind. She was sure I could do it and suddenly I saw things differently. So I stayed. If it had been someone else around to sign the form... well, who knows?"*  
(Keira, age 19, persistor, completed A-Levels)

### ***Reactions to Critical Moments***

As Thomson found, there is variation in how different interviewees reacted to the critical moment, according to their self-identity, their aspirations, their confidence and perceived agency, influences and resources. The role of perspective and perception was very important: often young people are not aware of the full range of options available to them, and have their own set of assumptions about how other people will react to their actions which may not be shared with those others. For example, as Eve said:

*"Thing was, I expected it to be the same as school. I thought if I handed the work in late I'd be in big trouble - at our school that was a real crime, the teachers went ballistic if you handed coursework in late. I'd had two years of that, for GCSE, so I thought it would be the same. I didn't realise that I could get an extension, and I only found out later that my mates had got them and the teacher hadn't been mad at all."*

(Eve, age 18, recent drop out from Catering Foundation)

Some took action immediately:

*"Once I had a proper reason to go, that was it. I left the same day. No point hanging around."*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

While others waited for events to take their course, or for a further critical moment to push them to action:

*"I gave up then, I knew it was only a matter of time before I left, but I didn't do anything about it. I went through the motions for a while, then eventually it was time to sign up for options for the next term and that seemed like a waste of everyone's time, so I cleared out my locker and never went back."*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

If the young person identified themselves strongly as a student, the process of acting on their critical moment could be particularly painful and traumatic:

*"I couldn't imagine being out of school. I didn't know how that would work out at all. I knew I'd miss all my mates, that I'd have to get out of bed in the morning, no more long holidays, no more nights clubbing. Even if it was only until next September, it was still a long time to not be a student. That was scary. Very scary."*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

For others, particularly those with a weaker commitment to college life and stronger aspirations elsewhere, it was a relief:

*"I was pleased to get out of school and get on with my life, you know? I wanted a trade, wanted some money in my pocket. I'd had enough. It felt good to leave."*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Students varied in the amount of risk they associated with their decision. In part this was related to the nature of their critical moment and the perceived weight of factors leading up to it. For example, some saw it as a hiccup in their plan rather than a significant change:



*“I was planning to come back the next year to do a different course, so it wasn’t a big issue, really, just like taking a year out. Didn’t bother me.”*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

While others, especially those who experienced life events or eureka moments, found the experience more dramatic:

*“I’d never had a choice before, really, just went from school to school and then on to college, and now here all of a sudden I knew what I really wanted and I could make a choice. It was heavy stuff.”*

(Caroline, age 19, recent drop out from A-Levels)

There were also differences in their responses depending on the extent of change to their lives they expected from their post-dropout route. Naturally those who expected their decision to bring about or be a part of dramatic change were more aware of the risks involved and more worried about the impact of drop out on their lives.

Most of the young people interviewed felt they had some degree of choice as to whether or not to drop out. However, many did not fully anticipate the risks involved in their decision. For instance, the ease of returning to study the following September, or particularly as a mature student, was often overestimated:

*“I thought it would be simple, go back after I had [my baby], get on with things. I had no idea how hard it would be, not just the practical things like getting childcare and time off when she was poorly, but how I’d feel. I don’t blame myself, I had no way of knowing how I’d feel. But looking back I was very, very blind.”*

(Buffy, age 20, past drop out from Hair & Beauty)

*"I didn't realise it would feel so different coming back and starting all over, when I knew nobody. I was used to different things, to the money from work and a different sort of life. It was strange at first."*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

*"You think everything's black and white when you're a kid. It never bothered me what I did, I thought there would always be a second chance. What you learn as you get older is that any kind of chance is gold. You don't throw things away. It's damn hard to come to college when you got kids and there's no money, no one to support you. When you're 16 there's not a care in the world. But once you get past 25, the rules change. If I'd known then what I know now, yeah, things would be different."*

(Tom, age 32, mature drop out who returned to study Electrical Engineering)

Thomson et al consider whether young people's reactions to critical moments are fatalistic, indicating an absence of agency, or 'fateful moments' which they exploit to make deliberate choices. Most of the interviewees in this study did appear to have some degree of agency, although it was often limited by their own experience, the control still exhibited to varying degrees by parents and teachers, and the opportunities available to them. One of the key features of the way they reacted to critical moments was their appreciation of risk and the anticipated outcomes of their choices. By definition, young people have limited experience upon which to base their decisions. Some adopt the experience of their family, peers and professionals through taking on advice and information, but this can vary in plausibility and impact. Dropping out is, for many of them, their first adult decision, the first time they 'buck the trend' and do something other than follow an expected route. It is not surprising, then, that they may not fully appreciate and anticipate the consequences, or the level of risk they are taking.



*“I don’t see what the fuss is about. If I don’t like the job I can just go back to college later on.”*

(Katy, age 17, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

*“I thought I’d get on fine without qualifications, just like my dad said. Thing is, things have changed since he was a lad at the railway.”*

(Simon, age 17, recent drop out from Electrical Engineering)

*“No, it wasn’t how I thought it would be. I thought I’d have more money, for a start, my own place by now. But it’s still better than sitting on my arse in a classroom all day.”*

(Tim, age 17, recent drop out from Construction)

### ***Conclusions***

Young people’s aspirations are moulded by what they believe to be possible, available and desirable. These views are defined and redefined through their individual experiences, their interactions with family, friends, professionals and their wider culture and social context. As their college career progresses, aspirations, influences, experience and perceptions change and this may make them more or less determined to complete their course, or to take another option. At some point, an episode of event, opportunity, crisis or self-discovery could occur, which precipitates a conscious decision to leave or stay. Once the decision has been made, the student will then begin a process of re-instatement or disengagement, resulting in their eventual drop out or persistence.

The interviews presented in this chapter show that the causes of drop out are complex, develop and change over time and are rooted in the evolving social contexts of the individuals concerned, as suggested by the life course theories discussed above. The decision to leave is rarely an isolated event; rather it is the process of an accumulation of experience, opportunity and

influence which is precipitated (but not caused) by a particular event or realisation. The college-collected data upon which policy in this area rests does not capture the inter-relationship of factors behind the student's decision; it may capture an element of the 'critical moment', but as I have argued, this is unlikely to reliably represent the actual cause of drop out, rather a key part of the decision making process. As such, the use of such indicators in designing policies and practices to reduce drop out is highly questionable.

The other main assumption upon which policy on drop out rests is that drop out is a negative experience which is likely to have an adverse effect on young people in the longer term. The questionnaire data presented in Chapter 3 raised some important questions about this assumption, and it is to the perceived and actual consequence of drop out for the young people interviewed that we now turn our attention.



## Chapter 6 - The Consequences of Drop Out

*“Jamie Oliver dropped out of college, you know. Bill Gates didn’t finish University. It’s not the end of the world, now, is it?”*

*(Bianca, age 39, drop out who returned to study Media Studies)*

This chapter focuses on the experiences of the five mature drop outs (those who had dropped out more than ten years previously) and seven past drop outs (those who had dropped out more than two years previously), with particular attention to the consequences of their drop out on their lives afterwards. Survey data is also considered. Chapter 1 discussed the argument that drop out is likely to lead to disadvantage for the young person concerned in terms of qualifications, pay and employment prospects, self-confidence and involvement in crime. In this chapter these claims will be compared with the experiences of the interviewees in the study.

It should be noted that the mature drop outs had their experience of drop out at a time when policies and practices in education were different: notably prior to college incorporation. There did not appear to be any particular difference in their perspectives on drop out as a direct result of these policies, but some may exist which were not brought to light through the research.

Both groups of drop outs felt that their drop out had been the right decision for them, and did not regret their decision or its consequences. In some cases their lack of qualifications does seem to have prevented them from getting jobs or promotions, but only one had experienced repeated or prolonged periods of unemployment. The chapter begins with a consideration of the consequences of drop out in relation to the students’ working lives, then moves on to look at the implications for patterns of lifelong education and training. Issues of aspiration and identity are then discussed, in the light of the findings presented in Chapters 4 and 5, to see what role they play in life beyond drop out.

## Consequences for Work

More than half of the drop outs in the survey said they had left college either because they had been offered a job or wished to actively seek one as an alternative to full time education. As one survey respondent noted:

*“I’ve had enough of school. I want to start working, earn some money.”*

(Survey respondent, drop out, GNVQ Leisure & Tourism)

The job prospects for drop outs when leaving college seem fairly good: by the time of the final survey, none of the respondents who had dropped out were unemployed. 36 per cent were in a full time job with training, 12 per cent were in a full time job without training, 8 per cent were self employed and a further 24 per cent were working part time (without training, although some were also attending an unrelated part time course at college unrelated to their work). The remainder were engaged in full-time education or looking after children. However, the survey did not ask respondents about the nature of their work. It is possible that drop outs are likely to end up doing ‘poor work’, especially if they left school with low qualifications (Roberts, 2005).

This was the experience of one of the returners interviewed in the study. Tom had left school at sixteen and started a college course in leisure and tourism. However, he found the course dull and wasn’t sure that a career in the tourist industry was for him:

*“It sounded okay, not too academic, but turns out that there was a lot of paperwork and lectures, just boring. Just like school, and I’d had enough.”*

(Tom, age 32, mature drop out who returned to study Electrical Engineering)



Tom found a part time job in a local garden centre, a Christmas job which he took in the hope of it becoming permanent and full time. Unfortunately this didn't happen. After a few months of unemployment Tom found a full time factory job, only to be made redundant two years later when the factory closed. Tom "drifted about doing this and that" for the next few of years, until he heard through a friend of his father about a job as a janitor at a leisure centre. Tom remained with this employer for four years, and eventually took his life-guarding certificate and added extra hours to his job as a pool supervisor. Unfortunately this job also ended in redundancy, at which time Tom decided to retrain as an electrician, an option included in his redundancy package.

Tom described his experience as "unlucky", rather than as a specific consequence of his leaving full time education at 16. He did, however, sometimes regret having dropped out when he did:

*"I was ready to work, that was the thing. I didn't want to be in a classroom anymore. If you'd given me a job, bit of training on the side, that would've suited me down to the ground. But that isn't how things worked in that kind of work. Not like this [electrical engineering]. If I had my time over, I would have switched to one of them kind of courses, not just up and leave. Then maybe I wouldn't still be living at home, like."*

(Tom, age 32, mature drop out who returned to study Electrical Engineering)

All five of the returners interviewed had taken unskilled or semi-skilled work upon initially leaving college in their teens. Bianca worked on a market stall:

*"I didn't care what the work was. I got money in my pocket for the first time, and I felt proper grown up."*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Bianca didn't have any particular career goals at that time, but she made the transition from part time to full time work on the stall, and became very successful. When her employer retired she bought the business from him and continued to make a good living. She felt satisfied with her income which enabled her to care for her children and create the lifestyle she wanted.

Two other returners in the study, Deb and Dave, also found work pretty much immediately after leaving college. Deb worked full time as a waitress in a cafe, and later as a shop assistant, until she gave up work to have her first child at the age of twenty-three. She returned to work five years later as a waitress, but decided she wished to pursue a career as a hairstylist, and had returned to college to do so, while continuing her waitressing job part-time to supplement her husband's income and help to pay for her course. This was proving to be hard work, but:

*"I want to do something I can fit around the family, and I can do mobile hairdressing when my daughter's at school, then be a proper mum when she's at home. The way shifts are where I work at the moment I don't get to see her at all some days. The pay won't be as good, at least to start, but I'm thinking I can build it up as she gets older, maybe get a salon job when she's in big school."*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

Dave had left college after taking "about half" of a Business Administration course. He had originally intended to go into a financial services job but lost interest once he began his studies:

*"This was in the eighties, and I think I saw meself as a bit of a yuppie. Wanted to get rich quick on the stock market, you know? But I soon lost patience with all the studying and the books."*



*There was a job going as a clerk in the bank in town, they gave on-the-job training so I thought right, that'll do me."*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

Dave hoped to be able to progress quickly up the career ladder within the bank, and at first he did very well:

*"I was keen, and I worked hard. Ambitious, you might say. I soon got a promotion, and another. But then I got stuck. [...] It didn't help that there was a recession, the crash and there was restructuring and, you know the kind of thing. But I wanted to be an Advisor, that's where the real money started, it was a big leap up and more what I wanted to do. When I joined they said 'yes, work hard and you can get a job like that', but it turned out different. Suddenly, you needed a degree. Or some kind of certificate or something, whatever it was I didn't have it. So that was me done for, really. I stayed at that level for years after that."*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

Three themes related to work come out strongly from the interviews. Firstly, there does seem to be, as might be expected, a likelihood that drop outs might be engaged in low-paid, less secure employment, especially immediately after they leave. However, some have then gone on to better pay and conditions, sometimes including training. Others made a deliberate choice of a low-paid job in order to fulfil other criteria such as time for childcare or freedom from responsibility.

Secondly, two of the returners and more than half of the other drop outs either had been, or intended to be, self-employed. It is hard to estimate the significance of this without wider comparison, but it would be an

interesting focus for future study. There were frequent mentions among all drop outs (more frequent than for the persistors interviewed) of the importance of independence and self-sufficiency:

*“Independence. It was all about independence. I didn’t want to be told what to do, not at school, not at work, not at home. That’s why I do best being my own boss! I only get to fight with meself! [laughs]”*

(Mark, age 23, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

The third theme that came up regularly in the interviews with drop outs was that of career barriers. It appears that Dave’s experience was not an isolated one: most of the drop outs (and all of those who were not self-employed) had experienced competition for jobs or promotions at some time from others with higher qualifications than themselves. When this happened, jobs always seemed to go to the higher-qualified candidate:

*“I’d been there nearly two years, another two part time before, and I could do the job with one hand behind my back. Did do, while the boss was away and that. But still, they gave it to some kid straight from college. Way of the world, experience don’t count.”*

(Mark, age 23, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

However, in some cases experience had proved useful:

*“Some jobs, they don’t want qualifications, they want proper life experience. I know I’ve got jobs that way.”*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

It is difficult to draw any strong conclusions from the data, not least because the interviews with the older drop outs only includes those who have made the decision to return to education in some form at the time of their



interview. This might indicate other factors which could be related to their working experiences and their perspective on issues of work and education. However, what does seem clear is that there is a range of possible work situations and experiences which a drop out may go through after college, and that although there is a risk of low pay and poor promotion, this is not necessarily the case for all.

## **Different Routes Through Education**

One of the main concerns about drop out from education is that it may signal a long-term end of education and training for the drop out. But does dropping out necessarily mean ‘staying out’?

For the study cohort, this did not seem to be the case. Most of the drop outs in the survey stated that they intended to engage in some kind of education and/or training in the near future, and most went on to do so, as we saw in Chapter 3. However, the route to further learning and the character of the learning itself varied widely among the drop outs in the study. The experiences related through the interviews fall into three categories:

- a) quick returners - those who returned to full time education within a year of dropping out;
- b) alternate route returners: those who returned to learning part time as part of paid employment
- c) life/view change returners - those who had not explicitly intended to return to education but chose to do so (or wished to do so) following a change in their circumstances or outlook.

### ***Quick Returners***

16 per cent of the drop outs in the survey had returned to full-time education within a year, and a further 5 per cent returned in the following year. 60 per cent of these drop outs said that this had always been their

intention. Most of these students had left due to changing aims, or more rarely, due to difficulties with their course or life outside college. Some of the interviewees relayed experiences similar to those of Billy, whose story is provided in more detail in Chapter 4. Taking a break helped some students to resolve their difficulties by avoiding or solving specific problems at college or at home. For example, Faith returned to take a different mix of A-levels, thus avoiding a teacher she had difficulties with:

*“It was a personality clash, kind of. He didn’t like me and I didn’t like him. So I took a year out, and when I started again I took History instead. I’d nearly done it first time, so it all worked out okay.”*

(Faith, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Crystal returned to restart the programme she dropped out of, once she had resolved some personal difficulties:

*“Things were too bad at home, I’d worked hard for GCSEs and I was worn out... I couldn’t take it any more. So I left before I started failing anything, got my act together and started again in the next September. So far so good!”*

(Crystal, age 18, persister, completed A-Levels)

Of those drop outs from the survey who returned to Thornton College, 80 per cent went on to achieve their qualification; a good result, considering the national achievement average is only 54% (National Audit Office, 2001). However, the sample is very small, so it could be dangerous to draw conclusions without further study. In general the evidence suggests that those who have dropped out before are more likely to drop out again (Martinez, 1996), as was the case for Billy. As well as the usual issues which may precipitate drop out, returning students may carry further unresolved issues and contextual factors with them which make them more likely to consider dropping out. Having experienced drop out once might make it feel more



plausible subsequently, but at the same time might bring new reluctance, as Billy found:

*“I didn’t really want to drop out again. Once is a mistake. Twice felt like failure.”*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

### ***Alternate Route Returners***

Nearly all of the drop outs who weren’t planning on going back to full time education intended to pursue some kind of education or training in the future. Over a third of those in the survey were working full time and undergoing training of some kind as well. Most commonly this was vocational training provided by their employer, either in-house or through a Modern Apprenticeship scheme. 12 per cent were taking a part time college course unrelated to their employment. In the case of the interviewees, this route was typically directed towards the goals that had led to their drop out in the first place. For some it was a long-held goal which they pursued when the opportunity arose, while for others their goal had changed.

The choice to take a work-based rather than full-time college-based route was not necessarily driven primarily by the job on offer. Some interviewees had chosen this route because they felt the style of learning would suit them better. For instance it might be more ‘hands on’ on the job training. It could also offer a ‘stepping stone’ to independence and adulthood by providing qualifications alongside a respected occupation and regular income. In some cases it could be the price paid for getting and keeping a job. Two interviewees described doing training because it was a requirement of their employment, although they didn’t feel it had any intrinsic value beyond satisfying their employers they had fulfilled the requirement, and would not have done it otherwise. The majority of interviewees who were engaged in part time learning, however, reported that they were enjoying it and found it better suited to their needs than the full time course they had dropped out of.

## *Life/View Change Returners*

This third group of learners had returned to education and training after a gap of more than two years, due to a change in their circumstances and/or attitudes to education. The 'mature returners' interviewed for this study all fitted this category.. Interestingly, their decision to return appeared to be precipitated by a 'critical moment' similar to those described by drop outs, as discussed in Chapter 6.

The four 'returner' drop outs interviewed had dropped out age 16-18 and returned to education as mature students, aged between 25 and 40. None of them had planned to return to full time education at first, although two of them had undergone short work-related training courses at various stages in their careers. However for each of them a life event of some kind had provided the opportunity and/or motivation to return to college.

In Tom's case, it was redundancy from his factory job that had made him reconsider his options. He received comprehensive advice as part of his redundancy package, and was attracted to an Electrical Engineering course by the opportunity it offered to give him a respectable trade and long-term employment prospects.

Bianca, meanwhile, returned to education while in prison. She was convicted for her part in a robbery, which she said she helped to commit in order to pay off her gambling debts. She had already sold her business in Covent Garden for the same reason, and felt too demoralised to contemplate starting again to build a new business from scratch. She was transferred to an open prison which offered the option of taking a full-time course for the last two years of her sentence, and leapt at the chance:

*"Media had always interested me but I couldn't be bothered with college before. But in here it was different, it was such an opportunity - to get out of that place and be like a normal person*



*again. You can't describe it. Finding out I liked studying as well was an accident!"*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Deb said she hadn't considered returning to college until her daughter went to school. Then she found she couldn't spend the time she wanted to with her daughter as she often had to work late afternoons and evenings. She also wanted to give a good example to her daughter:

*"She hated school at first, and that set me thinking, what are we showing her about school? I want her to be happy and get all she can out of it. Not like me and [her father]. She should know it's good to learn new things and do better for yourself. She thinks it's really funny now that mummy goes to school too!"*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

Divorce was another life-changing experience which could lead back to education. Dave was searching for a new start after a difficult marriage breakdown. With encouragement from a friend decided to take advantage of his newly established financial security and reduced demands on his time he decided to take a degree.

Nearly half of the drop outs in the study felt they weren't ready for College at 16, and nearly two thirds (as opposed to one third of persistors) felt they would have done better if they had been older. All of those who had returned as mature learners said they were enjoying the experience much more than they had as school leavers, and were proud of their achievements. However, they also agreed on one other aspect of their experience: returning to learning had not been easy.

## **Lifelong Learning: Returning after Drop Out**

The majority of drop outs in the study said they planned to return to education at some point, and the stories of individuals such as Dave and Bianca suggest that even those who do not intend to do so may change their minds later on. Although there was some evidence of antipathy towards education, or a lack of confidence in ability which could prevent re-entry, it only accounted for minority of those included in this study. Most of the drop outs intended to access further education when the need arose and circumstances allowed.

If young people are making a choice to defer their education or training, rather than leave altogether, should this still be a matter of concern? And if that is the case, why does participation in education fall so rapidly after the age of 17, and even further after 19? (Payne, 1995b). The interview data suggests one explanation for this lack of re-entry into education: it's a lot easier to drop out than it is to drop back in. None of those interviewed who had returned had found it an easy step. Two of those interviewed who had dropped out and not returned said that this was because they couldn't overcome a barrier of some kind. The earlier the return is made the less impact these barriers seemed to have, but on the other hand an early return could mean that the student risks repeating the same circumstances that led them to leave in the first place, such as not being clear about their goals or feeling confident in their abilities. This can lead to repeated drop out.

There were barriers to returning to education or training which recurred through the interviews with drop outs:

- a) financial difficulties;
- b) conflicting responsibilities;
- c) fear of the learning environment;
- d) opposition or a lack of support from family and/or employers;
- e) the absence of a culture of learning among friends and associates;
- f) a lack of appropriate advice and guidance.



Some of these had persisted from the time of drop out, and in some cases has contributed to the decision to drop out, but for the some of the drop outs in this study the barriers seemed greater as time went by.

### ***Financial Difficulties and Conflicts of Responsibility***

Drop outs who were over the age of 19, and especially those over 25, faced a different financial challenge to younger students. Not only were they likely to be living independently of their parents and on their own and/or a partner's income, but as adults they would be expected to pay their own fees. If they were unemployed they could claim benefit and fee waivers for some courses, but they were limited in the number of hours they could study in order to still be available for work as far as the benefits office was concerned. For all but those with substantial savings or external support, the financial implications of returning to full time study were dire:

*"It was a shock. I expected I'd have to pay something, but it's not just course books and that, the fees are exorbitant. I couldn't do it if my Dad hadn't offered to help out."*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

For older students, the financial burden wasn't just a matter of reduced income and the expense of taking a course: many of them have financial responsibility for others. As well as needing to provide for dependents, some interviewees felt that while they were prepared to give up their own luxuries, they worried that their children might lose out. This could be justified in terms of potential long-term benefits, but most parents interviewed still found it difficult.

Finance was one of a host of responsibilities which returning students found challenging to meet. The lack of time and energy to devote to both studies and family life was a common theme. Many courses required some element of home study, which was difficult to combine with housework,

childcare, parent-care and maintaining social networks. Some interviewees were concerned that they were setting a poor example to their children by returning to education as adults (although others thought exactly the opposite).

Responsibilities, and particularly work-status, also link with the individual's sense of their own identity, causing possible conflicts, as discussed below.

### ***Fear of the Learning Environment, Lack of Support and the Culture of Learning***

Many returners, particularly but not exclusively those who had been out of education for a year or more, were anxious about returning to the classroom. This was sometimes because of a history of negative experiences, but even for those who had happier memories of school or college were often apprehensive:

*"It's easy when you're a kid, you don't know any different. I was really dreading going back and being the oldest, I thought they'd all laugh at me. Being from prison made it even worse. But it wasn't like that. Didn't seem to bother anyone. I still feel old sometimes though, when they're all talking about their boyfriends and that. [laughs]"*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Exams and assignments were also off-putting, especially for those who had not performed to their (or their parents' or teachers') satisfaction at school. The fear of failure appears to have grown for these people in the intervening years since leaving full time education, and was compounded by concern as to the impact new failure would have on their children, partners or employers. However, interviewees didn't see drop out in particular as a signal of failure; their main concern was failure in assignments and exams. Some felt that drop out had helped to maintain some level of confidence because they



had left before they took the final test and thus would never know whether they might have passed.

Some interviewees reported that they found the college buildings themselves intimidating and reminiscent of school. At the same time, fears were expressed that things would be too different for them to relate to, especially in terms of teaching methods and information technology. Many interviewees were concerned that they would be at a disadvantage in relation to younger students whom they assumed would be more confident and competent in the learning environment.

It was noted in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 that support and encouragement from family, friends and others could help students to sustain their studies despite difficulties they encountered. Those returning to learning also frequently mentioned the value of support in taking the step to go back to college. Such support took many forms including financial help, childcare, emotional support and encouragement, example and confidence-building. However, some encountered not just a lack of support but actual opposition to their return for a range of reasons, such as:

*“My ex-wife was dead against it. She was only interested in my pay cheque, not in me bettering myself.”*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

*“No-one in my family understood. They couldn’t see why I wasn’t happy at home with the baby and a little part time job.”*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

*“My boyfriend, he never went to college, and he said he’d chuck me if I went back. He was scared of me meeting someone better than him, I think.”*

(Katy, age 19, recent drop out from Fresh Start+)

In many cases this opposition or lack of support seemed to arise from a lack of understanding of the individual's goals or reasons for wishing to return. This could operate at an individualised level, for example where the opposing person had negative experiences of education themselves and wished their loved one to avoid the same. It could also operate in a much wider sense, where education has no shared cultural value, or at least a much lesser one compared to, for example, work or child care. Cultural attitudes do seem to be an important factor in perpetuating social exclusion by dissuading individuals from taking advantage of opportunities to improve skills, as suggested, for example, by Pearse and Hillman (1998).

Just as familiarity with and a belief in the value of learning could help students decide to stay on at college, so it could help drop outs to drop back in:

*"I was the only one in my family who didn't have a degree, so it seemed like a natural thing to do, to go back once I'd sorted myself out."*

(Colin, age 17, recent drop out from A-Levels)

Those who moved in circles where education was not considered important had different experiences; for instance Bianca described how she had in fact gone further in education as a young woman than many of her peers on the market stalls. Her mother was proud of her achievements and there seemed to be no reason for her to progress further. Returners sometimes had difficulties in explaining their needs to family members who had not experienced this kind of learning for themselves. This could lead to feelings of guilt or a lack of specific support, not because the family member was generally unsupportive, but because they did not understand the student's needs.

The accounts of these returning students echo the themes of social and cultural capital discussed in chapters four and five. However, cultural and social capital are not static resources for the individual. Dave, for example,



developed a new perspective on the value and process of Higher Education due to the influence of his daughter. She gave him an understanding of what university life was like, and what he needed to do in order to be successful. She was happy to help him with the “tone and attitude” of his essay-writing, for example. Thus Dave’s confidence in his renewed studies increased, and he “fitted in like I never thought I’d fit in at school.” (Dave, aged 42, mature drop out, returned to study Access to HE in Humanities.)

### ***Advice and Guidance***

Advice and guidance was crucial in assisting the dropping back in process, especially for those drop outs who had been out of the education system for a while. Those who were working found it particularly difficult to access careers advice, unless it was offered to them proactively. The difficulty was partly a question of not knowing where to go, or if there was anything available that was appropriate for them. They tended to assume that careers advice and careers centres were intended for school age children, or at least the under-25s. Most of the adult education they had seen advertised was aimed at recreational, part-time evening classes or people with difficulties in reading, writing or maths. There was also a perception (not necessarily incorrect) that careers advice had to be paid for as an adult.

None of the returners in the study, and only two of the more recent drop outs who had gone back to college, had taken advice from a Careers Adviser before returning. Advice had usually come from friends and family, sometimes from previous teachers at school or college. Others sought information directly from the college itself.

*“I fancied hairdressing, so I had a chat to the girl who cuts my hair, then went and asked at an exhibition thing the college had in town.”*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

Three returners had all decided to go back to full time education as a consequence of external advice, to some extent unsolicited. Tom received advice from an advisor as part of his redundancy package, while Bianca benefited from the prison's education advice service:

*"My officer at the prison, she's been great. Not all of them are, but she is very good. She told me about the media thing and got me on this programme, I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise, there's always a lot of competition for courses and I probably wouldn't have bothered, wouldn't have stood a chance."*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Dave received advice as a result of family encouragement:

*"My daughter... this is embarrassing, actually, my daughter dragged me down to this open day at the university, it was all about how you could get a degree as an adult. There were people there like me, who'd done it through Access, and I thought for the first time maybe, just maybe... [laughs]."*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

Once again, the accidental nature of these opportunities reflects the important relationship between education and social networks. If Dave hadn't been persuaded by his daughter, or if Tom and Bianca hadn't received advice due to specific (and potentially catastrophic) circumstances, it seems unlikely that they would have received advice at all.

The interviewees had found college to be a good source of information, but that the image of the institution as primarily provision for young people was perpetuated by their experiences. This could prove intimidating even for the more recent drop outs:



*“I was early for my interview and I went to the coffee shop. Everyone looked so young! [...] but they were behaving like kids too, and I thought ‘can I do this? Won’t they all laugh at me?’ [...] When I got the information and that from the college and the first thing I noticed is the booklet said ‘16 to 19’ on the front. So I thought it wasn’t for me. I went for an interview for part time, and she said why don’t you do it full time, it’s not many more hours, you could still work, and it won’t take so long, and I said about the age thing and she said ‘oh, that’s just marketing, don’t worry about that!’ Seems like bad marketing to me!”*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

*“On the open day it was all young kids with their parents. Made me feel really out of place. I tried about three times before I got up the courage to go in.”*

(Nora, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels)

Most of the drop outs in the study had overcome such barriers, to the extent that they had returned to learning. However, the difficulties they experienced are an important clue as to why relatively few of those who do drop out age 16-19 subsequently drop back in. It was also apparent from the interviews that the difficulties of returning to education had not been anticipated when the decision to drop out had been made. For example, as Dave describes, the educational and occupational landscapes may have changed considerably in the intervening period:

*“When I was young people went to night school all the time, it was taken for granted. When you left school you got a job, and if you wanted to move up the ladder, you’d go to night school. I suppose I thought, if I wanted to retrain, that’s what I’d do, but*

*it didn't work out like that, those opportunities just aren't there."*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

More recent drop outs reported that they had been unaware of the possible difficulties they could experience trying to return to education. Many interviewees were concerned at the financial costs of returning to learning. Most had initially thought that full time vocational courses would continue to be free for those who had not already taken them at 16-18. Although concessions were often available for those on benefits, those on low incomes or with debt found course fees very difficult indeed to manage. Some found it harder to be in a class where the vast majority of fellow students were under the age of eighteen, and/or had very different interests and commitments outside of college.

It is possible – likely, even, especially for the more recent drop outs – that advice and guidance may have been available at the time of drop out to warn them of some of these consequences.

*"I never knew you had to pay when you got over eighteen or whatever. That's not right. I might have stayed if I'd known that."*

(Phil, age 22, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

*"I didn't really know how hard it would be. I knew money would be tight, but I didn't get how different it is being twenty-five rather than sixteen, and being in a class with all those kids."*

(Deb, age 29, mature drop out who returned to study Hair & Beauty)

*"It was so different. I'd changed so much, just in a year, having the baby and everything. It's not how old you are, it's what*



*you've been through... I didn't have anything in common with anyone. It made it much harder than I thought."*

(Buffy, age 20, past drop out from Hair & Beauty)

## **Aspirations and Identity**

One of the fears for drop outs is that the experience will diminish their self confidence and reduce the level of their aspirations (SEU, 1999). This rests upon the assumption that drop out is seen as a 'failure' on the part of the individual to some degree. However, as I have argued above, when looking at the responses of drop outs at the time of leaving college, this is not necessarily the case. For most drop outs the experience is seen as an alternative choice rather than a failure on their part.

This was also true for those in the study who had dropped out several years ago, such as Bianca:

*"No, I never saw it as a failure. It never held me back. If I hadn't dropped out I would probably have done something stupid from being bored and got chucked out, or failed my exams. That would have been worse."*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Dave similarly felt that it had been a positive choice for him:

*"I don't regret leaving at 16. I learned more out in the real world than I ever would in college. I wouldn't have done well if I'd stayed. I was ready to leave, just like now I'm ready to go back."*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

Dave did find that not having qualifications held him back from achieving his aspirations, when he lost out on promotions when competing with incoming staff with degrees. But even so, he did not seem to take this as a sign of personal failure, or as cause for regret. He felt that his employers had made a mistake in recruiting new graduates to posts that he felt demanded experience of more than qualifications. He described the extensive support and mentorship that less experienced recruits required, and was of the opinion that their knowledge was too abstract and divorced from the practical world of banking for them to perform as well as more experienced colleagues would have done.

None of the returner group felt that drop out had affected their long-term aspirations, because those initial aspirations in their mid teens had not centred around an extended period of education or jobs demanding qualifications in the first place. Bianca ‘drifted’ into college for a lack of any more favourable alternative; Dave reluctantly stayed on at first mostly because of pressure from his parents; Deb wanted to “have a laugh and enjoy being young” before she settled down to have a family. Even Tom, who did have some regrets about dropping out of education entirely, did not regret leaving the Tourism course, which he had initially chosen as “the lesser of other evils”.

Tom’s experiences come closest of those in the returners’ group to the ‘failure’ model of drop out. He didn’t see his own drop out in terms of personal failure, although in retrospect he would have preferred to continue in some other vocational training rather than drop out completely. However, he was not aware of that option at the time he left. He also regretted some of the consequences of his dropping out, particularly his lack of independence and reliance on low-paid unskilled or semi-skilled work. Like the other returners, however, he does not believe that deciding to stay rather than dropping out would have helped:



*“I would of done badly. Even if I’d passed, I would have ended up with a qualification in something I didn’t want to do. No point in that!”*

(Tom, age 32, mature drop out who returned to study Electrical Engineering)

The drop outs in the ‘two-years plus’ group describe more mixed experiences, and it is possible that feelings of regret, low confidence and aspirations are forgotten and/or re-interpreted over time. Even so, it is not as simple as the ‘failure’ model might imply. It was noticeable in the interviews that those drop outs who felt less confident about their futures, held lower aspirations and, had never expected to achieve at school or college:

*“I’m not the brightest in the bunch. I never did well at school, I’m not a high-flyer. No reason why I’d be any different at college, so it wasn’t a surprise.”*

(Phil, age 22, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

For these individuals, it could well be the case that a perceived failure at college has contributed to the perpetuation of their low self-esteem and aspirations. However, there were also accounts from the persistors in the study whose college experience had helped to raise their aspirations and self-esteem. This had enabled them to overcome the issues which caused others to choose an alternate path. Drop out is not, for most, a cause of low self-esteem in and of itself. It may be part of a long-perpetuating cycle, but if that is the case, drop out itself is just one part of the problem rather than a problem or cause of failure in its own right.

We saw in Chapter 5 how young people’s perception of their own identity, and aspirational identities, were important factors in their decision to persist or drop out from their courses. Students are varied in their sense of identity, and are not a homogenous group, even when considered in categories assumed to share characteristics, such as ‘mature learners’ (Waller, 2006). The interview data also suggest that perceptions of identity played a part in

the consequent processes the young person went through after dropping out. Two themes arose consistently through the interviews with the mature drop out and past drop out groups: 'being a worker' and 'being grown up'. It was clear from the experiences of the past drop out group in particular that these facets of their identity were especially important in the period immediately following their initial drop out:

*"It was great to feel different, to be someone with a job. I was done with being a kid. I went out with my old college friends sometimes but they seemed so immature, and they were skint all the time. I felt like I'd moved on, grown up, and left them behind."*

(Nora, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels)

### ***The worker identity***

As many teenage college drop outs leave college with the aim of getting a job, it isn't surprising that they report identifying themselves as workers in positive terms when this happens. For the interviewees who had followed this path, being a worker had a number of advantages over being a student, one of which was disposable income:

*"Working means money, and money means you can buy things you like. I could go to the pub on Friday after work with my mates and buy a round or two. People treat you with more respect when you can do that."*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

The sense of making a contribution to their families and to society at large was also important:

*"I remember the first time I paid my mum housekeeping. I was so proud. I know she'd always worked hard for us, and I was*



*awful as a kid, always mithering for stuff, trainers and that. I was proud to give something back."*

(Tom, age 32, mature drop out who returned to study Electrical Engineering)

Mark felt even more strongly that income was an important part of his identity and self-respect:

*"My dad always said, and he was right, you shouldn't be a burden on society. It's pathetic to be a scrounger. You have to earn your way. Students are just scroungers, really. They all end up owing money left right and centre. I like to know I'm in the clear."*

(Mark, age 23, past drop out from Electrical Engineering)

Those teenage college drop outs who returned to education in or after their mid twenties were in some cases reluctant to give up the worker identity, which they saw as in conflict with the student identity. For example, a part time job could provide comfort and peace of mind as well as income. For others, however, the worker identity was gratefully surrendered:

*"I've had enough of being a wage-earner. Work isn't all it's cracked up to be. I like being a student again, it's done wonders for my confidence."*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

### ***The grown up identity***

Associated with the working identity was that of being a 'grown up'. The grown up identity wasn't only related to work, however. It also meant being respected by family and friends for one's maturity:

*“All the while you’re at school, college, whatever, people look on you as a kid. Once you’ve left, you’re an adult. It brings it home to people you’re legally an adult and you get the respect that goes with it.”*

(Dave, age 42, mature drop out who returned to study Access to HE in Humanities)

*“I didn’t get a job straight away, but people still treated me different. You get more respect from your friends, because nobody can tell you what to do no more.”*

(Billy, age 25, past drop out from A-Levels and Business Studies)

For some drop outs, family responsibilities were part of feeling grown up. Milestones such as marriage and having children were recognised as important indicators of status as an adult. Adulthood was associated with independence, respect from others and a sense of achievement.

An absence of authority figures was also part of the grown-up identity, as Bianca explained:

*“I never listened to anyone who tried to tell me what to do. That’s what being grown up meant to me, and I thought I was grown up from when I was about fourteen [laughs].[...] I didn’t want no teachers telling me anything. Even on the stall, I did things my own way. I thought that’s what being an adult was all about.”*

(Bianca, age 39, mature drop out who returned to study Media Studies)

Freedom from authority, schedules, timetables and rules were also mentioned frequently as being part of the feeling of adulthood some drop outs experienced after they left. These freedoms particularly appealed to those who had rebelled against restrictions as young adults and adolescents. While some



persistors looked forward to University as a relief from parental authority and the limited choices of childhood, drop outs associated these factors with a life outside of education altogether. The worker identity and the grown up identity could be challenged by the prospect of returning to learning, as the student identity was seen as in some ways incompatible with either of them. Interviewees described leaving full time education as a welcome rite of passage which, once negotiated, they had no desire to repeat. Neither did they wish to be associated with current students who they regarded as immature and lacking in worldly experience.

There is a risk of over-simplification in this summary of individuals' motivations to broad identity-types. The consequences of drop out, just like the process of drop out are, is rooted in the context of each individual's life, and many factors are likely to be involved in determining their choices and feelings. Nonetheless, it does appear likely that the factors that affect drop out and persistence has a great deal to bear on the consequences of their decision also: a person's aspirations, self-perceptions and the influence and support of their immediate circle of friends, family and associates.

### *Conclusions*

We have seen from the stories of the drop outs in this study that drop out does not of itself signal deprivation, unhappiness or failure for the individuals concerned. Rather, in *some cases*, drop out is part of a combination of other factors which lead to such consequences. For example, if drop out is a continuation of a persistent disengagement and dissatisfaction with education beginning at school, which has already reduced the young person's self-esteem and directed their aims outside of education, it is likely that those issues will persist and continue to influence longer-term outcomes. Similarly, if issues of poverty and social exclusion colour a young person's aims to the extent that they do not envision a future in which qualifications are relevant currency (Roberts, 2005), then it is likely their aspirations and aims will continue in the same vein after drop out. It could be the case that for some individuals, as we saw from the persistors in the study, staying at college can

turn around previous experiences of education and change their confidence and aspirations, as can a successful return to learning at a later state. However, that is not to say that it is dropping out which necessarily caused or reinforced the problems of those who leave. Indeed it seems likely that problems of this kind are so entrenched that this particular event may have little impact in itself.

Aspirations are likely to continue to change over the individual's life course. Choices made during people's late teens and early twenties are no longer expected to direct the rest of their lives. However, opportunities for re-training and especially for full-time education decline dramatically post-19. Vocational preparation is expected to be concentrated into the two to five years immediately following compulsory schooling, and despite the shifting shape of the labour market and employer needs, there seems little provision for those wishing to re-visit their education later in life, unless by way of work-based training or part-time, self-funded study. Course fees can be prohibitively expensive, and most full-time provision is marketed specifically at 16-19 year olds. At Thornton College, all full-time provision, including A-level and vocational programmes, is managed as a 'brand', and is categorised as such on their web-site. This division is also reflected in the college's organisational structure. The message to those wishing to return to education is clear: those courses are for school-leavers, and school-leavers alone. Which suggests that, for some at least, it is not dropping out which is a problem, but dropping back in.

In the final chapter of this thesis I will summarise the main findings examined in this and previous chapters, draw out the key issues and make some suggestions as to how this research could contribute to policy and further studies in the future.



## Chapter 7 – Discussion and Conclusions

*“A particularly worrying part of the current FE rhetoric is the belief that if, somehow, we get it right, then student, college and society are all winners. While this is not necessarily completely wrong, it is dangerously oversimplified.”*

*(Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: p 114)*

This thesis highlights the complexity of student drop out, both as an issue for social and educational policy-makers and practitioners, and for the students themselves. The study has investigated in depth the phenomenon of drop out in one college in the north of England, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine trends and gain an understanding of students' experiences. The research shows that there is rarely a single cause of drop out, and although colleges and other professional organisations have a part to play, the decision and process of dropping out is likely to have much further-reaching reasons, effects and connections than simply the specific course or even the college in which it takes place. In investigating connections between these new findings and wider research on youth transitions, social policy and social exclusion, the study has situated its findings in the broader framework of theories and policies on the changing understandings of the new circumstances faced by young people in contemporary society.

This chapter begins by summarising the thesis, and evaluating the study for its strength and limitations as a piece of research. The research findings are then discussed in the context of the research questions set at the start of the study and described in Chapter Two. The key themes from the research are then described in relation to current policy and practice and some suggestions for future research based upon this study are outlined.

## Summary of Thesis

This thesis presents a piece of research investigating the phenomenon of student drop out among young people engaged in full-time college courses. It arose from recent policy changes and gaps in current knowledge about why students drop out and what can, or should, be done to encourage them to persist in full time education until the age of 19 or beyond.

### *Context and Aims of Research*

The aims which the research set out to meet were to a) investigate the experience of drop out from the student's point of view, and b) to explore any links between drop out and variables commonly linked to other educational outcomes, such as social class, gender and parents' educational background.

Chapter One reviewed the current literature and policy relating to students dropping out of full-time education between the ages of 16 and 19. It was argued that although this can and often is seen as part of the overall transition of young people from school to work, and it is also usually understood to be 'pathological', indicating failure on the part of the young person, their educators and/or the overall systems within which the transition from school to work takes place (SEU, 1999) . Drop out is seen in the same light as other forms of disengagement from education, such as school exclusion, failure to obtain qualifications and non-participation (NEET), and as such is thought to be dangerous to the individual in that it makes eventual disadvantage and social exclusion a more likely outcome for them. Low educational achievement has been found to be closely associated with the replication of inequality over generations, as part of the mechanism whereby young people who do not do well at school perpetuate their parents' biographies of low-paid jobs and/or periodic unemployment, limited opportunities and poverty (Bynner et al, 2002).

As well as structural factors such as social class and educational achievement, research has indicated that notions of risk and individualization



can account for the different transitions experienced by young people (Hobcraft, 2003). This is particularly apparent in the light of today's more complex transitional routes, compared with the largely linear patterns followed by previous generations (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). Opportunities have changed so much, and continue to do so, that young people are no longer expected to follow in the footsteps of their parents or the precisely followed well-worn career pathways from early school leaving through traditional work-based apprenticeships into finding work in established trades. The traditional routes for trades and crafts are largely gone; there is very little by way of entry-level employment for school-leavers which could be expected to lead to future career development, and employers require more advanced qualifications than in the past for similar posts (Coles, 1995; Roberts, 2005). University expansion and a wider range of FE courses open up new opportunities for young people, but at the same time there are fewer employment opportunities for school-leavers. There is advice and guidance available to help young people through the myriad choices available to them, but there are also many other potential influences upon their decisions, including their social and cultural background and prior educational achievements. It has been widely accepted that formal Careers Education and Guidance is largely delivered 'too little and too late' (DES, 2005b). Social capital can also be seen to be important; for example young people from backgrounds where University education is the norm, and their family, friends and school provide both the encouragement and culture in which such an aim could flourish, could be seen to have an advantage over those who have little or no experience of Higher Education.

Young people can sometimes be regarded as consumers, making a rational judgement about their career options depending on the resources available to them (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). They make pragmatic decisions about pathways which will deliver the educational experience and outcomes they need to achieve their goals, within the bounds of choice and opportunity they perceive (Bates and Riseborough, 1993). Other agencies can be expected to have an influence on these choices, including parental and professional advice, friends, school, college and employers. Young people,



including drop outs, are not, then, an homogenous group, but individuals facing risks and making choices within a complex framework of boundary and opportunity, advice and influence.

Since Incorporation in the early 1990s, colleges have been required to demonstrate high levels of retention as an indicator of the quality of their provision. They have subsequently sought with some vigour to identify causes of drop out and to establish interventions to minimise it. Key themes from early research into drop out were personal support, course quality and students' financial resources (Kenwright, 1997, Martinez and Munday, 1996). A range of initiatives, new services and structures have been put in place with the aim of improving participation of 16-19 year olds in full time education, including the Connexions Strategy, entitlements such as EMAs and most recently a proposal for a legal requirement for engagement in some form of education or training to the age of 18. Colleges have also put in place local measures to improve retention rates. These have met with mixed success (Kenwright, 1997; Martinez, 1997).

While the Learning and Skills Council collects data on retention rates, little is available nationally on the causes of drop out. Most studies to date agree that drop outs give more than one reason for leaving, but college data usually collects only *one* reason at best, so this data can be hard to interpret. The three most commonly reported reasons for drop out are *course unsuitability*, *finding employment* and *financial difficulties*. However, these categories are ambiguous and their implications in terms of drop out can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. Other common factors identified in recent research include *transport*, *problems with other students* and *personal issues*, which hint at the influence of structural background factors (Audit Commission, 2001; Kenwright, 1987; Martinez and Munday, 1998). However, we do not know how these factors might interact with educational factors, or how influences operate in affecting a student's decision to drop out. The literature focuses primarily on drop out from the point of view of policy makers and educational organisations rather than students, underpinned by the assumption that drop out has potentially disastrous consequences for young



people. From the point of view of this thesis, very little is known about learners' perspectives on the process or outcomes of drop out.

## *Methods*

Chapter Two set out the design of the research project to meet its aims. A dual-method approach was adopted, combining two strands. Firstly, a quantitative analysis of college data was conducted, supplemented by a new questionnaire survey. Secondly, a qualitative study was carried out comprising thirty in-depth ethnographic interviews. The former strand focused on trends and patterns relating to drop out, while the latter aimed to investigate the meanings and accounts of young people who had experienced drop out in some way, including those who had considered dropping out, but decided to stay.

Participants in the research were selected to include a range of criteria to meet the needs of the study. The data were collected over a four year period, enabling a strategy of theoretical sampling and reflection to aid analysis. It also allowed for one cohort to be followed through the two year period of their course and beyond. Conclusions were drawn following a detailed study of the resulting materials, using computer software to assist the organisation and interrogation of both qualitative and quantitative material, as described in Chapter Two.

The overall approach of the research, derived from the existing literature and theories discussed in the previous section, was to investigate the structural factors that may have effected drop out, but also to explore the individual experiences of students and the processes they went through when making their decision to leave. By combining the two threads, it was intended that, as well as identifying the structural landscape in which drop out occurred, further understanding would be gained into how students interacted with this landscape as individuals, and how this resulted in drop out.

The dual-method approach also allowed for a measure of triangulation to be used in order to test findings and especially to test and explore interpretations of the data as it grew during the course of the research. The two strands were not conducted in isolation from each other; measures were built into the research design to ensure that findings from the quantitative data collection and analysis could inform the qualitative research, and vice versa. This began at the design stage, where concepts were defined and variables linked with the most appropriate methods of inquiry. It continued throughout the data collection, when, for example, interview data helped to frame questionnaire design and administration techniques; and also throughout the analysis phase when emerging interpretations and findings were tested against and between the two data sets. However, it was important to keep in mind throughout that the quantitative and qualitative strands were different in character, and had been chosen to address different research needs. As such they held particular strengths and weaknesses in regard to each other. It had to be kept in mind, for instance, that although one student's story from the interview might serve well to illustrate how a particular pattern observed in the survey data might come about, further work would be needed to test how generalisable such an explanation might be as a persistent finding, beyond the further cases involved in the interviews.

A sample of a third of one year's intake was selected from the college records for the questionnaire survey, amounting to 747 individuals. Three fully-piloted questionnaires were distributed to the sample, at the projected start, middle and end of the two-year programme of study to which they had enrolled. An overall response rate of forty three percent of persistors, and thirty two percent for drop outs was achieved, and these were balanced for course subject and the gender of the respondent. The questionnaires measured a set of core variables at each point in time, as well as additional variables added to cover specific issues, and to test emerging findings from the interview data. The data was added to data from the college records, and analysed using the SPSS computer package. Sample sizes were too small to allow for any robust multi-variate analysis, but did yield useful results via cross tabulation.



Informal, semi-structured interviews were carried out with thirty individuals, including 'recent drop outs' (those aged 19 or under, who had dropped out within the last two years), 'past drop outs' (those aged 20 to 25 who had dropped out more than two years previously), 'persistors', (those aged 19 or under who had completed their course), and 'mature drop outs' (those aged 29 or older, who had dropped out when they were between the ages of 16 and 18 but had returned to study as adults). The latter group of 'mature drop outs' was selected in order to investigate the experiences of adults returning to learning after dropping out in their teenage years, once it became apparent from early findings that this could be an important issue for the research. The groups therefore allowed for investigation of the impact of drop out in the short, medium and longer term, and in contrast with those who did not drop out. Each case was selected under principles of comparison, with the aim of generating data from different perspectives. This enabled the identification of themes through the analysis of the similarities and differences between different students' experiences. In some cases, sampling and the content of interviews was guided by emerging findings from the questionnaire data. For example, it was noted that recent drop outs did not seem to find drop out to be a negative experience. Mature drop outs were then included in the sample to find out whether this perpetuated in the longer term.

The interviews were conducted in venues as comfortable and unthreatening to contributors as possible, and measures taken to build rapport and to empower and support contributors. This included the use of photographs, taken by the contributors of things they felt to be of importance to them in their lives. It was also used as an 'ice breaker' at the start of the interviews. The photographs also proved useful in analysis. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and analysed using *Atlas ti* software. This enabled the identification of key themes and issues arising from the findings, which could easily be compared and contrasted between interviews, interview groupings and where appropriate, with the survey data (Miles, Huberman and Huberman, 1994; Fielding and Lee, 1998). As each interview was added to the set, new interpretations were generated to account for the data, and further

questions designed to test and further stretch the growing understandings which emerged.

Once the data collection and initial analysis was complete, and the key themes of the research had been established, four case studies were produced. These served to exemplify the key themes, and also demonstrated how individual students had been influenced by a range of factors within and beyond the educational setting. They also helped to map the processes involved for students in reaching their decision to drop out or stay on their courses. The selection and development of these case studies was guided by principle of inclusion: where interpretations and theories are tested with the whole data set to ensure that there are no unaccounted for exceptions which fall outside the thesis. Thus, while the case studies were individual stories, they demonstrate themes which were typical of the wider range of interviews. This process was very useful in sharpening interpretations of, and theories about, the data, as well as providing helpful examples through which the data could usefully be presented. It highlighted areas of analysis where theories, often formulated early in the research, clearly did not usefully account for all of the data, or were challenged by specific cases, and therefore required revision (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

### ***Drop Out: Trends and Causes***

Chapter Three presented findings drawn primarily from the quantitative study. The survey and college data showed that reasons for leaving were complex and that most students gave more than one reason for leaving at any one time. There were no significant differences in gender. There were variations in drop out between courses and curriculum areas, but these were not consistent over the period of the study. Students were more likely to leave around vacation periods. This could be because vacations provided opportunities for reflection, were a natural break-point, and could also be the focus for stressful events, such as assessment deadlines.



Two clusters of reasons given for leaving were identified, as described in Chapter Three. The first set included reasons which signalled change in the student's aims. For example, a young person wanting to look for a job rather than continue in education; a new vocational career choice presenting itself or unanticipated financial difficulties. The second cluster included reasons related to difficulties in the young person's life, such as problems with their course, college staff, family, transport or ill health. Reasons given varied in importance and relative importance, with only the changing of aims as consistently proving the most popular reason given. This reflects the complexity of reasons given for drop out, and thus the importance of studying the student's experience in more detail. It also indicates the complexity of the process of drop out from the student's point of view.

Structural factors such as class, prior attainment and parents' educational background were found to have an affect on drop out, although this relationship was not a strong one, as shown in the results presented in Chapter Three. This could possibly reflect the wider range of opportunities, influences and agency young people begin to find once they have left school and start on the road to independence (Evans, 1997). These opportunities are not limitless, however, and the constraints of socio-economic and cultural background were indicated by the relationship between drop out and variables such as living arrangements, family composition, parents' occupation and parents' educational background. Peers were also found to be influential, perhaps reflecting a transfer from family to peer group as a source of identity and guidance (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Poole, 1984). The importance of these variables also indicates that factors such as social and cultural capital could have an influence; perhaps rather than simply the financial constraints associated with coming from lower-income families, the cultural roots of the advice given by family and friends, and the information and experience available to them also has an affect (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). This theory was examined in more depth through the qualitative strand of the research.

The survey data confirmed that drop outs rarely decide to leave suddenly; rather it is, as Martinez proposed, part of a continual process of

weighing up options which most students undergo (Martinez, 1996). Drop outs do, however, appear to be particularly pragmatic in their educational decisions, more likely to see education mostly as a means to an end, and to make the decision to leave when it no longer fitted their aspirations. Again, this could be a culturally-influenced pattern, as observed by Bates and Riseborough (1993), reflecting expectations and aspirations shaped by family and community experience.

The complexity of reasons and circumstances, linked to, but not exclusively determined by, student's socio-economic and cultural background, suggests that many drop outs do, as Furlong and Cartmel describe: "... perceive themselves as living in a society characterized by risk and insecurity which they expect to have to negotiate on an individual level." (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006: p12). Such a change of plans was not unique to drop outs: for example, a fifth of those who completed their period of full time study changed a major aspect of their course at some point. Furthermore the route of drop out itself is not necessarily a high-risk one. Contrary to evidence from the Social Exclusion Unit's report (SEU 1999), none of the drop outs in this survey sample were NEET as a result. The majority went on to employment, many with training, and a large percentage returned to full-time education.

### ***Student Experiences***

Chapters Four, Five and Six described the findings of the qualitative strand of the research, with reference to the survey data where common themes were found. Chapter Four examined the experience of drop out for four individual students. These case studies were selected from the thirty interviews as representative of four typologies of drop out emerging from the data: the *seeker*, the *drifter*, the *stopper* and the *changer*. The development of the four typologies also served to highlight similarities and differences between different students' experiences, and thus to identify key themes from the wider body of research.



Billy ('the seeker') dropped out twice during his journey to find a vocation which appealed to him, which meant taking a route contrary to the expectations of his family and teachers. His case demonstrates the role of expectations and persistence in the process of drop out. In Billy's case, his early experiences and the expectations of his parents encouraged him to adopt a route which was not, ultimately, what he wanted. He kept looking for alternatives, however, until eventually he found a career path he actively wished to pursue.

Brendan ('the drifter') had not particularly sought a specific career when making his choices upon leaving school. He stayed at college as a stop gap until something came along that suited his aspirations better. He never really engaged with his courses or wider college life. Rather than actively seeking alternative routes, as Billy did, Brendan was content to wait and take opportunities as they arose. Eventually he left college because he had reached a point where the study necessary to continue was more than he was willing to put in, especially when offered the alternative of paid work that would enable him to continue his preferred lifestyle.

Brittney ('the stopper') left college when she experienced difficulties with her course that she felt she could not overcome. At first she had done well, especially due to diagnosis and support for her dyslexia. However, she became stuck on an assignment and her course problems snowballed from there. She gradually disengaged from college life, to the point where she attended only in order to maintain friendships with her erstwhile course-mates. For Brittney dropping out was a slow and gradual process. Eventually, with family support, she found work, which led eventually to work with training. Brittney's story highlights the importance of learning support and social networks in keeping students in college, but also the difficulties, which proved to be insurmountable in Brittney's case, of low self-confidence. As soon as she hit a barrier in her course work, she gave up, taking it as evidence that she would fail in other areas and that there was therefore no point in seeking further help or trying different strategies. This fits the model of

learned helplessness described by Seifert (2004), which is an example of an individual factor contributing to the experience of drop out.

Buffy ('the changer') left when her experience of motherhood led to a radical change in her aspirations and circumstances. She was a successful student and willing to work hard to resume her studies after the birth of her daughter. However, when she returned to college she found her priorities had changed. It wasn't just the practical problems of combining childcare with full time education, but that she felt she was missing out on her daughter's development and wanted to take the opportunity to enjoy being a mother. Unlike Brittney, Buffy did not feel helpless, but rather exhibits high levels of control over her choices, not least because she was in a relatively good position to make them, having good resources in terms of support and information about the routes available to her.

These four case studies served as useful typologies, representing between them most of the experiences of the drop outs in the study. To be clear, they demonstrate five key themes which were also corroborated by data from the full qualitative data set. Firstly, there is strong evidence for individualized routes to drop out. Secondly, levels of confidence have a substantial impact on the decision to drop out. Thirdly, drop outs are less likely to have clear vocational goals, and/or the information they need to achieve them, than persistors. Fourthly, the social and cultural resources available to the student can influence their decision to drop out and the route they take thereafter, emphasising the importance of social and cultural capital. Fifthly, and finally, although drop out could be a protracted process, each of the drop outs could pinpoint a particular set of circumstances which precipitated their decision: a 'critical moment' which led to their choice being made.

As further cases were clustered and the themes described above emerged, the analysis shifted from 'within type' to 'across cases'. Despite the different routes described by the typologies, some common themes were also identified across them all, and these were explored in Chapter Five. The



findings from the ethnographic interviews once again showed that drop out appeared to be the result of students' interpretations of their opportunities, guided by their aspirations, motivations and perceived identity (Jenkins, 1996; Seifert, 2004) albeit bound by structural factors (Bynner, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006) and the degree to which they were able to control events (Evans, 2002). At the time of their drop out young people were going through a process of change in many areas of their lives, and were influenced by a range of people, including their families, teachers, peers and professional advisers. As they encountered new experiences and opportunities, for some their aspirations changed, and consequently their personal strategies altered. In some way a critical moment was reached, triggering a decision to drop out or to stay.

Confidence was an important theme throughout the interviews. It played a vital role in defining young people's aspirations, guiding them in what they felt to be achievable and plausible for them. The interviewees' perceptions of their abilities varied widely, even among those with similar actual qualifications. The confidence levels students brought to college had been heavily influenced by their prior experiences at school, and the opinions of their family and friends. Their college experiences had further impact. It also appeared that drop out itself might foster low self-esteem subsequently, as it was seen to be in some sense a 'failure' by most of those who dropped out. This concurs with the fear that for some individuals, dropping out can reinforce previous educational failure and low self-confidence (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

Chapter Six looked in detail at the consequences of drop out in the medium and long term. The interview data from the mature returners and past drop outs suggested that drop outs were more likely to have gone on to low-paid work, at least initially, with low job security and restricted opportunities for career development. However, there were no cases of long term unemployment in those interviewed. This once again contrasts with the assertions of the SEU, and while it challenges the assumption that drop out inevitably leads to young people becoming NEET, requires further

examination before conclusions may confidently be drawn. For example, factors such as the demographic and employment profile of the area served by Thornton College could have an impact on the findings. A study of unemployed drop outs would therefore usefully enhance this research. However, the drop outs in this study did not regret their decision, and felt that they had achieved, or were on their way to achieving, their aspirations, which were often centred on steady work and family life, rather than educational achievement for its own sake, or a highly paid job. Some had returned to education and/or training in some form, but reported that that this had not been as easy as they had hoped, and for some the barriers of funding, competing responsibilities, poor information and low self-esteem proved too much.

The research findings show that drop out is a complex issue. The choice to drop out is part of some young people's individualized pathways and as such is interlinked with many other features of youth transition. There is no evidence in the data to suggest that there is a direct relationship between drop out from FE and social exclusion. Rather it seems that drop out is a pragmatic decision some young people make as part of their overall strategy to achieve goals which shift and change as they encounter new experiences and opportunities, and perhaps lose sight of old ones. That is not to say that drop out is unproblematic, or that it is always a positive choice. But the indications from this research suggest that the causes and consequences are complicated and best understood within the broader contexts of young peoples' lives.

### ***Limitations of the Research***

Although every effort was taken to ensure that the research was undertaken in a robust fashion, like any study it has its strengths and weaknesses. The research benefits from its relationship to a social policy and sociological context, complementing the current literature situated in the education and FE management fields. Post-compulsory education is under-researched, and often narrowly conceived, especially in terms of theoretical



and academic, rather than practitioner-led, studies (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999). However, the scope of this research was limited by the resources and staffing available. It was decided early on in the project to restrict the research to one institution, largely due to constraints on time and budget. There are disadvantages to this decision. The inclusion of one or more further institutions would have ensured a larger sample, and allowed for a wider range of variables for student backgrounds and circumstances to have been included, especially those from different economic contexts and areas of higher unemployment. It would also have allowed for different college approaches to drop out and other aspects of provision to have been examined.

A larger sample would also have allowed for a robust multi-variate analysis, and thus a greater understanding of the interaction and causal relationships between different variables. However, this added complexity would have posed additional problems to the analysis as well. Given that the study does not intend to explore retention strategies, but rather is looking at the students' perspectives, different institutional values and contexts could have confused rather than clarified the data. By selecting a single institution with a broad client group, variety is ensured while still holding some elements, such as the overall college approach, constant. There was also the advantage that the researcher had considerable background knowledge about the institution, having worked there for several years, although this in turn presented some problems of potential bias, which were explored in Chapter Two.

The length of the project also had drawbacks, not least that the education and social policy landscapes changed considerably over the duration of the research. Most of the students in the study did not experience the Connexions Service, the new two-stage A-levels or the revised, post-GNVQ, vocational qualifications. College policies and strategies also changed over the period of the research, and the upcoming 14-19 policies promise to change things still further, as they seek to place all young people up to the age of 19 in education or training of some kind. However, the use of retention as an indicator of performance and a means of determining funding remained

constant, and with it the implication that of drop out was both an institutional personal failure, which this thesis challenges.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This section considers the findings from the research in the light of the research questions it sought to answer. The questions can be clustered into four groups: the link between family background and drop out; other factors that influenced students' decisions to drop out; the process of dropping out; and what the consequences of dropping out were for the students in the study, including their own feelings about drop out.

### ***Family Background and Drop Out***

There was some indication from the study that students' socio-economic background is related to their likelihood of dropping out. Parental occupation, educational background and household composition all show tentative links to drop out. However, the relationship in this data set is by no means straight forward or conclusive. This could be at least in part because of the size and/or the socio-economic composition of the sample area, but it is also likely, given the complexity of the issues demonstrated through the qualitative research, that there are more influences effecting student outcomes than a straightforward structural one between social class of origin and educational outcomes. This supports Furlong and Cartmel's argument (2006) that within the broad social structures of class, gender and ethnicity are further diverse, individualized routes which are influenced by a multitude of other factors.

The study helps to identify ways in which family and cultural background can have an influence on young peoples' choices within this process. Billy's story, for instance, shows how the pressure from parents to follow a particular vocational route can be strong enough to deter young people from looking outside of the boundaries of their expectations. In Billy's case this occurred through two attempts at completing a course of study.



Billy's parents were both educated to a high level, and both had professional occupations. This served to inform their expectations of Billy's potential routes, and at first, also informed Billy's own expectations and aspirations. Interestingly, the experience and information that finally helped him to find the career that suited him also came from a family member, whose influence appeared at a later stage. Billy's account illustrates how, as young people grow up, their aspirations and perceptions of what is possible and desirable for them in terms of education and work are shaped through the process of socialisation. Their home circumstances have a central role in this process. It may not be possible for young people to follow directly in their parents' footsteps any more, not least due to the rapidly changing society and economic landscape into which they are born. Nevertheless, the process of socialisation is still rooted in their experience of their immediate community and smaller social groupings, including the family.

The concepts of social and cultural capital are useful in accounting for the mechanisms involved (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). For example, the research presented in this thesis shows that drop outs are more likely to be sharing a room with a sibling, and less likely to have a place dedicated to study within the home. Family life is more likely to interfere in their learning than for those who didn't drop out. Young people cared for by foster families or the local authority are among the most likely to drop out. Perhaps the key to understanding the influence of socio-economic background on drop out isn't simply that of inheritance of disadvantage, but rather of the young peoples' knowledge and currency in the educational and employment market places. Brendan, Billy and Tim serve as useful examples of how this process can work. In Tim's case, as the various quotes in Chapter Five reflect, his family had built successful working lives without education, to the point where Tim saw very little value in it at all. His social capital was in his commitment to the world of work: his contacts were his family and their colleagues in the construction industry, and his aspirations were to become part of that world. Brendan, meanwhile, had been brought up to value education in principle, but lacked the cultural capital to engage fully with the educational process. His family had little experience of further education and

thus struggled at times to support him, for instance they could not provide him with a suitable environment to work in at home. He also lacked the confidence in his own entitlement and use of college-provided facilities such as the learning centre. In contrast, Billy's upbringing and family context, meanwhile, provided him with plenty of cultural capital when it came to academic education. They had experience of education at different levels and passes their knowledge on to their son. Once he decided to step outside of the scope of this experience, however, by considering a craft-based rather than professional career, he was just as lost as Brendan. It was only when, through his cousin, he engaged with a social network that helped him reform his aspirations and provided the appropriate contacts to pursue them that he got back on course.

As well as helping to form young peoples' aspirations and providing the resources for them to realise their goals, the family plays a key role in determining the boundaries within which young people make their choices. Part of these boundaries are expectations and experience; the young person's perceptions of what is possible, likely and desirable. But there is also the matter of authority. Although young people are becoming adults and usually gaining autonomy at a rapid rate, once they leave compulsory education, the speed and nature of this process varies significantly between different (class) groups (Coles, 1995) and can be related to socio-economic factors. By way of example: a working class family might put more emphasis on the immediate value of work, while a middle class family focuses on education as a longer-term strategy for higher income, and/or as a viable goal in its own right. Although simplistic, these distinctions serve to demonstrate the different cultural values that could inform parents as they guide and encourage their children. Thus a working class young person who wishes to leave to take up a job might be allowed or encouraged to do so, while a middle class young person might face considerable parental opposition and disappointment.

There is more work to be done before the relationship between drop out and students' family background can be properly understood. This



research shows, however, that it is an important factor, and warrants further investigation.

### ***Other influences on the decision to drop out***

The research findings made it clear that drop out is the result of a complex set of circumstances, which cover the full range of aspects of students' lives, including social, educational and economic contexts. Drop out is clearly *not* restricted to institutional factors. Drop out is linked to students' aspirations, confidence levels and their perceptions of their abilities and opportunities. These factors are in turn shaped by a range of influences, including family and friends, professional advisors, role models and the students' own experiences and personalities.

Students in the study described aspirations which guided their choices to varying degrees. These aspirations differed between individuals in their clarity and focus. Two categories of aspiration emerged. The first was dreams: long-term hopes which they don't have any specific strategy to achieve, but which may nonetheless serve to motivate and inspire them. The second was goals, which are focused, have what the young person believes to be an attainable outcome, and for which they have a strategy which they expect to work. This may include the pursuance of full time education in the short or long term. However, where the goal is not directly dependent on qualifications, or where alternative routes not involving the short-term acquisition of qualifications might be acceptable, young people may choose to leave college *in order* to fulfil their goals, not in spite of them. Similarly students who are struggling financially or academically with their course may persist because they need to complete it in order to achieve their goals.

This serves to demonstrate that students can come even to vocationally-specific courses with very different aims from each other. However, current policy and practice in FE expects young people to have at least moderately static career aspirations and plans, and leaves little room for change once the academic year is under way.

A range of role models were found to be influencing factors in helping to form young peoples' aspirations, by demonstrating pathways which individual students may wish to emulate or avoid. Role models were also sometimes actively involved in supporting students who were following in their footsteps, by offering advice, information and resources of various kinds. Role models could be family members, teachers from school or college and celebrities or fictional characters. Role models could be important at an inspirational level and/or a practical level, by offering advice, example, encouragement and information to help the young person achieve their goals.

Role models could also boost students' confidence in their own abilities. Confidence was not necessarily related objectively to their prior achievements, but had been shaped through their childhood via the influence of friends, family and school experiences. The study has shown the importance of the detection of, and support for, learning difficulties, especially dyslexia, which when undiagnosed or under-supported can serve to crush young peoples' confidence in their wider abilities, as seen in Chapter Five. When young people have poor experiences at school, resulting in perceived failure and underachievement, their expectations of further education are low and, it could be argued, they are more open to notions of further failure, including drop out. Students with higher levels of confidence could be less likely to 'give up' if they have course difficulties. However, it could also be argued that more confident students may over-reach their abilities: that it is the mismatch between perceived and actual abilities which is a problem. Whatever the outcome, confidence is one of the aspects which helps to shape students' perceptions of what is plausible and appropriate for them to aspire to. It can be a stronger factor than any objective measure of their abilities, including qualifications.

Perceived abilities and aspirations are also part of the process of identity-formation, which is particularly important to this particular age group. The young people in the study were taking their first steps into their adult identity, and this meant different things to different students. Some identified



strongly as students, which could lead to a heightened determination to complete their studies, in order to remain at college, or achieve the goal of becoming a university student. However, it could also lead to drop out if they felt they were not being treated as college students; for example if they felt their teachers were patronising or over-authoritarian. Others identified as working adults, which could make them determined to stay, if their work goals required specific qualifications, or could direct them to leave if a working opportunity arose, or if their choice of vocation changed.

As well as these broad identity factors, changes in circumstances or specific events can influence a student's decision to leave or stay. These are often the factors captured in college records, such as 'financial difficulties' or 'family problems'. However, it is misleading to assume that these 'crisis points' are the underlying cause of drop out. It was particularly noticeable in this study that financial difficulties were never the sole reason given for leaving, and rarely the most important. This is not to say that students did not suffer financial problems, or that the provision of financial support via EMAs is misguided. Greater financial security can, for example, make it easier for students to bear some of the other factors challenging their persistence, such as difficulties with their course or home problems, whereas if they are struggling financially they have another problem to add to the pile. It could be the last straw. It is also possible that less well-off families might be more supportive of persistence if students are contributing to, rather than detracting from, the household income, but this is a matter for further inquiry.

What is clear is that drop outs are not an homogeneous group. Young peoples' options, aspirations and circumstances are not static, but are constantly shifting. This means that young people regularly re-assess their position and sometimes decide that dropping out is the best option for them to take. This fluidity, coupled with the complexity and inter-relationship between the factors effecting drop out make drop out very difficult to predict. Individuals present different combinations of factors, some of which, such as aspirations, confidence and social and cultural capital, are very difficult to reliably quantify for predictive purposes. However, this thesis presents a

deeper understanding of the factors affecting students, and their very complexity suggests that policy and practice which treats drop outs as one homogenous group with predictable causes and outcomes of their actions is deeply flawed.

### ***The processes of dropping out***

The research reflects a range of different accounts of drop out, in which individuals follow a variety of pathways through the decision and actions to leave college early.

The study showed that drop out is typically a long-term process, part of an ongoing assessment of possibilities, opportunities and goals which most students engage with continuously throughout their course of study (Martinez and Munday, 1998). As we have seen, there are a range of contextual factors which may precipitate the decision to drop out or to persist. However, it is not these factors themselves that cause drop out. Rather it is how they affect the individual's aspirations and perceptions of the potential routes available to them, and their understanding of the consequences of following these routes.

At some stage in this continual process of weighing up pros, cons and objectives, however, there is a specific moment which precipitates the start of a decision-making process. The concept of the 'critical moment' as derived from the work of Giddens and others (Giddens, 1991; Thomson et al, 2002) is helpful in describing the point at which the individual faces choices which will ultimately change their identity, aspirations and lifestyle. *All* of the interviewees in the survey described at least one such moment in the process of their drop out or persistence. At some stage, one or more specific event had led directly to their explicit consideration of their circumstances and ultimately to a decision as to whether to drop out or not.

Furthermore, four distinct types of critical moment could be identified. The first of these, '*life events*', describes major changes in the students' life or the life of those close to them, such as marriage, divorce, serious health issues,



birth or death. However, while life events may precipitate the decision to drop out, they are not necessarily the *cause* of drop out in and of themselves. For example, they could offer a change in perspective, or be a last straw on top of a sequence of other factors. Life events were also used as 'legitimate' reasons for drop out, without blame for the individual or the institution, and as such were reportedly given as a more palatable explanation than those which the student identified as more important reasons for them. This was especially true if the student wished to spare their tutor's feelings, or preserve their own self-esteem.

The second type of critical moment described in the study are '*sudden opportunities*'. Like 'life events', 'sudden opportunities' can arise out of the blue. They typically provide an alternative to college. This could be an opportunity arising in direct competition to a college course, such as a full-time job offer. It could also take the form of a 'release point': an opportunity which provides an excuse for the student to drop out when they had already been planning to do so, but had no reason at hand that they thought would prove acceptable for family or college. Caroline's account provides an example of this (Chapter Five). She had been contemplating dropping out for some time, but the unexpected opportunity to spend time with her brother in Germany offered her with an ideal excuse to leave which would be acceptable to her parents.

The third type of critical moment were '*crises*': moments of personal turmoil. These could be course-related crises, such as assignment deadlines, impending examinations or an ultimatum from a tutor. However, they could be personal crises. For example, one young person in the study described how a row with her boyfriend made her unwilling to return to college to face him again. She had been dissatisfied with student life for some time, but it was this crisis which finally precipitated her leaving.

The fourth type of critical moment identified was the 'eureka moment'. These were moments of revelation and personal development which caused students to redefine their own aspirations or identities in a substantial way.

They are moments of sudden clarity, when the young person gains a new focus and perspective on their problems and opportunities. This enables them to make a definite decision which had been eluding them. Like the other critical moments, this may not be a decision to drop out. It could lead them to stay. For example, Josh (Chapter 5) described how he had been considering leaving as a result of being bullied about his sexuality by his fellow students. However, a positive experience elsewhere gave him sudden insight and commitment into his own identity and a strong desire to be proud of his sexuality and to stand up to the bullies. As a consequence he stayed at college and completed his course.

So far we have seen that young people are likely to re-evaluate their commitment to completing their course at regular intervals, as their perceptions, aspirations and circumstances change. As there are many inter-related factors which can contribute to their perspective on the value of persisting, this is a complex process. At some point, however, for those who leave, a critical moment is likely to occur, which sparks the decision to drop out. Some students have critical moments which spur them on to stay, and resolve issues in a different way, while perhaps for others no critical moment occurs and they continue to finish their programme. They may possibly engage in continual re-assessment right until the end.

Although drop outs identified their 'critical moment' as the turning point where they made the decision to leave, drop out did not necessarily occur immediately. Instead there followed a process of disengagement, which could vary in length from a matter of days, to weeks or even months. For some drop outs this process had already begun at some level. For instance Brittney stopped attending classes but continued to go to college as a social activity (Chapter Four). Finally a letter home precipitated Brittney's overt decision to leave. Poor attendance is often observed prior to drop out (Kenwright, 1997), which could be an indication that such a process of disengagement is underway.



For some drop outs, the process of disengagement continues, or only begins, after the critical moment has occurred. Some waited for a natural break such as the end of a term (for example Billy, Chapter Four), while others left immediately (Simon, Chapter Five). Disengagement was a more traumatic process for some than for others. Specifically, it was often difficult for those who held a strong student identity, such as Brittney (Chapter 4). Those who were keen to escape the student identity (such as Simon, Chapter 5), or who planned to return to college and thus felt less urgency to surrender their student identity (such as Colin, Chapter 5), found it easier.

At some point the process of disengagement culminated in complete drop out from college. However, even this point was not always easy to define. While there was an official withdrawal procedure at Thornton College, which included an 'exit interview', fewer than half of the drop outs in the survey sample had attended exit interviews, according to college records. Of the remainder, a further third informed the college that they were leaving by a telephone call or letter. The rest did not formally withdraw at all, but simply stopped attending.

Once the young person had, in their own view, dropped out, a process of re-adjustment began. For some this involved immersion in a new role as a worker, carer or student-in-waiting. For others it involved a hiatus period, where they re-evaluated their options, or simply waited to see what would turn up (for instance, Brendan, Chapter 4). Throughout the process of dropping out, the young person continued to work through the system of factors and influences described above. Role models, confidence, family, friends, their goals and aspirations and the objective and perceived opportunities available to them all continued to operate and influence the young peoples' experiences through the process of drop out and beyond.

## ***Consequences of dropping out***

The expected consequence of drop out for young people described in *Bridging the Gap* is that they will meet the same fate as non-participants in education and training beyond the age of 16. This includes, in the short term (to the age of 21), prolonged unemployment, low qualifications, poor health, depression, early parenthood, crime and drug use (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). One of the central contentions of my thesis, however, is that while this may be the case for some drop outs, it is far from universally true. In fact the drop outs in this study have a very different and more positive story to tell.

More than half the drop outs in this research had left their course with the explicit intention of finding work, and many had a specific job to go to immediately upon leaving. None of the drop outs in the survey were NEET. However, those who were in employment at the end of the study represent a broad spectrum of positions within the labour market. Over a third were in full-time jobs with training, and it is likely that these young people would have better prospects of securing qualifications and long-term employment. The remainder of the 'employed' group, however, were in part-time jobs, full time jobs without training, or were self-employed. The likelihood of those young people being engaged in 'poor work', and of them remaining in low-paid, insecure employment in the long term could be relatively high. This is especially likely for those who do not gain qualifications (Bynner et al, 2002).

The 'mature drop outs' described mixed employment histories. Tom is perhaps the closest to the picture of drop out presented by the SEU. He has experienced periods of unemployment and casual, part-time employment since dropping out of college. He did also enjoy extended periods of employment, however, the most recent of which included training and was only terminated through redundancy. However, Tom still did not regret his decision to drop out. He wished he had been aware of other alternatives to the course he dropped out of at the time, but he preferred the route he had taken to continuing with a full-time course in a vocational area he disliked, and when he desperately wanted to work.



Bianca found a job on leaving college which grew into a permanent job and eventually evolved into her own successful business. Similarly, Deb did not experience any periods of involuntary unemployment. They had both returned to college, albeit via very different routes, to retrain for new careers following major life changes (prison in Bianca's case, starting a family in Deb's). Dave enjoyed the career in banking he'd left college for, at least to start with. He found after a while, however, that his employer's requirements had changed, and his level of qualifications were no longer sufficient to progress as he wished. Like Bianca and Deb he had returned to education following a major life event: in his case, a divorce. This suggests that possibly critical moments can signal a *return* to leaving, as well as a departure or persistence with it.

The research offered no proof that drop outs suffered from a loss of confidence as a *result* of leaving early. In fact, many of those in the study described how they had gained confidence upon starting work, especially where this was associated with gaining independence and adult status (for example, Bianca, Chapter 6). There was no overall sense of failure associated with dropping out. Even Tom, who did regret that he had not had a more successful work history on leaving school did not regret leaving his Tourism course. In fact he felt it had been the right choice precisely *because* he was certain that he *would* have failed should he have stayed to the end.

Tom's experience provides some insight as to why drop out might not carry with it as high a risk of the devastating consequences of social exclusion as other forms of non-participation in education. Drop outs have made a choice to discontinue their education before it is finally measured in terms of achieving or not achieving a qualification. As such, they have not 'officially' failed. They were successful in gaining a college place, and made what was, in their view, a positive *choice* to discontinue in favour of another strategy. Thus Tom's regret is not that he dropped out, but that he didn't immediately find a viable alternative that better suited him. Dave did not regret choosing his pathway through employment, but resented the fact that the rules had

changed along the way, meaning that his employer eventually required qualifications which he had been assured he would not need. Deb did not regret dropping out of a course in which she had no interest, but found it difficult to get the support and information she needed to re-enter education when she needed further training.

Both the 'mature' and 'past' drop out groups affiliated strongly with non-student identities as workers, parents and adults, all of which they saw as principally opposed to the identity of 'student'. Even those who were or had been engaged in part time study and/or training since dropping out saw this as a secondary facet of their lives, and unimportant in comparison to their main identity. There are clues here, also, as to why drop out is not synonymous with failure for these individuals. While they may have had (or still have) low confidence in their learning abilities, this had lost much of its relevance when they were able to succeed in other roles. In this sense, drop out can be seen as a positive move, in opening doors to roles through which young people could achieve their aims (income, independence, adulthood) rather than prolonging their suffering in a world which they felt unsuited for (tests, dependence, childhood). This achievement of aims and increased role-comfort served to improve their confidence far more than any failure associated with drop out could reduce it. Indeed, it could be argued that there might be benefits to their self-esteem, as Tom suggested, in leaving before their perceived failings were proven in terms of examination results. They had left with the *possibility* of success intact.

Further support for this argument is found in the accounts provided by those drop outs who had returned to education at a later stage of their lives. Those who had experienced low self-esteem about learning often faced a renewed battle when returning, especially those returning to full-time education in a formal learning environment. Sometimes, however, their strong adult identity and experiences of holding down a job, raising a family and achieving independence could help them to overcome confidence issues regarding education.



Drop out did not necessarily mean the end of education for those in the study. Many of the young people who dropped out during the survey period returned at the start of the following academic year. Others took up training opportunities through employment or evening classes (Chapter 3). However, it was not always easy for drop outs to return to learning, especially once they had passed the age of nineteen or twenty. There are a range of other barriers to returning, in addition to the issues of confidence discussed above. Some barriers reflect those which contributed to drop out in the first place, such as a lack of confidence. Others include a lack of support from friends and family, social and cultural capital and/or financial support. In addition, those wishing to return are likely to have new responsibilities towards dependents, employers and financial commitments. The participants in the study also described a lack of readily available information and guidance. Returners such as Deb found that marketing and advice services were targeted primarily at young people. Crucially, so is financial support. Unless claiming benefits, adults returning to education not only have to support themselves financially, but also frequently have to pay for course fees, which can be considerable. They are also likely to have to cover the expense of equipment and learning materials.

For most of those included in the study who wished to return, these problems had apparently been overcome, and they were well on their way to achieving their new aims. What was outside of the project's scope and thus undiscovered, however, was what happened to those who found the struggle to 'drop back in' too great. Perhaps this is where social exclusion and its consequences can be a long-term result of drop out. It seems likely that the prospects of those who are not able to 'drop in' again at some stage in their lives will be more limited, with regrettable consequences for those individuals and for our skill-starved economy.

Given the experiences described by the drop outs in this study, the most important question appears not to be 'how can we stop young people from dropping out of education' but rather 'how can we help them drop back *in*, when the time is right for them?' There is much work currently underway

to improve education and training for work for 14-19 year olds, such as Young Apprenticeships, Specialised Diplomas and a renewed emphasis on key skills (Department for Education and Skills, 2006b). However, these initiatives are targeted very much at young people progressing from school to entry into the labour market. This does not account for the constantly shifting needs of the economy. If, as this research suggests, it is the case that young people can expect to follow varying, individualised routes through a changing economic landscape (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006), it is likely that they will need regularly to build upon their skills and knowledge in order to keep up with the needs of new technology and employment patterns. To this end means of providing education and training opportunities for individuals throughout their lives must be considered, and a culture of recurrent training and education be fostered throughout society and key institutions such as colleges and workplaces. This contrasts sharply with the current urgency for all young people to complete their education and training by the age of eighteen, or twenty one if they wish to pursue Higher Education. It seems there is much to be gained from considering a pattern of 'needs-matched' education and training. This would respond to the personal, knowledge and skills-development needs of individuals with rapidly changing lives within the context of the labour market, rather than an age-driven system which assumes a more static career pattern more suited to an economy of thirty years or more ago.

## **Key Themes from the Research**

This thesis presents arguments which develop understanding of drop out within four main themes: the role of drop out in young people's life-courses; how students decide to drop out; the relationship of drop out to college performance and relationship between drop out and lifelong learning. The research also raises some important issues that need to be addressed if the overall aims of reducing social exclusion and building an appropriately skilled workforce are to be met. I shall now summarise each of the main themes in



turn, and consider the wider implications of the research findings for the future.

### ***Drop out and Student Biographies***

The students did not see drop out as a problem, but as a mainly positive choice. Nearly all of those in the study felt they had made the right decision in leaving when they did. Most of the drop outs had gone on to positive outcomes. Rather than seeing themselves as giving up something when they left, they felt they had left in order to pursue their goals, and had gained something, such as independence, income or adult status. For many these goals still included education or training in some form, either in the immediate future or longer term. In fact, drop outs were often more focused on specific goals than those who stayed: they had started their courses with the aim of securing employment in a chosen field, and stopped when it wasn't working out, or their aims changed. In this sense, many of the drop outs were eager to progress their transition from school to work quickly, while those who stayed in education as an end in itself were willing to take a more protracted route. The relationship between socio-economic background and drop out suggests that this may be class-related. It could be that young people are replicating the paths their parents took: a swift transition to work for working class families, compared with a focus on the deferred rewards of protracted education for the middle classes. However, it also appears to be more complex, especially given the changes in patterns of transition and the choices available to young people compared with those presented to their parents. The children of parents who followed the traditional working-class route into unskilled work or craft apprenticeships may find today, in a very different economic and educational climate, that a full time college course may be a more useful option to them than it was to their parents. However, as described above, without the cultural and social capital or the aspiration to pursue education as a long term goal in its own right, it will cease to appear useful when a better route to a job appears. As Bates and Riseborough (1993) and Furlong and Cartmel (2006) argue, vocational choices are neither the pure result of free choice, nor the calculated outcomes of available economic

resources and opportunities. Young people are culturally prepared for work as part of adulthood, by their parents, teachers, peers and community. When choosing a route through education and into work they draw upon the full range of resources, including social capital such as personal contacts, networks and the social groupings of their friends and families, and cultural capital such as their attitude to and understanding of the educational process and employment markets. As well as enabling certain choices to be viable (for example, when Billy found a work placement through his cousin), social and cultural capital frames what the individual deems possible and probable.

Within the changing structural framework of opportunity and resources then, including the availability of preferred work and courses, the students in the study followed individualized paths through school, work and education, rather than the highly structured homogenous choices their parents might have followed. As well as having different resources to call upon, they demonstrated varying degrees of agency and control, different motivations and were influenced by a range of people, events and ideas.

College also remained a positive experience for many drop outs in that they felt they had gained something even without achieving the qualification they initially signed up for. New skills and experiences, ways of learning, friends and confidence were all mentioned as benefits from their time at college. This supports the theory that prolonged education can offer young people a means to support their general development and growth, and contribute to a more mature and efficient workforce (Bynner et al, 2002), even if the process is cut short and does not produce qualifications.

Drop out, then, cannot be seen simply as a 'failure' on the part of the student, or, of itself, as a risk. Neither is it necessarily a rejection of, or total disengagement from, education. It is most commonly a change of strategy, in response to a shift in young people's experiences, opportunities and goals. Given the changing and complex worlds in which young people live and develop, drop out could be seen as a flexible response to the shifting



landscape in which they find themselves, rather than a sign of failed transition.

### ***Drop out and Student Decision-Making***

The decision to drop out or persist is only very rarely a simple one. The majority of students regularly evaluate the pros and cons of their current situation, re-evaluating their options and aspirations as new experiences and circumstances are revealed to them. While there is often a critical moment when the decision is made, there is no reason to assume that this will coincide with action, although it could be a useful signal that additional advice and support for that young person might be welcome and particularly helpful. However, many students continue to be enrolled, and even come to college and some classes for a while after they have decided they will not complete their course. This might be because they are waiting for a better option to present itself, because they are reluctant to give up some aspects of college life, or because they are reluctant or do not know how or whether to have the necessary conversations with their tutors or complete paperwork. Again, this period could be a key opportunity to offer additional support and guidance.

In seeking guidance about their options at drop out, students are most likely to go to family, friends and teachers (past or present) for *advice*, while they seek *information* from professional advisers. Many students value the insight of those who know them well, and feel that professional advisers, while they may be experts on the options available, do not know them well enough to give advice. This fits with the experience of Connexions Personal Advisors, where the establishment of a relationship of trust was found to be vital, but hard to achieve with large case loads (Coles, Britton and Hicks, 2004). Dropping out can be a hard decision to make, and may well be one of the first major decisions a young person makes on their route to adult independence. As we have seen, it can also be a protracted one. This suggests that support, guidance and advice systems also need to be blended with young peoples' lives throughout their time at college, rather than only provided in response to crises or specific requests. This could be provided via a

mentorship and/or coaching model, especially given the impact of role models noted in the research. This could also help young people to gain social and/or cultural capital which could support their educational progress and widen their aspirations. Support for general confidence-building, not just in colleges but throughout the education process could help widen young peoples' perceptions of what is available to them, and of what they could be capable.

### ***Drop out and College Performance***

This research demonstrates that drop out is not a particularly suitable indicator of college performance. As a variable it is linked to a wide range of circumstances, meanings and motivations. Whilst there is a little evidence from a small minority of cases that drop out is a reaction to poor provision in terms of teaching, curriculum, support or facilities, for the vast majority of students in this study, their experience of Thornton College was a good one. Their reasons for leaving were far more complex, and more likely to be tied to their personal aspirations, opportunities and circumstances than the quality of provision. Even where education-related factors are involved, such as low confidence in learning ability, or having a learning difficulty or disability, the factor is likely to pre-date the individual's college experience. As seen in Brittney's case, for example, progression from school to a 'fresh start' at college can do much to improve such difficulties, especially when additional support is available. (Chapter 5) Even though it may not prove enough to overcome prior experiences, this is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of college provision.

The individualized nature of pathways to drop out also makes it very difficult indeed to predict. Even for the strongest predictors in the study, there were a sizeable number who did not drop out, despite their profile. This is not surprising, considering the variation of experiences, influences and perceptions observed through the qualitative strand of this research, but it has important implications for the use of retention as a performance indicator. As a statistic, it is unclear in the context of this research as to what retention



could reliably measure the performance of, especially as dropping out of college does not *in itself* appear to prevent future educational engagement, or to regrets on the part of the drop out.

These findings imply that it should be learner achievement, rather than retention, by which colleges are judged for quality. This may include achievement in the wider sense of helping young people to achieve their personal goals, rather than in the current, strict sense of gaining specific qualifications. The important role of colleges in building a young person's aspirations, cultural and social capital, and preparing them for a lifetime's learning as they and the economic landscape around them changes, is currently not indicated in performance measures. Colleges also have a potentially valuable role in developing the 'student identity' which could sustain individuals through difficulties and help them to return to learning when they need to. There is also a need for more flexible provision to allow for the fact that education fits within the context of young peoples' lives. This may not always follow the linear, age-driven model which colleges, guided by the demands of their funding bodies, currently cater to. There are also implications for other agencies, including private training providers and employers. It appears from the research that there is a demand for work-based training, including the old-style apprenticeships, which is currently either unmet or suffers from low status and/or poor promotion.

### ***Drop out and Lifelong Learning***

While it appears that drop out is not as much of a problem as has been assumed for students, the research suggests that 'dropping back in', or re-engaging with education can prove more difficult than anticipated and that this is rarely recognised by the individual at the point of drop out. Young people wishing to change to another course, perhaps reflecting a shift in vocational interest, can face a long wait for September to come around again. Those who wish to return later on are likely to face additional barriers, including the financial costs, family responsibilities and the youth-centric nature of most full-time FE courses. Information, advice and guidance can be

harder to come by, as most services are targeted at young people or the unemployed. Confidence issues can also be harder to overcome for mature students as they are likely to be more ingrained, at least with regard to education (Cullen, 1994; McGivney, 1996). It can be especially difficult for those who had a poor experience of education prior to dropping out.

The current emphasis on full-time further education for young people to the age of 19 bears the implication that full time education is *only* for young people. Courses are designed and often marketed with this in mind. Adults wishing to return to education typically access part-time courses, which often require work placements and come with a hefty fee for those who are not in receipt of benefits, or take full-time courses where they find them among classes of young students with very different educational styles and experiences.

These difficulties beg the question: by making drop out an obstacle and a symbol of failure, to be discouraged and avoided, are we really helping young people to make positive choices? Perhaps it is not the quality or style of provision which is failing young people, but the fact that there is an all too brief window of opportunity. There is a very short timescale within which young people have to choose their vocation if they are to be able to complete a full time course before they move into the world of adult education, which is far more limited in terms of curriculum and support, both financial and educational.

If we are serious about addressing the needs of individual learners, we must take account of their personal journeys, not just as learners but as workers, parents, children, friends and lovers. The findings of this research give some insights as to how learning fits into these lives, and show that the link is not continuous. Learning is most effective when happens at the right time for the learner: when motivation, opportunity and resources combine. It may, therefore, not be as effective to base policy on the supposition that this time will necessarily be at the age of 16-19, when young people are negotiating the vulnerable transitions to independence and adulthood in a



variety of different ways, and coming to know their adult selves (Coles, 1998).

I would suggest, therefore, that the current policy emphasis on semi-compulsory education for 16-19 year olds, and the direct funding link with retention, to be reconsidered in favour of drivers to ensure that a range of education and training opportunities are available throughout life, to better equip the population in their negotiation of our ever-changing world.

## **Future research**

This thesis raises many new questions about drop out and young people, as well as the wider context of learning, some due to the necessarily limited scope of the research, and others from the findings themselves.

Firstly, the current research could be usefully extended to consider the impact of drop out specifically on those who have not re-entered education, especially those with histories of long-term unemployment. This would usefully complement the sample of this study. The long term effects of drop out in general could also be more fully investigated, to test how the experiences of the small group of 'mature' drop outs in this study represent their cohort. It would also be interesting and useful to examine how experiences from those who dropped out twenty or thirty years ago compare with those from more recent cohorts, especially given the expected impact of economic and social changes described in this thesis.

Secondly, the processes of drop out identified in this thesis could be compared with other decision making processes, particularly the process of dropping back in to learning. If similar processes, including 'critical moments' could be described, it would provide useful clues to aid the targeting of advice and support for those wishing to learn new skills.

Thirdly, the findings from this study could be used as a starting point for a wider quantitative study. This broader work could include different geographical areas, colleges with varying socio-economic profiles and ethnic groupings. A larger sample would allow for robust, multivariate analysis which would help to properly test the descriptive outcomes presented in this thesis and include these new variables. Measures could also be developed to test variables established through the qualitative study such as confidence levels and the influence of role models.

Fourthly, there are two particular connections to drop out which appeared in the study which would benefit from further investigation: looked-after young people and those with dyslexia. The former group was very much under-represented in this study, but given the associations between this group and factors implicated in drop out such as social and cultural capital, self confidence and role models, it seems likely that there is much to be learned from studying the group in more depth. This is particularly important given the other educational challenges associated with looked-after young people (DfES 2006a). The link with dyslexia was unexpected, but occurred with remarkable regularity through the qualitative study as being associated with drop out, especially through low self-esteem in a learning environment.

Finally, it would be helpful to examine alternative measures through which college quality could be established.

For many students, drop out is a response to their changing ideas and identities as their experience grows and they encounter the wider range of opportunities and boundaries of the adult world. There is much still to be learned before we fully understand the processes involved, but it is hoped that this thesis has shown that dropping out does not necessarily mean failure for the individual or the institution. It is an indication of a change of mind and circumstance, and in a supportive environment it can be part of a constructive lifelong learning experience.



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# **Appendices**

**Appendix 1 - Questionnaire example**

**Appendix 2 - Interview schedule**

**Appendix 3 – Research Timetable**

**Appendix 4 – Data Tables**

**Appendix 1 - Questionnaire**



## **Appendix 2 - Interview Schedule**

The interview schedule varied from interview to interview, to include new lines of inquiry alongside emerging theory. This is the basic guide to which other elements were added.

All interviews began with a contributor-led discussion around the photographs they had taken.

## Interview Topic Guide

[Following discussion of photographs]

### Childhood

- family background
- school
- teachers
- friends
- schoolwork
- career interests

### Secondary school

- changes to family life
- school
- teachers
- friends
- schoolwork
- main hobbies/interests
- career interests
- advice and guidance for careers/post 16

### College

- changes to family life
- course choice
- induction and settling in
- friends
- course work
- tutors
- college support
- main hobbies/interests
- career interests

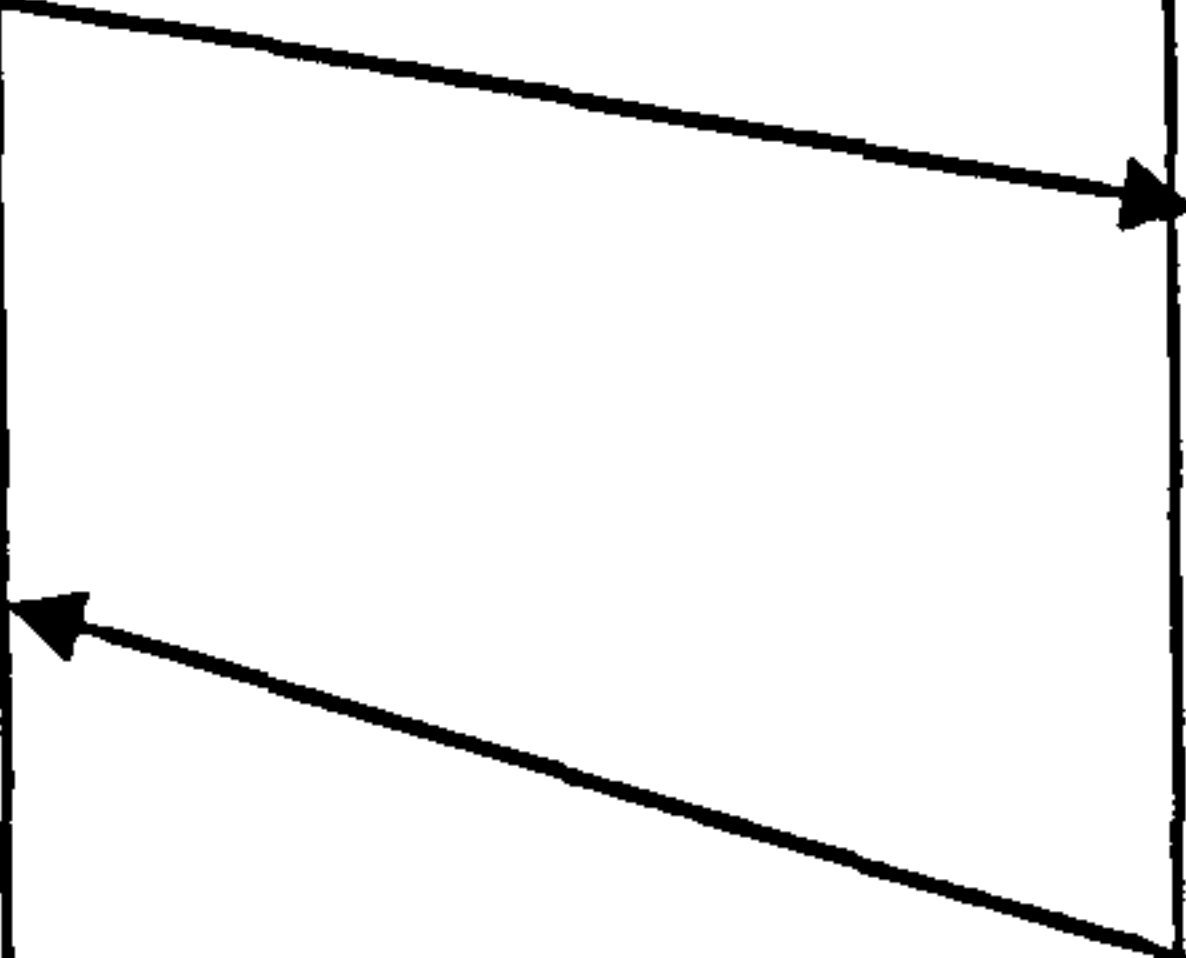
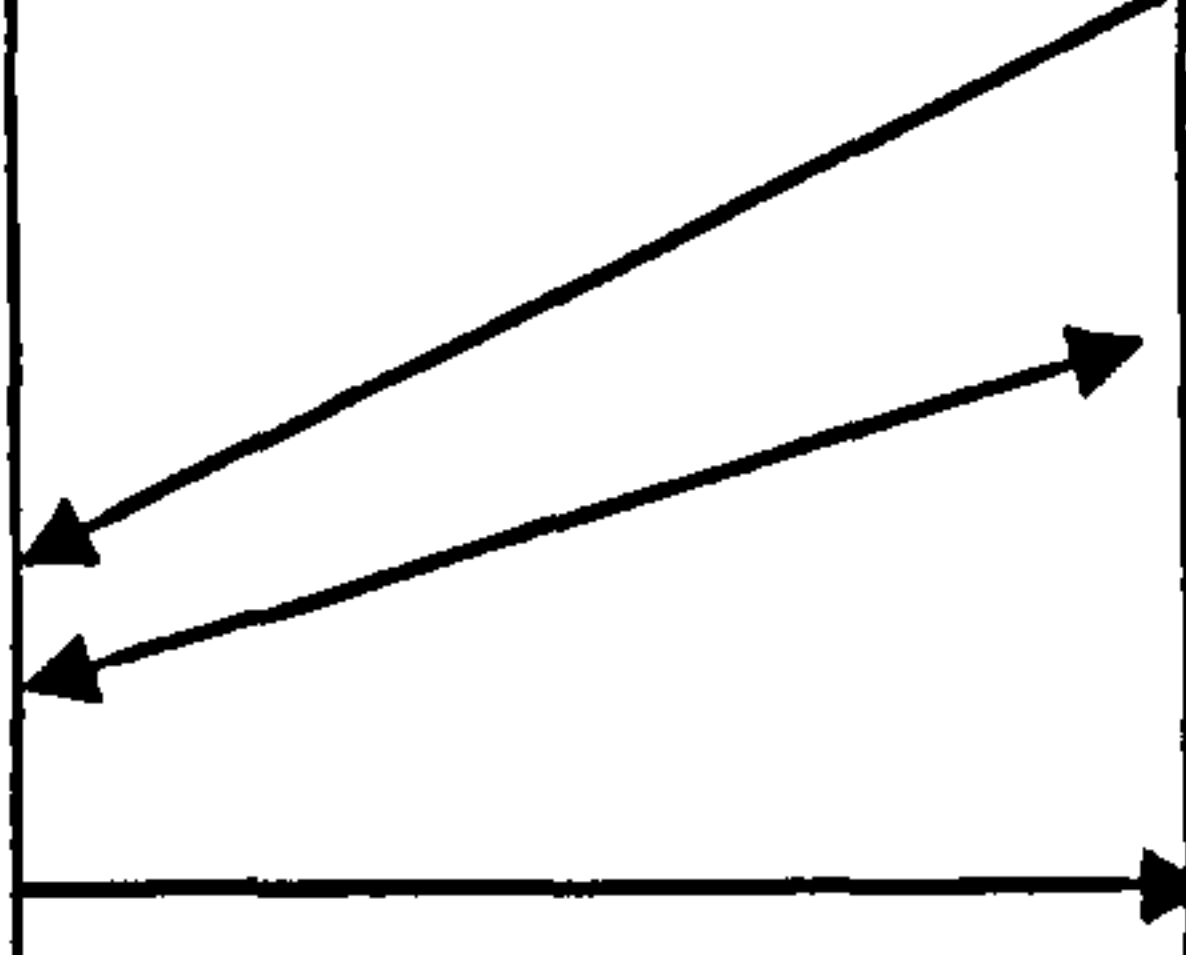
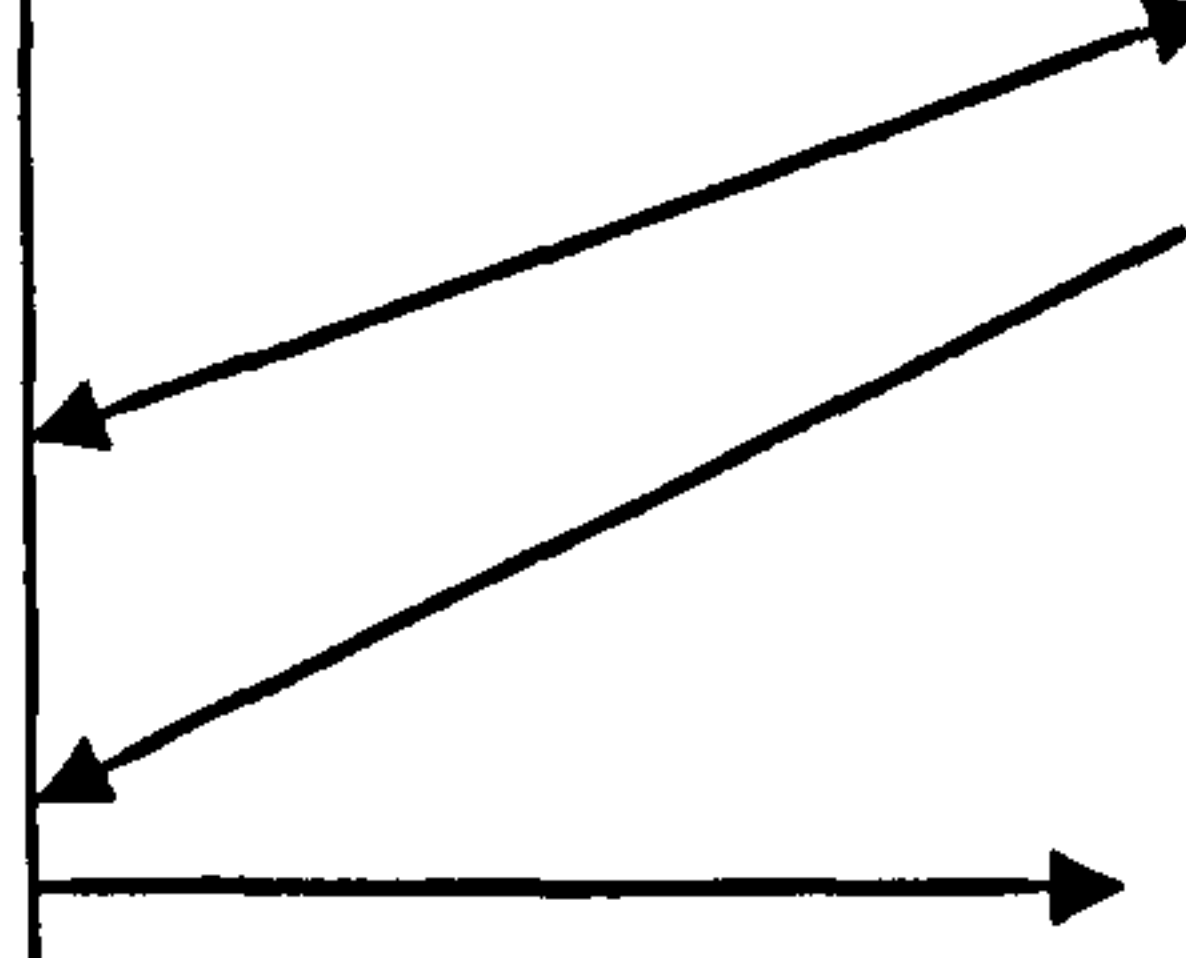
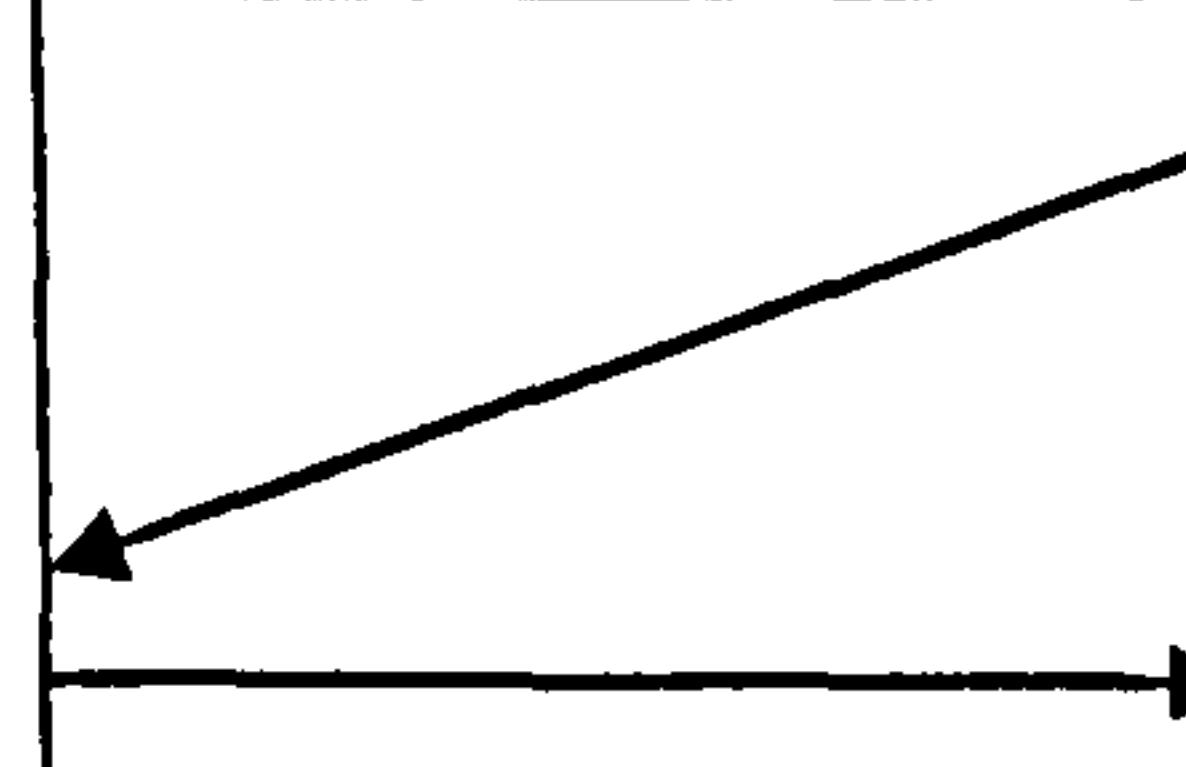


- advice and guidance
- family support for college
- considered dropping out?
- reasons for dropping out/considering
- influences on dropping out
- people discussed dropping out with
- experience of dropping out/considering
- consequences of dropping out/staying

#### Post drop-out (or completion) & future

- changes to family life
- occupation
- friends/social life
- main hobbies/interests
- career interests
- advice and guidance
- education

Appendix 3 – Research Timetable

Date: phase begins	Quantitative	Interaction between strands	Qualitative
Autumn 1998	• Literature review; research planning		
Autumn 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Survey sampling</li><li>• Initial questionnaire design</li><li>• Piloting</li><li>• Re-design</li><li>• Questionnaire 1 distributed</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Interview guide first draft</li><li>• Discussion groups focused on questionnaire themes</li><li>• Interviews: first sample.</li></ul>
Spring 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Database updated with college data</li><li>• Q2 design finalised</li><li>• Initial analysis Q1</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• First sample interview initial analysis</li><li>• Interview schedule revised</li></ul>
Autumn 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questionnaire 2 distributed</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Interviews: second sample</li></ul>
Spring 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Database updated with college data</li><li>• Q3 design finalised</li><li>• Initial analysis Q2</li><li>• </li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Additional analysis with second sample</li><li>• Interview schedule revised</li></ul>
Autumn 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questionnaire 3 distributed</li><li>• Interim analysis</li><li>• Database updated with college data</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Interim analysis</li><li>• Schedule revised, final sample selected</li></ul>
Spring 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final update of college data</li><li>• Data cleansing</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final interviews</li></ul>
2003 - 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final data analysis</li><li>• Data sets combined around common themes</li><li>• Key findings identified and mapped to data sources</li></ul>		
2006 – 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final writing up</li></ul>		



## Appendix 4 – Data Tables

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*Tables*

All data presented in the tables below is from the questionnaire survey.  $\chi^2$  used was Pearsons, all tables  $df = 1$  unless otherwise stated.

**Table A.1      Drop out and household living arrangements**

Living arrangements	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Has bedroom to self	22	85	124	93	146	91.8
Doesn't have bedroom to self	4	15	9	7	13	8.2
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 2.151$                        $p = 0.142$

**Table A.2      Drop out and availability of room to study in**

	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Has room to study in	16	64	112	88	128	83.7
Doesn't have room to study in	9	36	16	12	25	16.3
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 8.449$                        $p = 0.004$

**Table A.3      Drop out and computer use at home**

	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Has use of computer	18	69.2	107	80.5	128	78.6
Doesn't have use of computer	8	30.8	26	19.5	34	21.4
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 1.629$                        $p = 0.202$



**Table A.4      Drop out and views on education at start of course**

<b>A.4.1</b> <b>It's important to study and get good qualifications</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	25	96.2	133	99.3	158	98.8
Did not agree	1	3.8	1	0.7	20	1.2
Total	23	100	1334	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 1.695$        $p = 0.193$

<b>A.4.2</b> <b>Learning is only worthwhile if it leads to better job prospects</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	20	76.9	86	64.2	106	66.3
Did not agree	6	23.1	48	35.8	54	33.8
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 1.582$        $p = 0.209$

<b>A.4.3</b> <b>You need qualifications to get on in life</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	20	76.9	118	88.1	138	86.3
Did not agree	6	23.1	16	11.9	22	13.8
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 2.277$        $p = 0.131$

**Table A.5 Drop out and views on education at end of course**

<b>A.5.1</b> <b>It's important</b> <b>to study and get</b> <b>good</b> <b>qualifications</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	23	12.5	123	97.6	144	96
Did not agree	3	87.5	3	2.4	6	4
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 5.376$        $p = 0.020$

<b>A.5.2</b> <b>Learning is only</b> <b>worthwhile if it</b> <b>leads to better</b> <b>job prospects</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	19	79.2	77	61.1	96	64
Did not agree	5	20.8	49	38.9	54	36
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 2.853$        $p = 0.091$

<b>A.5.3</b> <b>You need</b> <b>qualifications to</b> <b>get on in life</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	15	62.5	103	81.7	118	78.7
Did not agree	9	37.5	23	18.3	35	21.3
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 4.450$        $p = 0.035$



**Table A.6      Drop out and Perceptions and concerns about income at start of survey**

<b>A.6.1 Housing</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	3	30	20	50	23	46
Did not expect income would cover	7	70	20	50	27	54
Total	10	100	40	100	50	100

$\chi^2 = 1.288$        $p = 0.256$

<b>A.6.2 Food</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	4	36.4	28	60.9	32	56
Did not expect income would cover	7	63.6	18	39.1	25	47
Total	11	100	46	100	57	100

$\chi^2 = 2.165$        $p = 0.141$

**Table A.**

<b>A.6.3 Bills</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	2	25	20	50	22	45.8
Did not expect income would cover	6	75	20	50	26	54.2
Total	8	100	40	100	48	100

$\chi^2 = 1.678$        $p = 0.195$

<b>A.6.4</b> <b>Course fees</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	3	60	14	46.7	17	48.6
Did not expect income would cover	2	40	16	53.3	18	51.4
Total	5	100	30	100	35	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.305 \qquad p = 0.581$$

<b>A.6.5</b> <b>Other living expenses</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	6	40	37	54.4	43	51.8
Did not expect income would cover	9	60	31	45.6	40	48.2
Total	15	100	68	100	83	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.022 \qquad p = 0.312$$

<b>A.6.6</b> <b>Course books/ equipment</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	7	38.9	67	72.8	74	67.3
Did not expect income would cover	11	61.1	25	27.2	36	32.7
Total	18	100	92	100	110	100

$$\chi^2 = 7.875 \qquad p = 0.005$$



<b>A.6.7 Transport</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	5	33.3	50	64.1	55	59.1
Did not expect income would cover	10	66.7	28	35.9	38	40.9
Total	15	100	78	100	93	100

$\chi^2 = 4.929$ 
 $p = 0.026$

<b>A.6.8 Entertainment</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	5	33.3	67	68.4	72	63.7
Did not expect income would cover	10	66.7	31	31.6	41	36.3
Total	15	100	98	100	113	100

$\chi^2 = 6.907$ 
 $p = .009$

**Table A.7      Drop out and Perceptions and concerns about income at end of survey**

<b>A.7.1 Housing</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	13	86.7	69	85.2	82	85.4
Did not expect income would cover	2	13.3	12	14.8	14	14.6
Total	15	100	81	100	96	100

$\chi^2 = 0.022$ 
 $p = 0.881$

<b>A.7.2 Food</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	14	82.4	77	86.5	91	85.8
Did not expect income would cover	3	17.6	12	13.5	15	14.2
Total	17	100	89	100	106	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.204 \qquad p = 0.652$$

<b>A.7.3 Bills</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	15	88.2	46	76.7	61	79.2
Did not expect income would cover	2	11.8	14	23.3	16	20.8
Total	17	100	60	100	77	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.077 \qquad p = 0.299$$

<b>A.7.4 Course Fees</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	2	100	45	84.9	47	85.5
Did not expect income would cover	0	0	8	15.1	8	14.5
Total	2	100	53	100	55	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.353 \qquad p = 0.552$$



<b>A.7.5 Other living expenses</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	14	73.7	86	78.2	100	77.5
Did not expect income would cover	5	26.3	24	21.8	29	22.5
Total	19	100	110	100	129	100

$\chi^2 = 0.188$ 
 $p = 0.665$

<b>A.7.6 Course books/ equipment</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	7	63.6	61	75.3	68	73.9
Did not expect income would cover	4	36.4	20	24.7	24	26.1
Total	11	100	81	100	92	100

$\chi^2 = 0.684$ 
 $p = 0.408$

<b>A.7.7 Transport</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	13	72.2	83	78.3	96	77.4
Did not expect income would cover	5	27.8	23	21.7	28	22.3
Total	18	100	106	100	124	100

$\chi^2 = 0.325$ 
 $p = 0.568$

<b>A.7.8 Entertainment</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Expected income would cover	17	73.9	83	66.9	100	68.0
Did not expect income would cover	6	26.1	41	33.1	47	32.0
Total	23	100	124	100	147	100

$\chi^2 = 0.434$ 
 $p = 0.510$

**Table A.8      Drop out and statements on aspects of course and college provision**

<b>A.8.1 Enjoyed most of course</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	19	79.2	117	92.9	136	90.7
Did not agree	5	20.8	9	7.1	14	9.3
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 4.465$ 
 $p = 0.050$

<b>A.8.2 Never had anyone to go to at college with problems</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	9	37.5	44	34.9	53	35.3
Did not agree	15	62.5	82	65.1	97	64.7
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 0.059$ 
 $p = 0.809$



A.8.3 Often bored in lessons at college	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	15	62.5	90	71.4	105	70
Did not agree	9	37.5	36	28.6	45	30
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 0.765$ 
 $p = 0.382$

A.8.4 Worried a lot about exams/ coursework	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	15	62.5	94	75.2	109	73.2
Did not agree	9	37.5	31	24.8	40	26.8
Total	24	100	125	100	149	100

$\chi^2 = 1.654$ 
 $p = 0.198$

A.8.5 Most tutors easy to talk to	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	18	75	104	82.5	122	81.3
Did not agree	6	25	22	17.5	28	18.7
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 0.755$ 
 $p = 0.385$

A.8.6 Fed up because treated like a child at college	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	10	41.7	39	31	49	32.7
Did not agree	14	58.3	87	69	101	67.3
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 1.052$ 
 $p = 0.305$

<b>A.8.7 Given too much homework</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	16	66.7	67	53.2	83	55.3
Did not agree	8	33.3	59	46.8	67	44.7
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 1.481$ 
 $p = 0.223$

<b>A.8.8 Prefer more structured programme</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agreed	15	62.5	103	82.4	118	79.2
Did not agree	9	37.5	22	17.6	31	20.8
Total	24	100	125	100	149	100

$\chi^2 = 4.839$ 
 $p = 0.028$

**Table A.9      Frequency of drop out by month**

	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Tot
<i>n</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>501</i>
%	8	26	9	8	12	6	7	2	2	2	11	7	100



**Table A.10 Reasons and importance of reasons given for dropping out or considering dropping out**

Reason	Given as a reason for leaving		Given as an important reason for leaving		Given as an important reason for thinking of leaving	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Changed aims	102	61	97	56	38	45
Financial problems	90	54	42	25	18	21
Offered a job	87	52	28	17	13	16
Wanted to look for job	94	56	72	43	29	34
Course too hard	70	52	20	12	27	32
Course too easy	55	33	37	22	3	4
Problems with tutors	53	32	30	18	24	29
Problems with other staff	38	23	30	18	8	10
Missed lessons	65	39	37	22	18	21
Family wanted it	0	0	0	0	8	9
Friends wanted it	22	13	22	13	0	0
Problems at home	45	27	30	18	16	19
Problems with illness	32	19	30	18	18	21
Transport problems	43	26	13	8	14	17
Bullied at college	7	4	7	4	1	1
Total	167	100	167	100	84	100

NB categories are not exclusive.

**Table A.10    Household composition by drop out**

<b>A.10.1</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>mother and</b> <b>father</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	12	46.2	97	72.9	109	68.6
Not living with	14	53.8	36	27.1	50	31.4
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 7.23$                        $p = 0.007$

<b>A.10.2</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>mother only</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	5	19.2	17	12.8	22	13.8
Not living with	21	80.8	116	87.2	137	86.2
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 0.759$                        $p = 0.384$

<b>A.10.3</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>father only</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	12	46.2	97	72.9	109	68.6
Not living with	14	53.8	36	27.1	50	31.4
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 7.236$                        $p = 0.007$

<b>A.10.4</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>parent &amp; step</b> <b>parent</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	3	11.5	12	9.0	15	9.4
Not living with	23	88.5	121	91.0	144	90.6
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 0.161$                        $p = 0.688$



<b>A.10.5</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>boy/ girlfriend</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	3	11.5	12	9.0	15	9.4
Not living with	23	88.5	121	91.0	144	90.6
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 0.161$ 
 $p = 0.688$

<b>A.10.6</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>foster parents</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	1	3.8	0	0	1	.06
Not living with	25	96.2	133	100	158	99.4
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 0.654$ 
 $p = 0.422$

2 cells count <5

<b>A.10.7</b> <b>Living in LEA</b> <b>care home</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living in	1	3.8	0	0	1	0.6
Not living in	25	96.2	133	100	158	99.4
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 5.148$ 
 $p = 0.023$

2 cells count <5

<b>A.10.8</b> <b>Living with</b> <b>each parent</b> <b>part time</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Living with	1	3.8	2	1.5	3	1.9
Not living with	25	96.2	131	98.5	156	98.1
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$\chi^2 = 0.654$ 
 $p = 0.422$

**Table A.11    Drop out and mother’s occupation (of mothers who are working)**

<b>A.11.1 Mother employment status</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Working	16	66.7	112	86.2	128	83.1
Not working	8	33.3	18	13.8	26	16.9
Total	24	100	130	100	154	100

$\chi^2 = 5.483$                        $p = 0.019$

<b>A.11.2 Professional</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	5	33.3	43	42.2	49	41.2
No	10	66.7	59	57.8	68	59.0
Total	15	100	104	100	117	100

$\chi^2 = 0.421$                        $p = 0.517$

<b>A.11.3 Managerial</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	20	9	8.8	12	10.3
No	12	80	93	91.2	105	89.7
Total	15	100	102	100	117	100

$\chi^2 = 1.775$                        $p = 0.183$

<b>A.11.4 Semi-skilled</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	6	40	49	48	55	47
No	9	60	53	52	62	53
Total	15	100	102	100	117	100

$\chi^2 = 0.339$                        $p = 0.500$



A.11.5 Unskilled	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	6.7	1	1	2	1.7
No	14	93.3	100	99	115	89.3
Total	15	100	102	100	117	100

$\chi^2 = 2.517$ 
 $p = 0.113$

**Table A.12    Drop out and father’s occupation (of fathers who are working)**

A.12.1 Father employment status	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Working	20	87	116	94.3	136	93.2
Not working	3	13	7	5.7	10	6.8
Total	23	100	123	100	146	100

$\chi^2 = 1.642$ 
 $p = 0.200$

A.12.2 Professional	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	5	25	30	29.1	35	28.5
No	15	75	73	70.9	88	71.5
Total	20	100	103	100	123	100

$\chi^2 = 0.140$ 
 $p = 0.708$

A.12.3 Managerial	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	15	29	28.2	32	26
No	17	85	74	71.8	123	74
Total	20	100	103	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 1.506$ 
 $p = 0.220$

<b>A.12.3 Semi-skilled</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	9	45	34	33	43	35
No	11	55	69	67	80	65
Total	20	100	103	100	123	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.059 \qquad p = 0.303$$

<b>A.12.4 Unskilled</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	15	10	9.7	13	10.6
No	17	85	93	90.3	110	89.4
Total	20	100	103	100	123	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.496 \qquad p = 0.481$$

**Table A.13    Mother’s area of occupation and drop out**

<b>A.13.1 Hotels/catering</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	12.5	2	2	4	3.4
No	14	87.5	99	98	113	96.6
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 4.629 \qquad p = 0.031$$

2 cells < 5

<b>A.13.2 Transportation</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	1	1	1	0.9
No	16	100	100	99	116	99.1
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = .0160 \qquad p = 0.689$$



<b>A.13.3 Banking/finance</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	12	11.9	12	10.3
No	16	100	89	88.1	105	89.7
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.118 \qquad p = 0.146$$

<b>A.13.4 Social services</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	7	43.8	25	24.8	32	27.4
No	9	56.3	76	75.2	85	72.6
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.509 \qquad p = 0.113$$

<b>A.13.5 Engineering/ construction</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	6.3	3	3	4	3.4
No	15	93.8	98	97	113	96.6
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.450 \qquad p = 0.502$$

<b>A.13.6 Retail/ leisure</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	18.8	26	25.7	29	24.8
No	13	81.3	75	74.3	88	75.2
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.362 \qquad p = 0.547$$

<b>A.13.7 Education</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	12.5	24	23.8	26	22.2
No	14	87.5	77	76.2	91	77.8
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.01 \qquad p = 0.314$$

<b>A.13.8 Other</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	6.3	7	6.9	8	6.8
No	15	93.8	94	93.1	109	93.2
Total	16	100	101	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.010 \qquad p = 0.920$$

**Table A.14 Father’s area of occupation and drop out**

<b>A.14.1 Hotel/ catering</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	2	1.9	2	1.6
No	20	100	104	98.1	124	98.4
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.383 \qquad p = 0.536$$

<b>A.14.2 Transportation</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	10	9	8.5	11	8.7
No	18	90	97	91.5	115	91.3
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.048 \qquad p = 0.826$$

<b>A.14.3 Banking/ finance</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	10	12	11.3	14	11.1
No	18	90	94	88.7	112	88.9
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.030 \qquad p = 0.863$$



<b>A.14.4 Social services</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	10	8	7.5	10	7.9
No	18	90	98	92.5	116	92.1
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.139 \quad p = 0.710$$

<b>A.14.5 Engineering/ construction</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	8	40	35	33	43	34.1
No	12	60	71	67	83	65.9
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.365 \quad p = 0.546$$

<b>A.14.6 Retail/ leisure</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	5	13	12.3	14	11.1
No	19	95	93	87.7	112	89.9
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.899 \quad p = 0.343$$

<b>A.14.7 Education</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	10	8	7.5	10	7.9
No	18	90	98	92.5	116	92.1
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.139 \quad p = 0.710$$

<b>A.14.8 Other</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	15	12	11.3	15	11.9
No	17	85	94	88.7	111	88.1
Total	20	100	106	100	126	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.217 \quad p = 0.641$$

**Table A.15    Drop out and sources of income at start of survey**

<b>A.15.1 Parents</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	17	68	101	76.5	118	75.2
No	8	32	31	23.5	39	24.8
Total	25	100	132	100	157	100

$\chi^2 = 0.816$                        $p = 0.366$

<b>A.15.2 Other family member</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	10	7.6	10	6.4
No	25	100	121	92.4	146	93.6
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$\chi^2 = 2.039$                        $p = 0.153$

<b>A.15.3 LEA grant</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	4	16	5	3.8	9	5.8
No	21	84	126	96.2	147	94.2
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$\chi^2 = 5.732$                        $p = 0.017$

<b>A.15.4 Grant from charity</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	2	1.5	2.	1.3
No	25	100	129	98.5	154	98.7
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$\chi^2 = 0.387$                        $p = 0.534$



<b>A.15.5 Loan from family/friends</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4	3	23	4	2.6
No	24	96	128	97.7	152	97.4
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.246 \qquad p = 0.620$$

<b>A.15.6 Partner</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	2	1.5	2	1.3
No	25	100	129	98.5	154	98.7
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.387 \qquad p = 0.534$$

2 cells < 5

<b>A.15.7 College bursary</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	4	16	5	3.8	9	5.8
No	21	84	126	96.2	147	94.2
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 5.732 \qquad p = 0.017$$

<b>A.15.8 Savings</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	5	20	27	20.6	32	20.5
No	20	80	104	79.4	124	79.5
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.005 \qquad p = 0.945$$

<b>A.15.9 Benefits</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4	1	0.8	2	1.3
No	24	96	130	99.2	154	98.7
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.738 \qquad p = 0.187$$

<b>A.15.10 Wages from job(s)</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	12	48.0	96	73.3	108	69.2
No	13	52	35	26.7	48	30.8
Total	25	100	131	100	156	100

$$\chi^2 = 6.300 \qquad p = 0.012$$

**Table A.16    Drop out and sources of income at end of study**

<b>A.16.1 Parents</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	4	16.7	68	53.5	72	47.7
No	20	83.3	59	46.5	79	52.3
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 11.004 \qquad p = 0.001$$

<b>A.16.2 Other family members</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4.2	6	4.7	7	4.6
No	23	95.8	121	95.3	144	95.4
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.014 \qquad p = 0.905$$



<b>A.16.3</b> <b>Wages from job</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	3	2.4	3	2
No	24	100	124	97.6	148	98
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.578 \quad p = 0.447$$

<b>A.16.4</b> <b>Grant from LEA</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4.2	21	16.5	22	14.6
No	23	95.8	106	83.5	129	85.4
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.481 \quad p = 0.115$$

<b>A.16.5</b> <b>College bursary</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	3	2.4	3	2
No	24	100	124	97.6	148	98
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.578 \quad p = 0.447$$

<b>A.16.6</b> <b>Loan from family/friends</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	8.3	3	2.4	5	3.3
No	22	91.7	123	97.6	145	96.7
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.481 \quad p = 0.447$$

<b>A.16.7 Bank loan</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4.2	18	14.2	19	12.6
No	23	95.8	109	85.8	132	87.4
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$\chi^2 = 1.838$ 
 $p = 0.175$

<b>A.16.8 Savings</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	7	29.2	25	19.8	32	21.3
No	17	70.8	101	80.2	118	78.7
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$\chi^2 = 1.045$ 
 $p = 0.307$

<b>A.16.9 Partner</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	7	5.5	7	4.6
No	24	100	120	94.5	144	95.4
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$\chi^2 = 1.387$ 
 $p = 0.239$

<b>A.16.10 Benefits</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	8.3	0	0	2	1.3
No	22	19.7	126	100	148	98.7
Total	24	100	127	100	151	100

$\chi^2 = 10.642$ 
 $p = 0.001$



**Table A.17 Drop out and educational views of friends**

<b>A.17.1 Friends considered dropping out</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	21	95.5	104	83.9	125	85.6
No	1	4.5	20	16.1	21	14.4
Total	22	100	124	100	146	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.036 \quad p = 0.154$$

<b>A.17.2 Friends were important source of advice</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	14	73.7	62	62.0	76	63.9
No	5	26.3	38	38	43	36.1
Total	19	100	100	110	119	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.945 \quad p = 0.331$$

<b>A.17.3 Friends didn't think school was important</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	23	88.5	78	58.6	101	63.5
No	3	11.5	55	14.4	58	36.5
Total	26	100	133	100	159	100

$$\chi^2 = 8.343 \quad p = 0.004$$

**Table A.18 Drop out and experiences at school**

<b>A.18.1 Too much homework</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	20	76.9	90	67.2	110	68.8
Disagree	6	23.1	44	32.8	50	31.3
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.965 \quad p = 0.326$$

<b>A.18.2 Fed up – because was treated as child</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	20	83.3	88	70.4	108	72.5
Disagree	4	16.7	37	29.6	41	27.5
Total	24	100	125	100	149	100

$\chi^2 = 1.389$ 
 $p = 0.194$

<b>A.18.3 Teachers easy to talk to</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	15	57.7	98	73.1	113	70.6
Disagree	11	42.3	36	26.9	47	29.4
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 2.503$ 
 $p = 0.114$

<b>A.18.4 Worried about exams/ coursework</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	20	76.9	104	77.6	124	77.5
Disagree	6	23.1	30	22.4	36	22.5
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 0.006$ 
 $p = 0.939$

<b>A.18.5 Often bored in lessons</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	25	96.2	105	78.4	130	81.3
Disagree	1	3.8	29	21.6	30	18.8
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$\chi^2 = 4.526$ 
 $p = 0.033$



<b>A.18.6</b> <b>No-one to go to with problems</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	14	53.8	42	31.8	56	34.4
Disagree	12	46.2	90	68.2	102	64.6
Total	26	100	132	100	158	100

$$\chi^2 = 4.606 \qquad p = 0.032$$

<b>A.18.7</b> <b>Preferred groupwork to working alone</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	23	88.5	105	78.4	128	80
Disagree	3	11.5	29	21.6	32	20
Total	26	100	134	100	160	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.389 \qquad p = 0.239$$

<b>A.18.8</b> <b>Would have preferred to leave school earlier</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	11	44	46	34.3	57	35.8
Disagree	14	56	88	65.7	102	64.2
Total	25	100	134	100	159	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.857 \qquad p = 0.355$$

<b>A.18.9</b> <b>Enjoyed most subjects</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	18	72	104	78.2	122	77.2
Disagree	7	28	29	21.8	36	22.8
Total	25	100	133	100	158	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.459 \qquad p = 0.498$$

**Table A. 19    Drop Out and Educational Goals**

<b>A.19.1 Hopes to continue learning in future</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	17	72.9	110	90.2	127	87.6
Disagree	6	26.1	12	9.8	18	12.4
Total	23	100	122	100	145	100

$\chi^2 = 4.700$                        $p = 0.030$

<b>A.19.2 Learning only worthwhile if leads to better job prospects</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	19	79.2	77	61.1	96	64
Disagree	5	20.8	49	38.9	54	36
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 2.853$                        $p = 0.091$

<b>A.19.3 Important to study and get good qualifications</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agree	21	87.5	123	97.6	144	96.0
Disagree	3	12.5	3	2.4	6	4.0
Total	24	100	126	100	150	100

$\chi^2 = 5.376$                        $p = 0.020$



**Table A.20    Persistors reasons for considering leaving (frequencies)**

Reason	Was a reason		Was an important reason		Total respondents to question
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Changed aims	49	61.2	36	45	80
Financial problems	31	38.7	17	13.6	80
Had been offered job	21	26.2	13	16.25	81
Course too hard	53	68.8	25	31.2	77
Course too easy	15	18.75	3	3.8	76
Had problems with tutor	38	48.1	23	29.1	79
Had problems with other staff	19	24.1	8	10.1	79
Missed some lessons and worried about returning	30	37.0	17	21.1	81
Family wanted it	7	8.7	2	2.5	80
Friends wanted it	4	4.9	0	0	81
Problems with illness	25	30.5	17	20.7	82
Transport problems	26	32.1	14	17.3	81
Being bullied at college	4	5.1	1	1.3	79

*NB categories not exclusive*

**Table A.21    Drop out and impact of difficulties and life events experienced (among those who experienced them)**

A.21.1 Own ill-health	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	6	100	17	85	23	88.5
Didn't have impact	0	0	3	15	3	11.5
Total	6	100	20	100	26	100

$\chi^2 = 1.017$                        $p = 0.313$

<b>A.21.2 Illness in family</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	3	50	17	19.4	20	83.3
Didn't have impact	3	50	1	5.6	4	16.7
Total	6	100	18	100	24	100

$\chi^2 = 6.100$ 
 $p = 0.011$

*2 cells < 5*

<b>A.21.3 Bereavement</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	0	0	4	20	4	15.4
Didn't have impact	6	100	16	80	22	84.6
Total	6	100	20	100	16	100

$\chi^2 = 1.418$ 
 $p = 0.234$

*2 cells<5*

<b>A.21.4 Parents remarried</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	0	0	1	50	1	25
Didn't have impact	2	100	1	50	3	75
Total	2	100	2	100	4	100

$\chi^2 = 1.333$ 
 $p = 0.248$

*4 cells < 5*

<b>A.21.5 Parents split up</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	0	0	3	75	3	60
Didn't have impact	1	100	1	25	2	40
Total	1	100	4	100	5	100

$\chi^2 = 1.875$ 
 $p = 0.171$

*4 cells < 5*



<b>A.21.6 Ended serious relationship</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	10	90.9	23	82.1	33	84.6
Didn't have impact	1	9.1	5	17.9	6	15.4
Total	11	100	28	100	39	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.466 \quad p = 0.495$$

<b>A.21.7 Began serious relationship</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	6	66.7	39	67.2	45	67.2
Didn't have impact	3	33.3	19	32.8	22	32.8
Total	9	100	58	100	67	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.001 \quad p = 0.973$$

<b>A.21.8 Became homeless</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	1	100	1	50	2	66.7
Didn't have impact	1	100	1	50	1	33.3
Total	1	100	2	100	3	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.750 \quad p = 0.386$$

<b>A.21.9 Moved away from family</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	4	100	3	60	7	77.8
Didn't have impact	0	0	2	40	2	22.2
Total	4	100	5	100	9	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.057 \quad p = 0.151$$

A.21.10 Moved home with family	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Had impact	0	0	6	66.7	6	60
Didn't have impact	1	100	3	33.3	4	40
Total	1	100	9	100	10	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.667 \qquad p = 0.197$$

3 cells < 5

**Table A.22    Drop out and destinations at end of survey**

A.22.1 Full time HE course	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4.0	50	39.1	51	33.3
No	24	96.0	78	60.9	102	66.7
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 11.571 \qquad p = 0.001$$

A.22.2 Full time FE course	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	4	16.0	22	17.2	26	17.0
No	21	84.0	106	82.8	127	83.0
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.021 \qquad p = 0.885$$

A.22.3 Part time FE course	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	12.0	6	4.7	9	5.9
No	22	88.0	122	95.3	144	94.1
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 2.020 \qquad p = 0.155$$



<b>A.22.4 Part time HE course</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	1	0.8	1	0.7
No	25	100	127	99.2	152	99.3
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.197 \quad p = 0.657$$

<b>A.22.5 Unemployed</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	1	0.8	1	0.7
No	25	100	127	99.2	152	99.3
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.197 \quad p = 0.657$$

<b>A.22.6 Self employed</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	8.0	0	0	2	1.3
No	23	92.0	128	100	151	98.7
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 10.376 \quad p = 0.001$$

<b>A.22.7 Full time work with trainng</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	9	36	17	13.3	26	17
No	16	64.0	111	86.7	127	83.0
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 7.653 \quad p = 0.006$$

<b>A.22.8</b> <b>Full time work</b> <b>without training</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	12.0	23	18.0	26	17.0
No	22	88.0	105	82.0	127	83.0
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 0.528$ 
 $p = 0.467$

<b>A.22.9</b> <b>Part time work</b> <b>with training</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	0	0	11	8.6	11	7.2
No	25	100	117	91.4	142	92.8
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 2.315$ 
 $p = 0.128$

<b>A.22.10</b> <b>Part time work</b> <b>without training</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	6	24	10	7.8	16	10.5
No	19	76.0	118	92.2	137	89.5
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 5.853$ 
 $p = 0.016$

<b>A.22.11</b> <b>Caring for</b> <b>children</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	2	8.0	0	0	2	1.3
No	23	92.0	128	100	151	98.7
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$\chi^2 = 10.379$ 
 $p = 0.001$

Table A.



<b>A.22.12</b> <b>Voluntary work</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	25	100	125	97.7	150	98.0
No	0	0	3	2.3	3	2.0
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.598 \quad p = 0.439$$

<b>A.22.13</b> <b>Gap year</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	1	4.0	15	11.7	16	10.5
No	24	96.0	113	88.3	137	89.5
Total	25	100	128	100	153	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.331 \quad p = 0.249$$

**Table A. 23 Drop out and hopes for the next five years**

<b>A.23.1</b> <b>Continue same job</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	11	57.9	34	48.6	45	50.6
No	8	42.1	36	51.4	44	49.4
Total	19	100	70	100	89	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.520 \quad p = 0.471$$

<b>A.23.2</b> <b>Gain promotion in same company</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	15	88.2	28	43.1	43	52.4
No	2	11.8	37	56.9	39	47.6
Total	17	100	65	100	82	100

$$\chi^2 = 11.018 \quad p = 0.001$$

A.23.3 Find a different job	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	3	21.4	16	20.8	19	20.9
No	11	78.6	61	79.2	72	79.1
Total	14	100	77	100	91	100

$\chi^2 = 0.003$ 
 $p = 0.956$

A.23.4 Training through work	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	10	62.5	47	64.4	57	64
No	6	37.5	26	35.6	32	36
Total	16	100	73	100	89	100

$\chi^2 = 0.020$ 
 $p = 0.887$

A.23.5 Course at college	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	13	68.4	32	48.5	45	52.9
No	6	31.6	34	51.5	40	47.1
Total	19	100	66	100	85	100

$\chi^2 = 2.354$ 
 $p = 0.125$

A.23.6 University (first degree)	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	9	45.0	91	82.0	100	76.3
No	11	55.0	20	18.00	31	23.7
Total	20	100	111	100	131	100

$\chi^2 = 12.830$ 
 $p = 0.001$



<b>A.23.7 University (postgraduate)</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	6	35.3	54	63.5	60	58.8
No	11	64.7	31	36.5	42	41.2
Total	17	100	85	100	102	100

$$\chi^2 = 4.663 \quad p = 0.031$$

<b>A.23.8 Running own business</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	11	57.9	41	47.7	52	49.5
No	8	43.1	45	52.3	53	50.5
Total	19	100	86	100	105	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.650 \quad p = 0.420$$

<b>A.23.9 Start family</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	12	66.7	51	51.5	63	53.8
No	6	33.3	48	48.5	54	46.2
Total	18	100	99	100	117	100

$$\chi^2 = 1.407 \quad p = 0.236$$

<b>A.23.10 Voluntary Work</b>	<b>Drop outs</b>		<b>Persistors</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	5	29.4	36	36.7	41	35.7
No	12	70.6	62	63.3	74	64.3
Total	17	100	98	100	115	100

$$\chi^2 = 0.339 \quad p = 0.561$$

A.23.11 Travel Abroad	Drop outs		Persistors		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	18	58.7	101	87.8	119	87.5
No	3	14.3	14	12.2	17	12.5
Total	21	100	115	100	136	100

$\chi^2 = 0.072$ 
 $p = 0.788$