

**GRADUATE REALISM - IS THERE A PROBLEM?**

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores how realistic students soon to enter graduate-level jobs are about employment, and, if not, whether this constitutes a problem. After discussing these issues in the context of the research literature, it approaches this through three investigative techniques - questionnaire, interview and documentary analysis.

Questionnaires designed to elicit the opinions of three recipient groups were sent out, one to graduates having recently entered their first posts, one to graduate recruiters, and one to careers advisers in higher education institutions. The data from these were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with graduates in post, and a detailed examination of graduate recruitment prospectuses.

Most graduate respondents in the questionnaire and interview groups considered their expectations wholly or partly borne out, though employers, and careers advisers in particular, expressed reservations about graduates' realism. However, there was close agreement among the three groups as to how students in general could become more realistic. The graduates were alone in their good opinion of their self-assessment skills. Work experience appeared often to negatively influence realism, especially when unrelated to the job or occupation aspired to. Recruitment literature expressed powerful images, but frequently was less strong on hard information, notably relating to job content. Careers Advisory Services were generally perceived to contribute to student realism, but appeared handicapped by limited resources. It was felt by all groups that academic staff's contribution was modest, and could be much increased.

While each of three theories advanced early in the thesis remains plausible by the end as a possible explanation of unrealism, the one retaining most credibility (in the light of the evidence) suggests that there is an influential discrepancy between the kinds or degrees of awareness which higher education promotes, and what needs to be known to make informed decisions about employment and to avoid being surprised by work.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### INTRODUCTION

In one recent year, over 160,000 home students graduated from British Higher Education institutions, about 60 per cent entering permanent full-time employment in the same year (EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT GROUP, 1994). Its magnitude alone makes graduate employment a phenomenon worth investigating, yet some important facets of it have prompted little scholarship. One of those neglected has been the realism of students soon to graduate concerning the world of work they are about to enter.

Economic factors constitute one prompt to such an investigation. Large sums are invested in Higher Education (HE) to produce graduates who will enter and in time contribute to the nation's economy. It seems desirable that this resource be used to best effect, and that a concerted effort by HE institutions, graduate recruiters and graduates themselves is perhaps the most promising means to this. Personal factors are important, too. Self-development and self-fulfilment are potential sources of happiness for the individual, best not extinguished with the conclusion of full-time education. However, continued fulfilment of this kind is usually at least partly dependent on knowledge of which occupational opportunities exist, and sound judgement of how suited the individual is to them. Any lack of realism among graduating students would seem to place both economic and personal outcomes at risk.

However, partly because the British HE system respects the notion of a general education, and partly because many of those passing through it seem content to enter careers at best tenuously related to their academic histories, institutions may not sufficiently promote career awareness among students (RABAN, 1981). Structuring careers education within HE has been perceived as problematic (WATTS, 1977), and, until the fairly recently-introduced Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) programme, most efforts in this direction have been left to Careers Advisory Services in HE institutions, whose success has often been prejudiced by lack of resources. Moreover, despite the prioritisation of career goals usually having a strong influence on academic motivation and classroom performance (FREDRICKSON, 1984), the dependence of employment prospects on academic achievement prompts many students to postpone not only job-hunting, but career decisions themselves, until after final exams. Choice has become perceived as less important than eligibility, and the urging of CASWELL (1983) that students tackle career investigations as assiduously as academic work has, like the lament of DELATTRE (1983) that not two students in a hundred understand what a career is, passed largely unheeded.

On the strength of this and similar evidence, it seems that there is at least a prima facie case that students are less realistic about employment than they might be, and that it is worth attempting to raise their awareness. However, any steps in this direction must be based on a proper investigation of the phenomenon of realism, such as this study will hopefully achieve. Two major questions must therefore be posed as a preliminary to formulating methodology or collecting data. These are:

- 1) Is there thought to be an incongruence between graduates' expectations of employment (or what graduating students perceive to be the realities of employment) and the actual nature of it?
- 2) If so, does this lack of perception, misperception or realism amount to a problem for students on the verge of work and graduates just entered it, or for the recruiters and careers advisers with whom they have dealings at this significant time?

These are the essential research questions on which the study is founded. They will not be answered by a survey of research literature or consultation with representative spokespeople. These exercises will, however, underpin the legitimacy of the questions and help to indicate what other subordinate questions might be asked in order to best answer them.



## DEFINING KEY TERMS

The significance of the above objectives does not eliminate certain difficulties in identifying and examining the issues they give rise to. Not least of these is obtaining a clear understanding of the terms which will be used time and again in the investigation, and it seems fitting at this point to attempt to define these.

A major one is 'expectations'. JOHNSON (1995) uses the term 'preference' to define the degree of attraction towards or perceived personal compatibility with an occupation, and 'expectation' to describe the perceived likelihood of entering an occupation. However, this is not the way 'expectations' will be understood in this study. Instead, it seems more appropriate to define these as: what students believe will be true of their first full-time graduate appointment in terms of the work environment, the nature of the job, their responses to both, and the effect of employment on their lives in general. Expectations will be regarded as no less significant for being unfounded than when the reverse. However, the study must try to deal mainly with such expectations as can be both detected and in some way gauged, if not measured. Interestingly, the literature which liberally employs the term 'expectations' appears nowhere to make an earnest evaluation of it. One of the study's incidental gains will hopefully be to show what it is for someone to have meaningful expectations with regard to employment.

'Employment' is another important term, to be distinguished from 'work', which may be defined as the constituent activities and responsibilities of a job. Employment includes these, but also embraces other features of, and experiences within, the workplace. These may include the physical environment, social aspects, career structure and opportunity, status and

remuneration. Because these factors surely figure in individuals' anticipations of employment, it seems appropriate to work within the broader boundaries defined by the term.

To 'employ' seems to mean 'to contract the services of'. Because many graduates are recruited to do jobs of which they have no prior experience, it is their potential rather than their capacity which is, at least initially, employed. This in turn implies an obligation on the part of the recruiter to nurture and develop this potential. In recruiting a graduate, the employer undertakes to fulfil a duty towards him/her.

'Graduate' will, for the purposes of this study, be taken to mean someone who has successfully completed a first degree course at a British HE institution. It will have a more limited meaning still for the data collection part of the investigation, where it will refer to those fulfilling the above conditions and having entered or being about to enter their first full-time graduate-level job while still under the age of twenty-five. These parameters are set with the intention to exclude from the investigation graduates usually considered atypical, data from and about whom might infect the study to no good effect. However, where material drawn from such fringe groups can usefully inform the investigation, it will be so used.

It is recruiters of graduates (i.e. organisations which endeavour to fill posts for which eligibility is restricted to graduates) rather than merely employers of graduates (i.e. those whose appointment of them is not dependent on their graduate status), who will play a significant role in this investigation. Implicit in this distinction is the assumption that graduate recruiters will deploy their appointees in ways commensurate with their educational attainments and the image of employment conveyed via the



organisations' advertising strategies and selection policies and procedures.

Perhaps the most important term to clarify is 'realism'. Realism may be acquired through various processes of learning, both formal and informal. Since an academic study cannot hope to embrace all those likely to arise, the thesis will focus on those formal processes and experiences which are detectable and observable by the participants. Realism implies a reality, but to see reality as a fixed backdrop is misleading. Part of the difficulty is that reality changes during the time between its vicarious assessment and personal experience of it. Secondly, in anticipation reality is general and objective, in experience, particular and subjective. We may therefore debate the existence of objective reality, whereas realism is a state of mind, which, for the purposes of this study, will be regarded as recognisable by certain agreed actions or forms of behaviour. The difficulty of defining 'reality' should not discourage attempts to pin down the less elusive 'realism', which for the purposes of this study, may be defined as: the nature of expectation derivable from the appropriate observation of or engagement in activities which convey, by their nature or intent, the essence of employment of a particular kind or kinds, and the successful translation of that process into an awareness of the suitability or unsuitability of that employment by and for the individual concerned.

This section has attempted to clarify the definition of terms which will occur frequently in the text, and understanding of which is essential to an appreciation of the nature and objectives of the study. Having done this, it is appropriate now to look at graduate employment in the context of national policy. This is justified, since a great deal of money is spent running HE, and in paying the grants which enable many students to study full-time who otherwise could not, and because graduates represent much of the talent through which the nation's endeavours (in all sorts of fields) progress.

## POLICY CONTEXT

Debate has raged fierce and long over the perceived *raison d'être* of HE. Writers such as WARNOCK (1988) and SARGENT AND PFLEEGER (1990) think its role should be free of economic and functional justifications. SMITH *et al.* (1989) acknowledge this, but believe that students (and those concerned for their future) see gaining a job and embarking on a career as important results of the process. BECK (1974), sees this as part of a basic problem of contemporary education, which he describes as the confusion of process with substance, institutional treatments coming too often to stand for fundamental human goals. Despite this caution, most recent opinion reflects a view of HE as having national objectives:

... the intrinsic interdependence of all studies and perspectives now makes Higher Education as much a state enterprise as a personal exploration.

(BOYD and KING, 1975, p.442)

The graduate labour force represents a huge investment in human capital and a major proportion of the economy's highly qualified manpower ...

(BEE and DOLTON, 1990, p.327)

DREIJMANIS (1991) speaks of:

... the widespread belief that Higher Education is a significant mechanism by which individual opportunities and upward mobility may be secured.

(p.8)

SCOTT (1993) says that:

The idea of a University hard-wired into wealth creation is among the most pervasive of the late 20th Century. At times this seems to have become the University's justification, as a key player in a post-industrial economy where knowledge itself is the primary resource.

(pp.8-9)

while OTTER (1992) points out that:

... Higher Education is no longer dominated by the Arts and Sciences. These core subjects have been overlaid by layers of professional education ...

(p.15)

REUTERSWARD (1988), however, questions the wisdom of attempting to predict demand for particular skills as a means to career selection or job choice. Academic systems, he says, should be expected to provide no more than an educational foundation on which specific occupational training can be built. While governmental policy has not for many years reflected such scholastic exclusiveness, and has in recent ones urged that HE serve the economy more effectively (HMSO, 1990), it is true that even courses offering neither marketable knowledge nor certification for professional practice may be considered vocational insofar as the abilities they promote are apparently valued by the community of employers. KELLY (1992) believes that University-industry co-operation need not, (and in fact does not appear to) diminish the ideals of a liberal University.

The loss of three or more years' potential income and subsequent likely exclusion from jobs available to school leavers represent two ostensible drawbacks to those engaged in, or contemplating entry to, HE. However, the level of job and attendant remuneration typically available to graduates rarely



cause either factor to trouble students, and even the problems of graduate unemployment and underemployment during the 1970s did not lead to a lowering in the level of educational aspiration among the young (TEICHLER, 1989). Because few first-degrees significantly restrict choice of employment, the initial investment in HE has so far proved a low-risk option both for students and for successive governments.

A large survey by KEEN and HIGGINS (1989), reinforced by ROBERTS (1997), sets out disturbing evidence of widespread ignorance of HE among sixth-formers, which could lead to inappropriate course choice and ensuing lack of career realism. HE may consequently have an obligation actively to assist students to find congenial work, since underemployment and 'filtering down' can cause unhappiness. HERRIOT and FLETCHER (1990) refer to 'graduate wastage', and HARLAND (1984) speaks of the tendency to ignore the private pressures and emotional injuries experienced by those falling victim to it. He counters those who consider its intrinsic and academic rewards sufficient by saying that HE must also offer extrinsic and economic justifications. In this he is supported by TARSH (1987), who argues that public money invested in producing graduates must be a worthwhile expense, and by WILDER (1982), who refers to assisting students with career plans as an 'inherent responsibility' of HE institutions.

Between 1950 and 1970, graduate numbers grew dramatically, and few experienced difficulty finding employment in either the public or private sectors. In recent years, graduate numbers have continued to grow (TEICHLER, 1989), but perhaps because growth has seemed unthreatened, concern has increased about the quality of the graduates produced. Since 1970, employers have exercised more influence on graduate destinations, partly because graduates are in greater supply (MURPHY, 1991), partly owing

to a slowing in the increase of traditionally-graduate job opportunities (MORGAN, 1988). It has become difficult to predict job-markets, not only because of economic fluctuations, but because graduate opportunities have arisen in fields of work which barely existed even a few years ago (MACLEOD (1994)). There has also been a surge in graduate recruitment to long-established professions, notably accountancy, which currently attracts some 13 per cent of graduates each year. Conversely, cutbacks can threaten the career plans even of those once sure of their future. EXWORTHY (1990) thinks that students should not try to anticipate the job market four or five years hence, warning that an opportunity turn-around for chemical engineers took only two years. However, Exworthy expects demand to continue to exceed supply and O'LEARY (1988) predicts that a degree will be a marketable commodity towards the year 2000. Projections of employment growth during the decade up to year 2000 are for three-quarters of the 2.2 million job total (almost 1.7 million) to be for people qualified to NVQ level 4 or above (degree-level or higher). (INSTITUTE OF EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH, 1990). However, the increased supply of graduates may not always coincide with the demands of the labour market, and the 1990s may be a period remembered for the co-existence of graduate shortages and graduate unemployment (PEARSON *et al*, 1990). Nevertheless, though it has requested more information on graduates, in order better to relate course provision to demand, government has so far produced no national policy designed to shield graduates from the financial winds of a fluctuating economy (FISHER, 1994)<sup>1</sup>, despite graduate employment dropping by almost one third between 1988 and 1993 (ABRAMS, 1993), and graduates having to lower their initial career expectations (FISHER, 1994)<sup>2</sup>.

The research question is firmly embedded in this historical context. Graduates' reading of the importance of realism and their efforts to achieve it



seem likely to be influenced by whether they perceive education to be essentially, incidentally or only peripherally vocational. This relates not just to course selection, but to how they believe recruiters view degrees. For example, a belief that most recruiters attach little worth to their degree subject may discourage realism-promoting activity and vocational decision-making, whereas the investment of resources by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in raising students' employment awareness may itself prompt investigations among students. It seems likely that those soon to graduate will regard seriously something which their institutions deem important enough to resource, though raising awareness need not be costly. In this way, HE may place greater obligation on students to extend their own awareness.

Having established the importance of graduate realism in policy terms, the next step is to establish the research context by examining how aspects of graduate employment and realism have been investigated so far, and to consider what findings have emerged. This will help to establish a pedigree for the research topic, and the direction and perhaps limits of data collection exercises.

## **THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Using a fairly large sample, DUNNETTE et al. (1973) in their investigation of turnover among graduates in one large company, found that graduate jobs were not as entrants had expected - they were worse, salary alone coming close to expectations. BRAY, et al. (1974) in their management progress study of the giant American Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, detected a similar picture, discovering that job expectations among both

successful and unsuccessful employees declined steadily over a period of up to seven years' experience. PEARSON (1990) writing as a representative of the Institute of Manpower Studies about an anticipatory study of graduate demand in the twenty-first century, says that one graduate in four claims to be under-employed in jobs which do not match their skills or aspirations.

This may mean only that graduates have an inflated view of their own worth. However, HUMBLE (1989) remarks that graduate contribution goes unappreciated. This may extend to potential contribution, with some graduates selected only to fit fairly rigid job requirements. This mirrors the view of HERRIOT (1984), who distinguishes three forms of graduate recruitment - general training for a specific job, specific placement for relevant training, and direct recruitment into a specific job, training being on-the-job. This is an important division, and may suggest much about how an organisation views graduates it recruits and the way they are likely to be treated within it.

Looking beyond graduates' early days in employment, WILLIAMS (1985), in a study of vocationalism in HE and its relationship to graduate employment, poses the important question of whether the capacities most instrumental to obtaining first posts are the same as those needed for advancement. PARSONS (1985) points out that most graduate entrants leave their first employer within five years. It is not clear why they do, but limited prospects and/or poor training seem possible explanations. Indeed, national statistics on training are not encouraging: in a fairly recent survey, which took a wide-ranging and critical look at training patterns and attitudes in the British economy, 70 per cent of (all) employers had no training plan, 80 per cent no training targets, and fully 97 per cent made no cost-benefit analysis of the training they offered (DREW SMITH, 1990). It is doubtless true that not



every graduate wants to take advantage of available training or is particularly concerned to advance prospects (BRADDOCK AND HECKER, 1988), but under-utilisation is clearly an issue related to job-change among graduates during their early years in employment (SMITH *et al.* 1989), (though the authors feel that more research is required before any confident statement about the frequency of this can be made) and one which seems certain to be connected to the realism of graduates and graduate recruiters, and perhaps those who advise the former.

Many graduate recruiters, however, appear to feel that lack of realism is the preserve of graduates or those about to graduate. GORDON (1983) cites employers who consider graduates frequently remote from the needs of the real world after years in academic life, while many anticipate a frequency of opportunity and a rate of promotion in excess of what is on offer. Lack of industrial and commercial experience and a need to acquire discipline are other criticisms that Gordon unearths. Perhaps the most damning comment he reports, however, is the lamentation that so many undergraduates fail to put careful thought into their choice of career.

However, TAYLOR (1987) in an article on the training needs of graduate scientists and engineers, in which he cites what he considers long-held and widespread views among recruiters, identifies more basic shortcomings. Among these are graduates' inability to communicate effectively in speech or writing, to work in groups, solve problems or understand how business works. More recently, BUTCHER (1997) says that during the past five years employers have not found it easy to acquire the skills and qualities they seek in graduate recruits. These criticisms suggest that the staff of HEIs have failed notably either to devise or transmit a programme which takes account of the need for students one day to earn a

living. In their study of entry-level goals among graduates, DEVLIN and PETERSON (1994) found that academic staff were ignorant of student values or preferences, and needed to be more effective in their career-related contacts with employers and their own students. COLLING (1988), too, while offering some criticism of recruitment methods, and citing a Brunel University study of expectations of HE among 139 employers of varying size, places the main responsibility to improve the situation on the shoulders of HE, saying that some of the traditional methods of communication in academic matters are not helping students to develop the personal skills which employers want. This apparent lack of encouragement seems likely to influence graduate realism. LONG et al. (1995), in a comparative study of decided and undecided final-year students, concluded that helping students develop a sense of purpose, encouraging them to be active and disciplined learners, and teaching them how to acquire occupational information and assess its personal relevance were important ways to foster career decisions, something to make many academics ponder how much they currently contribute to their students' awareness.

Realism, however, may vary among students, and sector differences have not gone unremarked. The study by BACON et al. (1979) in which the authors, via a sample of 86 graduate recruiters, examined attitudes to the employment of university and (then) polytechnic (now 'New University') graduates, suggests that polytechnic students are often more realistic than their university counterparts, a factor possibly explained by the generally more occupationally-related courses in the (then) polytechnic sector, or the occupational orientation of those attracted to them. However, lack of realism about some things is evident in all sectors, one of which, according to Bacon, is students' under-estimation of their abilities.



The answer offered to this last point by BAYNE (1977) in his study of the nature and limits of selection interviewing, is that graduates should be trained in self-presentation to combat what he considers their ignorance of, or indifference to, what is likely to impress employers. FLETCHER (1981), whose investigation looked at 63 job candidates' beliefs and self-presentation strategies in selection interviews, also acknowledges a lack of needed clues in this regard. When we add to these views those of EXWORTHY (1990), who says that graduates tend to see industry as a place for research and development opportunities only, failing to recognise the range of work it actually offers; of DIBDEN (1981), who claims that students create sterner competition than necessary by focusing on the better-known occupations and disregarding the frequently excellent opportunities of non-traditional ones; and of BACHHUBER (1988), who sees poor information production and delivery as barriers to successful conveyance and acquisition of realism, it sounds as though any problem which exists is about finding or being offered information.

However, many students seem unable to find more than some of the information which could help them, nor always to use appropriately the material they do locate (PAUL AND ALBERTA, 1989). Many fail to distinguish job choice and career selection, (AGCAS, 1989) often using employer literature in determining occupational choice, despite its inappropriateness for this purpose. Even well-produced neutrally-composed material employed for the correct purpose can pose problems. BIHM and WINER (1983) in their study of 120 university students' memories during a careers counselling programme, point out that careers information may be forgotten or distorted by the reader, and that the resulting stereotypes may come to form the basis of judgement. DRIER (1980) says that data should not be the basis for evaluating information, but rather the student's attachment of



meaning to the data. PRYOR and PINCHAM (1986) who looked at 73 vocational counsellors' views of the effectiveness of various types of occupational information media for themselves and their clients, reinforce this in saying that the stimuli students select are less significant than what they do with the messages gained thereby. MOORE and NEIMEYER (1992) show that acquiring occupational information does not always by itself raise awareness; a great deal depends on how far this squares with already-known data. The authors found that it was harder for students to differentiate among occupations which appealed to them when all the information was positive; greater awareness was likely where there was a friction between positive expectations and negative information, resulting in a more complex appreciation of the occupation.

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However, even students who deal well with objective information may be less sure about personal data. Many may be able to think only in general terms in this respect, and even aids such as literature and advisers may succeed only in encouraging a level of self-scrutiny beyond the powers of the majority. Even where students are mature and sophisticated enough, sources of information may be biased or otherwise inaccurate, and factors to which the outsider cannot be privy may be essential to realism. One possible refuge is to formulate a clear notion of what graduate-level employment should offer. Information dissemination and retrieval of this kind do seem deficient, however, and GINZBERG (1972), in his review and revision of his and his co-authors' general theory of occupational choice (GINZBERG et al, 1951); BEDEIAN (1977) in his study of the role of self-esteem in vocational aspiration; ARNOLD and MASTERSON (1987) in their ten-week testing of self-concept certainty, career exploration and readiness for career decision-making of 35 undergraduate students, and HATCHER and CROOK (1988), who looked at 253 American graduates in their first post following HE, all

highlight a neglect of employment factors in favour of information on work elements. According to the last study, the features of employment graduate entrants would most benefit by knowing about were pay, co-workers and supervision.

There is, as has been shown, ample reason to view the whole question of graduate realism as one far from free of controversy. The last point above, however, draws our attention to the research so far undertaken on this and related topics, and to possible shortcomings in it. Deficiencies may have arisen because the investigators excluded from the study data collection methods or techniques of analysis relevant to the conclusiveness it is reaching for, or because the premise on which the study is founded is itself open to doubt.

Some important messages come through the above research. Several studies show jobs to be different in some significant respects from what students/graduates said they had expected (something possibly related to an identified lack of training initiative among British employers). One seeming failing is that many graduates appear to confuse job choice and career selection, compounding this by frequently not using the right resources to decide each. Lack of awareness does not appear uniformly spread through HE, however, as there is evidence of 'new university' (former polytechnic) students being more aware in some respects than their 'established university' counterparts, this being linked to such as industrial/commercial placements constituting part of some courses, notably vocational ones.

Constructive input is nevertheless seen as a way of helping students to make career decisions through greater awareness, as well as imparting skills important in the job-seeking process as well as the work itself. However,



some traditional academic methods are seen not to develop perceived needed skills in students, while academic staff are considered lacking in knowledge of their students and work in general.

Students do not appear always to find the information which could help them. However, even when sound information is accessed, it may be forgotten by consumers, or otherwise distorted in their memories.

The studies cited do not duplicate experiments and emerge with differing results, but some studies' results or conclusions state or imply that students are the authors of their own lack of realism, while others see this as the result of shortcomings in the philosophy or provision of recruiters and/or HE.

Regarding exclusion, most recent sizeable studies of graduate employment have focused on specific occupations, as did the one undertaken by TAFFLER and HARVEY-COOK (1988), which examined graduate recruitment practices among sixteen large London-based firms of accountants. Among the interesting observations it made were severe criticism of conventional selection interviews and enthusiasm about the potential of formal job analysis, biodata and standard application forms. Studies which are not occupation-specific have limited themselves to a particular graduate group or undergraduates from only one sector of HE. TAYLOR's (1984) study is an instance. While the observations and conclusions these studies arrive at may be true of students, graduates or recruiters in general, it is hard to say so with confidence from samples limited by type if not by size. Other relevant groups and the environments within which they work may be sufficiently different to offset the claims made by such as the studies cited.

Regarding premises, we may take the study by AITKEN and JOHNSTON (1973), which dealt with promoting career information-seeking behaviour among 94 first and second-year college undergraduates, and, for all its thoroughness, bases its investigations on the unexamined assumption that career exploration behaviour among college students can be taught. More interesting, if more disturbing, is the approach of such as BAUMGARDNER (1976), who, studying the impact of college experiences on conventional career logic among 586 university students representing all undergraduate HE levels, painstakingly arrives at the tentative conclusion that there may be no rational way in which graduates can prepare for a career. His suggestion that realism must be evolutionary, and may not be hastened by seemingly constructive activity, has vast and negative implications for the whole career information and guidance industry, but is not the less valid on that account. Few studies would reach such momentous (if contentious) conclusions, but many might be better for a more neutral point of embarkation.

While many studies comment on graduate recruitment literature, most do so in a way or to a degree which renders observations incidental to the main argument. Very few studies have recruitment materials as their focus, despite these being often the initial and perhaps major source of information on which students base application decisions. This lack of scrutiny seems unlikely to encourage among recruiters possible necessary revisions in such material.

Canvass-based studies (e.g. GORDON (1983); BACON *et al.* (1979)) emphatically prefer the opinions of employers to those of graduates or careers advisers. Relatedly, no study compares the expectations or mutual expectations of the three groups, despite their potential influence one upon another. It is in making this comparison that much of the value of this study



lies.

Those studies which attempt retrospection do this in terms of what graduates would like to have known or have done rather than how they felt themselves affected by what they actually knew or did.

No study attempts to define a good job-fit by identifying the component parts of a job and investigating how well these fulfil expectations. Researchers are hesitant to say what they think a graduate job is. At present, the term seems to be attached unquestioningly to any post which a recruiter chooses to so describe. Though formulating criteria fulfilment of which would alone legitimise the label 'graduate-level' would be hard to do, this does not mean that no attempt should be made.

The above criticisms are not intended to suggest that the studies cited are without strengths, as this is certainly not the case. Rather, their perceived omissions are highlighted to indicate that the present study has tasks to accomplish. Significant among these is to survey opinion from recruiters representing a wider range of occupations, and graduates from each sector of HE, who have gone on to fill posts in a similar range. Despite the controversy relating to some of the issues it covers, the project will endeavour to adopt a neutral stance, but its chief potential contribution to this field of investigation lies in its intention to scrutinise its topic through four main data sources (graduate recruiters, graduate recruits, careers advisers in HE, and published recruitment and careers information material) and to arrive at any conclusions it reaches through analysis not merely of each in isolation, but through the process of comparison. It is hoped that in accomplishing this, a fuller statement on the nature of graduate realism than has so far been made will be constructed.

## **THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

And so it appears that we all need to put forth some effort - Careers Services need to deliver information in new ways that appeal to today's students; employers need to form closer ties with education and make sure their campus recruiting efforts are channelled through Careers Service offices; and, perhaps, most of all, students need to understand that they, and only they, are ultimately in charge of their job search and the level of success they achieve.

**(PATTERSON, 1995, p.8)**

The main research question and the research literature pertaining to it invite the formulation of a theoretical foundation on which data collection methods can be designed. Three avenues of enquiry suggest themselves, which the following hypothetical statements may fairly represent:

- A) There is an influential discrepancy between the kinds or degrees of awareness which HE promotes, and what needs to be known to make informed decisions about employment and to avoid being surprised by work.
- B) Recruiters mislead applicants and potential applicants about the nature of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs.
- C) Students insufficiently exploit the resources through which realism might be achieved, but even those who do use them to good effect cannot compensate for personal shortcomings such as limited self-concept or inherent difficulties in the process of career choice.

To underpin these hypotheses or theoretical avenues, it seems appropriate to state the case for each through the work of two theorists

associated with its position. The brief analysis which follows the description of each theorist's view will endeavour to identify any complications or problems apparent in it.

### Theory A

- (1) Summary of the view of WATTS, who posits that educational settings are vocationally dysfunctional, and how this relates to Theory A.

WATTS (1977) describes the words 'careers' and 'education' as having been, until the early 1970s, 'irrelevant and even hostile to one another'. However, he notes the increased credibility of careers education and posits that certain tasks fall within its scope rather than within those of careers information or guidance. Though Watts does not say so directly, the nature of the awareness-raising process and the means he indicates to its achievement suggest a need not only for institutional co-operation, but for careers education's insertion within the academic programme, if not a restructuring of the programme itself around careers-oriented educational objectives. Watts justifies the notion of careers education with his reference to the work of SUPER (1957), who identifies the individual's 'exploration' period as normally occurring between the ages of 15 and 25, during which (says Watts) 'self-examination, role try-outs and occupational exploration take place, ...'

In Watts' view, the really significant point in Super's theory is that for increasing numbers of people the exploration stage must take place in educational institutions. For those in HE, Watts argues, effective vocational exploration is inhibited by three major features of the institutions themselves.



He sees these as essentially:

- 1) The institutions' view of career exploratory activities as external to their real function, and in some cases hostile to it;
- 2) their having a value system very different from most workplaces, and a focus on academic and intellectual values which encourages stereotypical notions of other ones;
- 3) the homogeneity of the campus population conceals most adult role models against which self-evaluation could take place.

Of Watts' three perceived vocationally dysfunctional elements, only the first does not appear inherent in the HE system, yet even to change it would require a significant shift in institutional ethos. It is partly the tenacity of these elements which highlights their usefulness in theorising, since their stability during the period of investigation seems reasonably assured.

Watts questions the effectiveness of what he perceives as marginalised guidance services whose principal offering of assistance takes the form of interviews which stand apart from students' everyday experience, and constitute poor nourishers of self-reliance in the face of peer group and teacher influences, both characterised by untested assumptions and narrowly-based values. This seems an appropriate point at which to introduce the perceptions of PARSONS (1989), who claims that the wise choice of vocation is based on three factors:

- 1) A clear understanding of yourself, your aptitudes, abilities, interests, ambitions, resources, limitations, and their causes;
- 2) a knowledge of their requirements and conditions of success, advantages and disadvantages, compensation, opportunities and prospects of different lines of work;
- 3) true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts.

(Cited in OLLIS and DIETRICH, 1994, pp.311-12)



There may, despite the inherent drawbacks Watts mentions, be a better chance of the above being fulfilled in an educational setting, owing to the support mechanisms, actual and potential, existing within one.

Watts describes as 'fairly rudimentary' the British experimental work in HE careers education. However, while what has been said about Watts' work so far is still largely relevant, this opinion reminds us that certain things have changed since he wrote. The credibility of careers education within HE is now much greater, as this NICEC (1992) extract shows:

Careers services have much expertise to offer in developing careers education programmes. But such programmes are often more effective if developed in partnership with teaching departments, which have more continuous contact with students, are able to link careers education to the nature of their courses, and can integrate it into the course structure.

(p.2)

However, this view is not held universally within HE. As the same document says:

Departments tend to vary in the extent to which they regard careers education and guidance as part of their responsibility.

(p.2)

MOSS (1994), a Biology academic, sees helping students make informed career choices as an obligation of teaching staff. He also draws attention to what he considers a blinkered view of success:

There also seems to be a feeling of pride when you send your students down the expected path .. and disappointment when they choose an alternative career. We do significant disservice to our students by maintaining these biases.

BEWAYO (1990) goes further than this last quotation, claiming that each academic field tends to promote certain values and preferences. This does not make HE dysfunctional in terms of promoting realism, but it does suggest that educational content and method may encourage thinking which the economic/opportunity climate requires graduates to dismantle. This relates to the second of Watts' three criteria, and seems likely to slow the adjustment of some students to considering careers or becoming comfortable in a specific work environment.

In relation to Theory A as stated, it may be that experiences gained within educational settings can, like those outside them, fulfil only part of the perceived requirement. Perhaps the first can contribute to the making of informed decisions about employment, and that the second will always still admit surprises. Perhaps to expect no surprises is to be unrealistic.

(2) Summary of the work of HERRIOT, who posits that education and employers have differing norms, and how this relates to Theory A.

HERRIOT (1984) is in broad agreement with WATTS (1977) that educational settings are dysfunctional as preparatory settings for employment. He is in one respect more broadly critical than Watts when he cites as one limitation to students' understanding of employers the failure of educational organisations to open themselves up to the inspection and involvement of their student members.

However, Herriot's focus on the educational setting, and the feature of which he appears most critical, centres on the counselling process and its



underlying philosophy. He believes that counselling psychology and recruiting officers no longer share the same underlying theoretical assumptions, and that counselling has concentrated on the individual client to the exclusion of the client's relationship with organisations, saying that counselling psychologists have seemed self-appointed defenders of students against employers. Herriot depicts the counsellee as someone seen to have a problem, for which diagnosis and treatment must be offered. He sees this as an unduly medical reading and response to what are essentially educational situations with educational solutions. He cites the major efforts which have been made to change the image of careers counselling so as to remove any idea of remediation, and sees a function of guidance being to help individuals not only to express their career aspirations, but to ask more profound questions about themselves in relation to their work. One such question might be which of their personal values they wish work to reflect or fulfil.

Improvements in the transition from education to employment Herriot sees as achievable not only through changes of the kind just indicated. He sees recruitment practices as similarly meriting revision. Essentially Herriot sees graduate recruiters failing to obtain the most suitable candidates because they recruit with one eye on the short-term economy, and to fit people for specific positions within the organisation. He encourages flexibility in organisations, as does FOULDS (1990), which he feels will better enable them to adapt to the changing technological and economic environment. The whole recruitment process, from distributed literature on, should, they feel, be geared to presenting an open picture of the organisation and striving to obtain a fuller picture of the applicant.



It may require organisations to be open and honest about their jobs and cultures instead of marketing themselves; to tell applicants about attributes they are looking for, why they are looking for these attributes, and how they hope to find out about them; and to feed back to applicants the outcome of any assessments before decisions are made.

(HERRIOT and FLETCHER, 1990, p.32)

Part of this entails encouraging applicants to analyse themselves to have a better understanding of their possible contribution in the workplace, which ties in with the educational revision already proposed. This confirms the discrepancy between what HE promotes and the awareness needed, which is integral to Theory A. It is important to recognise, too, that the kind of knowledge/awareness gained, rather than just its quantity, is seen as vital.

Herriot sees a role for careers advisers in telling recruiters of the academic pressures students face while seeking work, and for recruiters in conveying to students via careers advisers the need to think about a career in organisational as well as occupational terms.

In his study of surprises experienced by graduates during their early months of employment, ARNOLD (1985) claims that while most graduates entering employment are reasonably prepared for the sort of work they are likely to do, and for their own performance and reactions, they are less ready for what SCHEIN (1978) calls 'the reality of the human organisation'. Arnold sees this as something for which vocational guidance instruments may be partly responsible, and feels that careers advisers might profitably discuss with students the way in which work organisations typically function, with particular emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

Herriot sees guidance as people-driven and employers as economy-

driven. The precarious nature of the British economy in recent years may make the employment sector seem a more likely effecter of change than the education/guidance one. However, this may occur only if employers become convinced that their recruitment and/or training practices could be more effective. Herriot fails to cite evidence of this, though concrete instances would bolster his case.

The proposal that students think in organisational as well as occupational terms may carry weight only if students see this as appealing in more than one dimension. The ease of scheduled lifelong progression within one organisation may be outweighed by taste for adventure and sense of progression through experience of different employers. The one-employer career may be culturally alien.

Thirdly, Herriot suggests an objective of the guidance process being to encourage students to think more deeply about the place of work in the fulfilment of values. However, constructive thought of this kind may only be possible after some experience of work has been gained. If so, this would relegate long-term career planning to a point after the individual has left the HE system. Such reflection might raise graduate employee leaving-rates.

Perhaps the main result of Herriot's proposals would be an overlap of HE (at least in a guidance dimension) and graduate employment. The potential benefits seem to be principally raised student/employee awareness, more satisfied graduate employees, and a more effective deployment of them. Potential hazards seem chiefly more critical graduate entrants with a resulting higher graduate attrition rate, and a revised and perhaps more onerous role for guidance services which they may find difficult to fulfil.



## Theory B

- (1) Summary of the work of BACHHUBER, who posits that improving communication with students can result in better graduate-employer matches, and how this relates to Theory B, that recruiters mislead applicants and potential applicants about the nature of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs.

In a thought-provoking article, BACHHUBER (1988) argues that successful career choices rest on effective exploration and assimilation of career information. He claims, however, that in HE circles this is not being achieved, feeling that those responsible for the nature and dissemination of career-related material concentrate on the process (which the author would define as how students are encouraged to research as well as what they are offered) rather than the outcome (which he defines as 'a more intelligent student who is able to use information effectively to make successful career choices'). While Bachhuber does not cite graduate recruiters as solely responsible for this situation, he does identify what he perceives as shortcomings in their practices.

Bachhuber criticizes the one-sided totally positive view presented in recruiting information that he claims results in 'reality shock' for graduate entrants, leading to dissatisfaction. He cites WANOUS (1976) to buttress his argument that organisations offering broader and more objective information enjoy lower graduate turnover.

Functional language, as a means to better descriptions of the constituent tasks of jobs, would, he argues, help, too. This would play its part also in determining the relationships among job title, job function, work



environment and industry. However, to improve the resources in this way is not enough. Bachhuber points out the need to use them to promote students' understanding of work as a whole and to help them draw relationships between personal needs and employer criteria as part of decision-making.

Perhaps Bachhuber's biggest criticism of employers' approach is that their recruitment material is geared more to public relations than to education. More specifically, he says they are remiss in not offering students a better picture of employee development elements, formal and informal training, performance review systems, career development services, and professional qualification opportunities.

Once the above improvements have been introduced, Bachhuber sees the way clearer for Careers Advisory Services (CAS) to use recruitment materials for specific educational purposes. They need, however, to be judicious in their selection and public presentation of materials, and to convey that different products (or parts of them) are fitted to different awareness-raising exercises.

Bachhuber's view is broader-ranging in both the recommendations he makes and the influential factors he recognises than those of other investigators of information-related issues and their implications. However, there appear to be shortcomings in what he proposes.

Firstly, he fails sufficiently to recognise the interference to effective information-gathering which may be made by external influences, such as students' social groups and the media in general. While it is not within the scope of either Bachhuber's study or this one to quantify such interference, it should be within the scope of both to suggest neutralising agents in order to maximise the beneficial effects of formal information sources.

Secondly, he does not make strongly enough the argument from an employer's perspective of how recruiters would benefit by the reforms he suggests, or how they might be losing at the moment. One would expect successful arguments to be founded on economic considerations.

Thirdly, the admirable nature of his objective of 'a more intelligent student who is able to use information effectively to make successful career choices' perhaps masks the difficulty of achieving it. Again, the argument for presenting the case from the point of view of interested parties - careers advisers and academic staff - suggests itself.

Bachhuber's arguments bolster Theory B, that recruiters mislead applicants about the nature of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs. His support of this theory constitutes validation of the main research question, which posits that identified lack of realism among graduates might attain problem-status. An implication to which Bachhuber imparts a lower profile is the need for improved communications. This reminds us that one group's lack of realism may result (at least partly) from poor exchanges, but also owe something to the compounding of error or omission through reinforcing intermediaries. This is why the triangulation offered by canvassing three groups involved in the establishment of graduate realism is so important as a validation technique in this study.

## Theory B

- (2) Summary of the view of GORDON, who posits that employers should do more to educate graduating students about the nature of employment, and how this relates to Theory B.

Early in the course of his large article on the attitudes of employers to the recruitment of graduates, GORDON (1983) identifies the lack of industrial and commercial experience among graduate recruits, and their unrealistic and over-optimistic career expectations.

Gordon, whose study surveyed the attitudes of fifty-eight British companies (employing a total of nearly two million people) to the recruitment of graduates, sees this as partially the responsibility of HEIs to remedy, and sees courses designed to integrate HE studies and employment experiences as part of the answer. However, he feels that graduate employers, too, have a major reforming role to play. Gordon believes that organisations must be prepared to offer more in the way of sandwich placements, useful vacation work, and to help those taking a year off between school and HE. Government too, he thinks, could lend a hand by offering financial inducements to the establishment of such links.

However, Gordon's investigation carries implicit criticism of employers, too. The fact that he was able to produce a study so fruitful in identifying significant new information about graduate recruitment suggests that organisations may be withholding information vital to graduates in their quest for realism about work opportunities and related employer preferences.

A major question is whether Gordon is right to draw a causal link



between lack of experience among students and any lack of realism they exhibit. It does seem likely that certain workplace experiences will raise awareness, but we may hesitate to claim this for all. To encourage realism in more than a limited organisational sense, range rather than quantity of such experience may be a key factor. Clearly, the preparation designed to enable students to gain maximum benefit from such contact, and possibly implemented through their educational institutions, is of considerable significance also. SHARMA et al. (1995) draw attention to the significance of work experience in career awareness-raising. They highlight the significance not only of experiences at or during University (e.g. sandwich placements), but of experiences occurring before entry to HE, and how these can play a formative role in the decision to choose (or avoid) a course involving significant work experience. The authors also found that the effects of work experience depended on how relevant and satisfying students found them. Lack of either meant the student was unlikely to have become more aware.

There are dangers in recruiters becoming scapegoats for students or graduates who fail to be realistic. However, where such organisations engage in essentially educational exercises (ones designed primarily to raise student awareness rather than exclusively to find recruits) their content might be expected to focus on more than the organisation alone. It may rather illustrate elements of work and employment in its particular sphere, since few, if any, of the participants will ultimately become employees. There is, incidentally, no suggestion in the work of Gordon, or any other researcher cited in the thesis, that organisations mislead in a conspiratorial sense. It is rather through narrowness of scope and imprecise terminology that perhaps most misrepresentations occur. These represent limited vision, not dubious ethics.

## Theory C

- (1) Summary of the work of HATCHER and CROOK, who posit that the incidence of surprise among graduate job entrants is higher than necessary, and how this relates to Theory C.

In their study of student values, MANTER and BENJAMIN (1989) conducted interviews with graduates, and found that they were looking for: (a) immediate involvement in the essential work of their organisation, (b) application of their newly-found knowledge and skills, (c) rapid career development, (d) the opportunity to understand the 'big picture' of the organisation, (e) rapid salary advancement, and (f) the chance to learn new skills.

In their questionnaire survey of first-job surprises among 313 college graduates, HATCHER and CROOK (1988) say that college graduates employed for less than a year reported that initial expectations for their first jobs were not met by work realities. The authors see the purpose of the study being to compile a list of organisational entry surprises usable in counselling students on ways to obtain more realistic previews of the jobs they apply for.

Hatcher and Crook see surprise (defined as the difference between what a graduate anticipates on the first job and what is actually experienced) as potentially twofold: it can refer to the nature of the job or work environment, but also to something unexpected which the newcomer learns about himself. The authors cite LOUIS (1980), who claims that coping with unmet expectations occupies newcomers during their first six to ten months of employment.



The authors see job surprises as counterproductive, relating these to the high turnover rates among graduate employees cited by DUNNETTE *et al.* (1973), and seeing the solution in HE curricular and placement activity changes.

Hatcher and Crook draw two sets of conclusions or implications: those for practice, and those for research. Relating to practice, their data showed that many graduates reported surprises in at least some job-related areas, and the authors parallel this with the evidence of GOTTLIEB (1975) that many students fail to collect much of the available relevant information during their job search activities. They in turn relate this to the work of GUTTERIDGE and ULLMAN (1973), which showed that the possession of detailed information about an organisation is associated with greater satisfaction with job choice and longer stay in the job. The authors see development of information-collecting skills to the necessary level to be likely to take a semester-long course.

Hatcher and Crook see the main implication for research being that most successful follow-up is likely through studies which compare what they term the 'healthy' with the 'pathological', seeing how those unsurprised by work differ from those experiencing things they did not expect.

From a practical viewpoint, the Hatcher and Crook study emphasises quantity rather than quality in urging students and new graduates to greater efforts in information gathering. In doing so, it fails to show what quality information is and how to identify it. The study also fails to suggest ways in which information can be evaluated. It may be that there is no 'best system' and, if so, this is better recognised early as it clearly has major implications for the design and presentation of the kind of course the authors recommend.



Their approach also excludes the scrutiny of information materials and the organisations producing them. This overlooks or dismisses as irrelevant the possible biases within such materials, and the potential improvements in their content and presentation.

From a research perspective, the focus is exclusively on the student/young graduate group. This seems unduly narrow, even with a sizeable sample and a healthy/pathological comparison. The evidence provided through such an analysis is limited by the lack of triangulation techniques, and by the possibility that differences between the two groups are not relevant to their comparative realism.

The significance of self-concept in Theory C is touched on only briefly in Hatcher and Crook's study. There is no suggestion that lack of self-awareness cannot be overcome, but little is offered by way of direct remedy. Perhaps those in this category find it hard to see themselves as resources. They possibly lack the objectivity towards themselves which they have towards conventional information sources, such as reference or recruitment material. However, it may be reluctance rather than inability which stands in their way, and it would be interesting to know whether some had seen self-analysis as in some way a depersonalising exercise.

Hatcher and Crook see job surprises as counterproductive. This is no doubt true in the economic sense in which it is meant. However, surprise may be productive in throwing light on aspects which in turn improve employment or job-orientation. Unfulfilled expectations may trigger discontent leading to ultimately successful searches for more fitting situations. It is important to remember that unrealism can act as a prompt to realism, and that there is no strict time-limit to acquiring a realistic outlook and acting constructively on it.

An argument may even be made that discomforts arising from unrealistic decisions create the resolve to base future plans or actions on sounder foundations.

The study does not encourage the view of career choice as an ongoing process. Perhaps the status and finality of the degree qualification encourages decisiveness which may not be consistent with maturity, recalling Watts' point (p.31) about the strain between careers and education.

- (2) Summary of the work of BAUMGARDNER, who posits that fully rational career planning may be impossible and undesirable and how this relates to Theory C.

BAUMGARDNER (1976) executed a questionnaire survey of 536 undergraduates at all stages of degree study, to assess the factors which students consider when selecting their main subject of study in HE. Intuitive and analytical factors were identified and used to differentiate the thinking of first-year undergraduates from that of second years. The freshmen were found to be predominantly analytical in their thinking, the second-years more intuitive. Baumgardner found a lack of explicit rationality in student educational decisions and admits that his findings confirm the need for more objective assessments and logical planning. However, he also claims that his data suggest that situational pressures and uncertainties often preclude purely analytical thinking, but that this would not ensure more appropriate or satisfying career choice anyway, particularly in the light of the uncertainties surrounding career information, such as rapid changes in the job market.



Baumgardner concludes by saying that theories of career choice which describe such choice as systematic may be misleading in their attempts to impose order on a world in which little exists. He suggests that recognition of this by students would be a desirable outcome of career counselling.

The main danger in the Baumgardner viewpoint is of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, or, more precisely, of dismissing career exploration techniques because they are not conclusive determinants. The most constructive implication may lie in its potential to encourage orientation rather than choice - to lead students to serious consideration of employment in a general field, or jobs identifiable by characteristics rather than titles.

Fulfilling an orientation function would require a revision in the way much information is presented, particularly in careers information libraries or rooms, where displays are usually arranged in employer or occupational categories. These arrangements which, because they cater for the decided rather than the undecided user, are essentially informative rather than educational. However, as is evident from much of the research literature, graduate realism appears as much about education as it is information. A possible reason for information being debated as a vehicle for increased realism is its being more manageable to effect changes in this comparatively marginal area than in the broader and more politically sensitive ones of recruitment policy and educational curricula.

As in Hatcher and Crook's study, Baumgardner's ideas touch only lightly on the elements of personal shortcoming and limited self-concept. However, his reading of undergraduate career choice may be such as to place the student largely at the mercy of forces beyond his/her control. The main implication of Baumgardner's analysis is that students should adopt a reactive



rather than proactive stance - making career-relevant decisions for the short-term in the light of current events, rather than for the long-term with an expectation of relative stability. Clearly, however, there are likely to be periods and/or occupations in which stability prevails, and within which once-tentative plans can be pursued. However, since the experts themselves often appear fooled by developments, undergraduates cannot be expected to anticipate them correctly. The duration of most undergraduate courses, and the possible requirement of a postgraduate qualification make students very vulnerable - on the one hand they must keep options open, on the other they feel pressure to meet the specific additional qualifications stipulated by employers or professional bodies. This may be hard enough psychologically without having to fulfil two different forms of preparation. However, dividing themselves in this way must to many students seem the only sure prescription to avoid being unrealistic.

## **DISCUSSION**

The three theoretical avenues discussed in relation to a number of studies are not in conflict. This is partly because each has a different focus: Theory A relates to HE, Theory B to graduate recruiters, Theory C to students. Most studies cited to elaborate on each theory identify their focal group as in some measure (and often principally) responsible for a lack of student/graduate realism, on which all broadly agree, while not concurring in their respective understandings of it.

None of the theories seems quantitatively verifiable, but the studies cited validate them and encourage their further exploration. Even at this early

stage, it is apparent that any explanation of graduate realism which purports to be complete may have to take into account more than one of the theories, and perhaps all of them.

Among the six main authors, there is much agreement and some contention. Theory A representative HERRIOT is arguably more realistic than WATTS in seeing the counselling process as an easier target for change than major academic structures. Herriot comes over as more impassioned than Watts, but this may be because certain research or initiatives written in the wake of Watts' work have encouraged him to believe in the possibility of constructive change. However, Watts' picture of intrinsic shortcomings of HE raises issues which are still current, not to say urgent, given the much-increased numbers entering HE in recent years.

The Theory B representatives, GORDON and BACHHUBER, seem largely in agreement, though Gordon's route to reform is biased towards activities (such as work experience and financial incentives), while Bachhuber sees improvement in essentially communicative terms, such as improved information. However, the different foci complement each other well. Both authors demand reform, Gordon mainly through wider introduction of already-approved exercises, while Bachhuber invites recruiters to see their own function differently, and not solely in terms of their own short-term interests.

The main writers representing Theory C, HATCHER and CROOK and BAUMGARDNER, are perhaps those differing most within the span of a single theory. The former urge effort, seeing realism as available to those prepared to struggle for it. Baumgardner sees realism as much more elusive, and is not an advocate of the systematic method. Nevertheless, these writers are well-twinning because they represent the major dilemma facing students

struggling for a plan and action appropriate to it. The research studies instanced have not resulted in a favoured theory emerging. More apparent is the possibility of explaining any of the three theories only by reference to the other two. This means that throughout the study, graduates, recruiters and careers advisers will need constantly to be seen in relation to one another.

There is the likelihood that the Dearing Report, due out later this month (July, 1997) will cover, in its review of HE, matters of policy and funding which have a bearing on issues covered in this thesis.



## SUMMARY

Considerable ground has been covered in this chapter. The twin issues of economic justification and personal fulfilment identified early on remain sound underpinning, justifying graduate realism as a topic worthy of investigation. However, what education is for and how far institutions and recruiters should be responsible for the career orientation of their students and employees are in doubt. The terms in which such issues are habitually discussed themselves present problems of precision and application, though in most cases workable definitions are attainable. The precariousness of the job-market has earned problem-status, resulting in student uncertainty over whether to remain occupationally uncommitted or to invest in often considerable entry preliminaries.

Previous studies in this field have left some important questions unanswered, and bolster the justification for the present thesis. Some of the admirably thorough studies cited are American, making their observations and conclusions of considerable interest, but not directly applicable to the British scene. There is, however, ample evidence from all sources of the problematic nature of realism, and the gravity of the potential difficulties this gives rise to. These are summarised in three theoretical avenues which receive various treatments from a number of major authors cited and discussed in some detail. What they say offers no grounds for believing that the subject under discussion merits anything less than the detailed treatment which the thesis will endeavour to give it.

Explanations for the current perceived mismatch between expectations and reality seem principally to be that:

- 1) HE fails to recognise the raising of career awareness among its mainstream objectives, marginalising this task by allocating responsibility for it to CAS whose policy and/or resources render its achievement uncertain;
- 2) graduate recruiters depict their organisations in ways which frequently fail to promote potential applicants' employment awareness, and neglect to sufficiently promote education/industry links to the degree necessary to offset this;
- 3) students fail to undertake awareness-raising exercises as well as they might, but even those who do remain uncertain and/or uncommitted because of difficulties inherent in the exercises or problems with the intermediaries through which or through whom these must be attempted.

The literature suggests remedies for the above and related problems. However, the difficulties and their potential solutions are often expressed and envisaged in relative isolation. Most notable, perhaps, has been the limited scope of numerous and otherwise commendable studies, resulting in a lack of conclusiveness or applicability of certain observations and recommendations.

This seems a good point at which to re-state the main research questions. They are:

- 1) Is there thought to be an incongruence between graduates' expectations of employment (or what graduating students perceive to be the realities of employment) and the actual nature of it?
- 2) If so, does this lack of perception, misperception or realism amount to

a problem for students on the verge of work and graduates just entered it, or for the recruiters and careers advisers with whom they have dealings at this significant time?

The literature survey has justified the determinants posed at the end of the introductory section, and the implications for determining a methodology suitable for and equal to the proposed investigation seem clear.



## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### INTRODUCTION

The thesis has, in asking the two questions on whether there is a problem with graduate realism, fulfilled the requirement stipulated by HOINVILLE and JOWELL (1978) that the purpose of an enquiry must be translated into a specific central aim. Research begins with foreshadowed problems (MALINOWSKI, 1922), and the literature review undertaken in Chapter 1 has identified some. In order to establish a workable methodology, however, it is first necessary also to derive from statements made early in the first chapter and repeated at the end of it, major questions sufficiently concrete to act as formulations for the design and implementation of data collection and analysis methods. The three following questions appear to fulfil this requirement as well as arising naturally from the work done so far:

- 1) What pictures of employment are intending graduate recruits offered?
- 2) Do graduate recruiters and student advisers think that a realism-related problem exists?
- 3) Do recently-recruited graduates think that such a problem exists?

Theory can develop from systematic data-collection (GLASER and STRAUSS, 1967), and in due course the nature of problems associated with different data collection methods will be discussed. However, it seems appropriate at this stage first to state the five proposed methods of data collection for this study. They are:

- 1) Preliminary discussions with employers and careers advisers, designed to check the validity of those issues which the research literature identifies as significant;
- 2) pilot questionnaires from which the design and content of those delivered to careers advisers, recruiters and graduate entrants for data collection purposes can be known;
- 3) a survey of graduate recruitment prospectuses to examine the strengths, weaknesses and apparent influence of such material on intending applicants;
- 4) three questionnaires, one for each of those recipient groups mentioned in 2) above;
- 5) interviews with individual graduates to obtain a fuller understanding of the issues and problems raised by the questionnaire responses.

These methods were intended firstly to ensure that questions put to respondents were intelligible and appropriate; that data were gathered from a variety of sources, including literature; that the brevity of responses inevitable through questionnaires was augmented through the expansion permitted by interviews. While the study's respondent groups were not large enough for it to be labelled quantitative, nor its depth sufficient to call it qualitative, the combined levels of quality and quantity were sufficient to justify the study, particularly given its exploratory nature.

Early in their book 'Ethnography: Principles in Practice', HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON (1991), identify the main differences

between positivism and ethnography, as philosophies of and approaches to research. Positivism they identify as characterised by:

- a) the presence of a logic whereby quantitatively-measured variables are manipulated in order to identify the relationships between or among them;
- b) an explanation of events by appeal to universal laws, whereby a premium is placed on the generalisability of findings;
- c) great emphasis on standardisation of procedures of observation in order to achieve stable measurements with a view to establishing a theoretically-neutral base.

By contrast, the essentials of ethnography, or naturalism, they see as:

- a) the study of the social world in its natural state, with data collected in ways that are sensitive to the setting, and not artificial. Fidelity to phenomena must precede methodological principles or philosophical arguments;
- b) an acceptance that the social world cannot be understood in terms of causal relationships or through universal laws. The infusion of social meaning in human action prevents this, making standardised methods of data-collection redundant;
- c) the immersion of the researcher in the milieu of his subject-matter, to the extent of becoming part of it. Understanding behaviour requires a full understanding of the meanings which inform it. The authors quote DENZIN (1970), who says that "the naturalist resists schemes or models which over-simplify the complexity of everyday life".

(P.168)



Having made these distinctions, let us now see the extent to which the present study and the methods proposed for it are consistent with or inimical to the positivist and ethnographic perspectives respectively.

The orientation of the study is positivistic in the following respects:

(1) it assumes a degree of knowledge about the phenomenon to be investigated which is derived from external sources, such as research literature; (2) it does not entail direct entry by the researcher into the world examined; (3) it adopts data collection methods, such as survey questionnaire, which are traditionally considered to be antagonistic to an ethnographic approach; (4) the quantity of data collected is a foundation of its credibility; (5) it assumes that data can be assessed and conclusions drawn objectively, that is, against a yardstick of notional reality.

However, the study also features elements characteristic of an ethnographic standpoint:

(1) it adopts an inductive approach, being open-ended and concerned with generating ideas; (2) it attempts to identify cultural patterns rather than formulate scientific laws (this is evident through the interviews preceding pilot studies and the pilot studies themselves); (3) it attempts to describe and explain perspectives and behaviour from the point of view of its subjects; (4) data are gathered from a relatively narrow range of sources and do not lay claim to a high degree of statistical precision - moreover, the data so obtained may be differently interpreted; (5) the three questionnaires effect a process of triangulation, a validation procedure frequently associated with ethnography.

Despite the ethnographic elements which nourish it, the study is rooted

essentially in the positivist tradition, its use of quantitative data, notional reality and survey method being perhaps the chief justifications for this claim. Its indebtedness to the ethnographic characteristics of idea generation and validation by triangulation must, however, be noted. Idea generation is especially important in an exploratory study, particularly if it is to prove a stimulus to further investigations. Moreover, the triangulation formed by the three respondent groups is mirrored by the triangulation of questionnaire, interview and recruitment literature scrutiny. It can therefore be seen that the study draws on both the positivist and ethnographic traditions.

### **MERGING QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DATA**

There has been a good deal of debate over the acceptability of merging quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. KYRIACOU and CHANG (1993) identify as a main problem of combining two types of data that one type is used in presenting evidence for claims which can really only properly be addressed by the other. The authors also feel that collecting qualitative data can undermine a study's claims to having a structure rigorous enough for experimental purposes. Despite this, some writers, such as BRYMAN (1988) and HAMMERSLEY (1991) argue that two sets of data can be mutually strengthening. This can in turn lead to greater confidence being placed in any findings, and acceptance of this eclectic approach is increasingly evident (MILES and HUBERMAN, 1984).

However, not only the techniques of research, but the methodology, too, is important in determining acceptable practise. Writers such as GUBA and LINCOLN (1989) say that research methods may be mixed, but that



methodologies cannot be. VULLIAMY et al. (1990) understand that a consequence of this must be to associate particular techniques with a particular methodology, and that to mix these (e.g. by using participant observation - a traditionally ethnographic technique - within a study having a positivist research design) will have a distorting effect. However, FETTERMAN (1988) says that 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' are somewhat misleading terms used to label different methodologies, and at the far end of the scale, researchers such as REICHARDT and COOK (1979) suggest that we should look beyond methodologies, and use whatever methods, or blend of methods, suits the research issue or problem at hand.

The study employs two qualitative sources - graduate recruitment literature and graduate interviews, and one quantitative source - the three questionnaires sent to employers, graduates and careers advisers. Far from being problematic, this approach provided a combination of data which enhanced it, particularly through the qualitative elements raising understanding of the data derived from the questionnaires.

## PRELIMINARIES TO DATA COLLECTION

Piloting is an integral part of any research and a questionnaire survey is no exception. Indeed, the strong dependence upon the instrument rather than the researcher makes pilot assessments even more necessary.

(YOUNGMAN, 1984, p.172)

Before designing or implementing any method aimed at the collection of usable data, it was considered desirable to do two things. The first was to



consult a small sample of graduate recruiters, of HE careers advisers, and of graduate entrants who had been with their organisation no more than six months. There were three reasons for this:

(1) to test the perceived relevance of issues already portrayed as significant in the literature; (2) to add any salient ones; (3) to prioritise topics for investigation during the next stage of the research.

A local university careers adviser provided on request a published list of notable and mostly local organisations which recruited graduates annually. Two such organisations were contacted via each one's graduate recruitment officer, and, in accordance with the request, each was interviewed separately from, but in addition to, a recently-recruited graduate. All interviews took a semi-structured form, the main advantages of which were that this allowed respondents to speak at some length, but placed on them a tight enough rein to reduce or eliminate irrelevancies (WRAGG, 1984).

The main issues covered with the recruiters were: their organisation's reasons for recruiting graduates; the nature of the selection process; applicants' knowledge of the selection process and the work, and their realism in assessing each; graduates' adjustment to the work environment; their job-fit after six months at work, their progress, training and evaluation. The issues discussed with graduate entrants were: the extent of their career exploration while in HE; the pre-recruitment attractions of their present employers; the recruitment process they underwent; their expectations of the work on appointment; the transition from HE to employment; the demands of their jobs; their perceptions of training and evaluation, and how they saw their futures. Two careers advisers working in HEIs were also consulted. The issues covered with them were an amalgam of the two ranges of questions just

described, from an advisory standpoint.

During all interviews, questions were posed as formulated, notes were taken, and ethical considerations pertinent to interviews of this kind, as described by JOHNSON (1984), were observed.

Three pilot questionnaires were then prepared. The content of each was based partly on those issues highlighted by the literature survey, and partly on the comments of respondents in the exercise just described.

... the design of questionnaires is pivotal, for the quality of the data produced depends upon their design.

(MAY, 1993, p.65)

The design heeded the question posed by MUNN and LEWIS (1987) of whether a wide range of views or practices were likely to be found. It also recognised a point likely to be important in analysis, namely that even using one data-gathering device, such as a questionnaire, there are different kinds of data, and that an understanding of these is important in the effort to calculate averages, or present a representative picture (GOULDING, 1984). The main purpose of the pilots was to test the incidence and nature of responses before sending out questionnaires designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data for analysis. The pilots would allow minor defects and/or major shortcomings to be corrected, thus minimising the prospect of unsatisfactory response (in nature or number) to the main questionnaires. Finally, the pilot questionnaire has a place as a means of generating exploratory insights without claiming that any findings are representative (as they may not be in the main study either). Reliability on a small scale may, however, be achieved



by resorting to more than one source (YOUNGMAN, 1984), which may encourage other aims at checking representativeness in the main study.

The well-known annual reference publication 'Graduate Employment and Training' was used to identify ten organisations advertising themselves as current graduate recruiters. Each was sent a questionnaire together with a covering letter detailing the nature of the project and instancing factors and instructions relevant to the questionnaire's completion. To ten further recruiters identified through the same source was sent a questionnaire designed for completion by a recent graduate entrant. Finally, to one careers adviser operating in each of the three sectors of HE (i.e. a university, a (then) polytechnic and a college) was sent a third questionnaire. In each covering letter, the importance of and respect for the confidentiality of responses both within and beyond the recipient's organisation was stressed, and in the letters to recruiters, the importance of no graduate being pressurised to participate (even if the organisation was enthusiastic about the project) was stressed.

Response-rates to the pilot questionnaires were pleasing, and these, together with the answers to individual questions, gave confidence to use both as guidelines in the design of the final questionnaires. The pilots proved particularly helpful in streamlining individual questions and improving the linkage or thread of questions within each questionnaire.

RECIPIENTS	QUESTIONNAIRES SENT	QUESTIONNAIRES RETURNED
Graduate Entrants	10	7
Graduate Recruiters	10	6
Careers Advisers	3	3

**TABLE 2:1     RESPONSE TO THE PILOT QUESTIONNAIRES**



## THE JUSTIFICATION OF SURVEY METHOD

The purpose of surveys, according to COHEN and MANION (1994) is to (a) describe the nature of existing conditions; (b) identify standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or (c) determine the relationships that exist between specific events. The authors describe the potential level of complexity of the survey as ranging from the simple frequency count to relational analysis.

The general objectives of the survey for this study are those stated at the beginning of the chapter. However, the practicalities of survey design require different approaches to different respondent groups, resulting in a separate questionnaire for each. Nevertheless, considerable correspondence among the three questionnaires is essential, since comparison of views of the same phenomena is part of the exercise. The same data from a different source can be useful in a confirmatory role. Moreover, even when the data is inconclusive, it illustrates that a particular source has not been overlooked. The statement of HAMMERSLEY and ATKINSON (1991) that aggregation of data from different sources need not produce a more complete picture is accepted.

One drawback of the present study is the limited size of the samples, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions or claim representativeness with any certainty. Moreover, each sample is itself fragmented, or open to fragmentation (e.g. recruiters drawn from different fields of endeavour, graduates in different disciplines, careers advisers from 'old' and 'new' universities). In defence, however, it must be emphasised that the study is exploratory. To be so, and cover the number of issues through the range of respondents necessary to any attempt to advance understanding on a topic as

broad as graduate realism, it was necessary to restrict the samples to around the numbers finally used. In looking for leads for future research, one advantage of a small-scale survey is that it permits exploration (albeit brief) of a number of avenues, from which the most promising can be selected. Another useful feature is that it allows triangulation through comparing different sample groups. This seems especially worthwhile in this topic, where there appears a dearth of triangulatory studies.

The validity of the postal questionnaire as a research tool has been established by such as BELSON (1986). However, the questionnaire has some limitations, too, for a study of this kind. The format requires brief answers, which risks the omission of significant information and points of view. Only a few questions could be posed about any single issue, perhaps discouraging expansiveness. Given the rather abstract main research question, there was a risk of questions being framed with insufficient precision to encourage the necessary depth of thought in the respondent. Relatedly, the user-friendly formula requiring only ticked boxes in answer to some questions may belie the knowledge or reflection needed to do this properly, and there is no obvious way to assess the assiduousness or cursoriness behind each response. This becomes particularly significant in comparing the answers of different groups (recruiters, graduate entrants and careers advisers) to very similar questions.

However, data's value lies not only in the worth of the information it yields about the subject under investigation, but in the degree to which it lends itself to the process of analysis. Structured questions, for example, are easier to analyse (YOUNGMAN, 1986). The main advantages of questionnaires for this study were probably the freedom from geographical constraint and the availability of larger samples. The likely resulting number and range of responses conferred greater reliability upon the data and



observations drawn from it. Youngman also makes the important point that:

... the initial and concluding stages of a survey are not independent; the questionnaire structure must include all the facilities deemed to be necessary for a successful analysis.

(p.156)

Conducting interviews with all respondents was rejected partly because it would have stretched resources too far, and partly because it carried hazards of its own. However, interviews were conducted with ten graduate entrants, as a means to exploring the possible thinking behind the opinions which came through from graduates in the questionnaire survey. This permitted, and even encouraged, a degree of reflection possibly missing in some of the questionnaire responses, resulting at times in less clear-cut but more interesting answers.

The graduate recruitment prospectuses permitted the researcher to experience something of the influence and impact of their messages by reading the text and seeing the images of these publications, endeavouring to appreciate them from the consumer's standpoint before analysing them from the researcher's. These documents provided a very useful backdrop against which the beliefs and actions of graduates and graduating students would be better understood.

## **GRADUATE PROSPECTUSES**

... for some researchers, a document represents a reflection of reality. It becomes a medium through which the researcher searches for a correspondence between its description and the events to which it refers.

(MAY, 1993, p.137)



SCOTT (1990) proposes that documents be assessed in terms of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. In this instance, authenticity is not in doubt; credibility refers to the extent to which the evidence is undistorted and offered sincerely, in Scott's words,

... free from error and evasion ...

(in MAY, 1993, p.144)

in which he recognises the view of SPARKS (1992), that they may constitute 'attempts at persuasion'. 'Representativeness' is understood to mean 'typicality', and the common or frequent features among them make it possible to ascribe typicality to more than a few prospectuses, and to say what the typical features are. 'Meaning' means, broadly speaking, clarity and comprehensibility to the reader.

Because the prospectuses produced by graduate recruiters constitute for many students their first significant information source on choosing an employer (BACHHUBER, 1988), it was considered appropriate to examine a range of these. They are the vehicles not only of much of the information about organisations and the jobs they offer, but of how working life in general is portrayed. As such, they seem potentially powerful shapers of applicants' concepts of the reality of first graduate posts. They are issued by recruiters and normally displayed in HE CAS; they can also be requested by, and sent directly to, interested students.

It was felt that the sample should fulfil several criteria:

- a) organisations should be recruiters (not merely employers) of graduates, the reasons for this having been given in Chapter 1;

- b) a range of graduate occupations should be represented, to discourage bias possibly resulting from too small or narrow a sample, and would usefully include emerging as well as traditional ones;
- c) some organisations selected should each recruit for a spectrum of graduate posts, to help differentiate preferences for particular jobs or particular graduates to fill them;
- d) small, medium and large organisations were to be represented, to highlight any differences in recruitment practice possibly attributable to size;
- e) public and private sector organisations should be included, in an effort to see whether any significant differences existed between the sectors; and
- f) service and manufacturing organisations should be represented, since graduate posts are often too-readily associated with only the former.

In all, prospectuses were obtained from 30 organisations which together fulfilled the above criteria. They also represented the following occupational fields: finance, engineering, media, education, health, H.M.Forces, the sciences, administration, hotel and catering, information, computing, sales, building, law, public services and transport.

Prospectuses offered the researcher the chance to enter the applicant's world (by reading what he/she would read), which would have been difficult or impossible with other steps in the realism-building process, such as work experience or the selection interview. They also offered hard information

with which subjective opinion could later be compared. However, it must be said that such comparisons were to be general - it was not the project's purpose to find discrepancies between the claims of specific organisations and the opinions of their graduate recruits.

### **EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE**

A major objective of the questionnaire aimed at employers was to discover the perceived realism of graduates they had recently recruited. It was recognised that the recruiters would be likely to assess this in terms of newcomers' adaptation to their own organisation. Accordingly, while various questions related to speed and success of adjustment, others quizzed respondents on other factors and influences upon this.

A copy of the Employer Questionnaire (see Appendix) was sent to 85 organisations which recruited graduates annually. The organisations were selected from 'Graduate Employment and Training', mentioned earlier, a large directory of British-based employers produced by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC), an independent and non-profit making body. The publication is well-known and widely used as a source of information in HE careers advisory work, for which reasons it was considered a good source of potential respondents.

Certain criteria were employed in the selection of organisations.



- a) Size was a factor. While many of the employers selected were large and well-known, care was taken to ensure that medium-sized and even some fairly small organisations were represented. Figures for categorisation purposes were arrived at somewhat arbitrarily; nevertheless, it was thought fit to term 'small' organisations employing fewer than 3,000 people nationally, to term 'medium' those employing between 3 and 10,000, and 'large' those of above 10,000 employees. (If figures seem high, it should be noted that some organisations have well over 100,000 people on the payroll.) This range of representation was made to guard against only the methods and opinions of those accustomed to large graduate intakes being represented.
- b) Organisational type was a second factor. Care was taken to ensure that a broad spectrum of employers featuring a comparable range of graduate occupations was represented. The guide for this was those represented by the prospectuses already obtained for the recruitment literature survey, and two organisations offering each occupation were chosen.
- c) Intake was the third factor. While it was important to represent small recruiters of graduates, any declaring forthcoming recruitment intent uncertain were not included. It was considered appropriate to similarly consign any employer intending to recruit fewer than five graduates, since it appeared that any such intent might evaporate under economic or other pressures. Five was therefore the bottom limit, with some organisations at the other end of the scale declaring an intended intake of several thousand.

As with the Careers Adviser Questionnaire, each Employer

Questionnaire was given a coded identification, and it, a stamped addressed envelope for its return and a letter outlining the project was sent to the Graduate Recruitment Officer at each of the 85 organisations contacted.

The Questionnaire asked about: graduates' realism pertaining to specific things; strengths and weaknesses of recruitment literature; the value of work experience; favoured applicant characteristics; the organisation's appeal to applicants; graduate self-appraisal; the 'realism value' of HE where the organisation fitted in various categories, such as size, sector and main function. Forty-three completed questionnaires were received, a response-rate of just over 51%. This was considered sufficient for the purposes of the study.

	NUMBER CONTACTED	RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRES	PERCENTAGE RESPONSE (%)
Small -	20	9	45
Medium	25	12	48
Large	40	22	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>51</b>

**TABLE 2:2    RESPONSE TO THE EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE**

## CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE

While the Employer Questionnaire had tested graduates' realism in terms of adjustment to the recruiting organisation, the Careers Adviser Questionnaire (see Appendix) had a different focus. Its task was to gauge realism in terms of anticipation of the general rather than adjustment to the particular. Respondents were effectively being asked which factors or activities promoted realism, and to indicate the incidence of their occurrence among the student body, rather than commenting on people whose very success in gaining appointment suggested a realistic outlook, at least towards the organisation which had appointed them.

An apparent advantage of the careers adviser as observer or commentator lay in his/her apparent independence. The interests which might influence the recipient of an Employer Questionnaire seemed not to exist for the adviser, whose opinions might be the more critical in some respects on that account. However, the Careers Adviser Questionnaire did not neglect to ask respondents about aspects of their academic institution and the CAS within it. The purpose of this was not to discourage outspokenness, but rather to encourage thoughtfulness.

One thing relating to both the Careers Adviser and the Employer Questionnaires was the issue of respondents' knowledge. The consultations and pilot questionnaires provided a basis for the design of the circulated documents, and questions were avoided for which the respondent would have to rely on guesswork or consultation rather than his/her own knowledge. Nevertheless, realistically, the possibility of this not being so suggested that certain questions include a 'don't know' option. It was also considered important to gain some idea of the extent of careers advisers' knowledge, since



this was itself a possible influence on the realism of graduates. An area of potential vulnerability for advisers was the experience and success or failure of alumni. Advance groundwork had suggested that advisers, busy with current students, had little time to review past ones. However, it was hoped that this would not be true in all cases, and when a respondent did hesitate, colleagues could and would be consulted in order to produce a satisfactory answer.

A copy of the Careers Adviser Questionnaire was sent to 87 HE CAS - 30 'established' universities, 30 'new' universities (ex-polytechnics), and 27 colleges of HE. Opinion was therefore drawn from each sector of HE, and over a range in each. Random selection of institutions within specified geographical regions ensured that each area of the country was well-represented. Directors of Services were considered the most suitable recipients of the Questionnaire: they were likely to have considerable guidance experience and a knowledge of all aspects of their Services' work. As suggested, they might also draw on colleagues' experience in the answers they gave, thereby producing a fuller and more accurate picture of graduate realism. It was also hoped that sending the Questionnaire to a specific individual within each Service might result in a higher and speedier response-rate. Each copy of the Questionnaire was given a coded identification, and a letter outlining the nature and objectives of the project enclosed together with a stamped, addressed envelope for the return of the completed document.

The Questionnaire asked about: how realistic students were in anticipating graduate employment; the 'realism value' of the selection process and recruitment literature; the value of work experience; student self-help potential; applicant characteristics favoured by recruiters; potential for improvement in CAS promotion of realism; feedback from alumni; students'

use of campus careers resources; background of the respondent careers advisers.

In all, 42 completed Questionnaires were received, representing a response-rate of just over 47 per cent. This was considered adequate for the purposes of the study.

	NUMBER CONTACTED	RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRES	PERCENTAGE RESPONSE (%)
'Established' University	30	16	53
'New' University	30	13	43
College of HE	27	13	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>47</b>

**TABLE 2:3**                      **RESPONSE TO THE CAREERS ADVISER**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**

## GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Recipients of the Graduate Questionnaire (see Appendix) were in a position somewhat different from both the employers and the careers advisers participating in the study, since they were to a much greater degree the subjects of their own responses. This may have made the task of completing the Questionnaire harder than their comparable exercise was for the other two groups. It may have, additionally or alternatively, made the questions seem more intrusive. Despite these factors, the response-rate for the Graduate Questionnaire was a little higher than that for the Careers Adviser Questionnaire, and only just below that for the Employer Questionnaire.

Graduates were approached not directly, but through a letter to the person responsible for graduate recruitment in each of 50 organisations, none of which had already been approached concerning any other stage of the study. The Graduate Recruitment Officer was requested to find two graduate recruits, preferably one male and one female, willing to complete each of two Graduate Questionnaires enclosed with the letter. Each graduate approached had to fulfil three conditions: (a) be under the age of 25; (b) have joined the recruiting organisation after 1st January, 1992; and (c) be in his/her first graduate post. These rules were stipulated in an effort to ensure that the age or experience of respondents was not unrepresentative, that they had not been in post so long as to forget their career investigations during HE, and that they had no previous graduate-level employment which might contaminate their recent experience in their current post. The usual reassurances about confidentiality were given, and stamped, addressed envelopes for Questionnaire return were enclosed.

There was a noticeable delay in the return of many of the completed



Questionnaires. This may find an explanation in some not having been passed on immediately to graduates, in graduates delaying completion and/or return of Questionnaires, or the fact that they were sent out during the Summer, when a significant proportion of the recruitment officers and graduates may have been on holiday. A number of recruiters wrote back saying that they could not help with the project. These responses were sometimes curt, but more often an explanation was offered, most commonly that no graduates had been recruited since before 1992; that graduates were unavailable, being away from the organisation engaged in training or study; that recruits were taken only after post-graduate study, and that the request to assist with this project was only one of many, to which it was felt the additional necessary resources could not be devoted.

The Questionnaire asked recruits about: the nature of their expectations of graduate employment and the extent to which these had been borne out; the 'realism value' of the selection process; the value of recruitment literature; previous work experience; valued personal characteristics; self-awareness; 'realism value' of academic staff and the CAS; considerations of postgraduate study; physical, emotional and intellectual impact of work, and some information on personal background.

Forty-three completed copies of the Graduate Questionnaire were returned, which were considered enough for the purposes of the study.

NUMBER CONTACTED	RETURNED QUESTIONNAIRES	PERCENTAGE RESPONSE (%)	
86	43	50	
	[Male	21	49
	Female	22	51]
	['Established Uni. Graduate	34	79
	'New' Uni. Graduate	9	21]

**TABLE 2:4 RESPONSE TO THE GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE**

**GRADUATE INTERVIEWS**

MEASOR (1985) says that the quality of data obtained at interviews depends on the quality of the relationships built with the interviewees by the researcher, and points out that access to them involves being accepted by them, and earning their trust. This, he says, acts partly to combat what he terms 'the unnaturalness of the interview situation', which, he believes, leads to a discomfort based on the negative associations of talking about oneself. However, he also cites the dangers attendant on trying to overcome this barrier, in the form of 'over-rapport', which may lead to bias in collecting or reporting data.

MOSER and KALTON (1983) propose three conditions necessary for the successful completion of interviews: (1) accessibility, which means that the interviewee possesses the information the researcher seeks, is willing to divulge it, and properly understands the questions put to him/her; (2) cognition, which means that the interviewee understands what is required of him/her in that role - for instance, in a structured interview, answers are guided largely by interview schedule, where in a focused interview, they are more likely to reflect the interviewee's own words and frame of reference; (3) motivation, which means that the interviewee feels that what he/she says is valued, and that his/her co-operation is essential to the success of the research.

The graduate recruitment managers of five separate organisations, representing different fields of work, were contacted by telephone, and the nature of the survey explained to them. All agreed to the researcher's proposal to visit their organisation to record an interview with each of two of their graduates, who were required to meet the criteria already described in selecting recipients of the Graduate Questionnaire. The selection of individuals was otherwise at the manager's discretion, as the availability of individuals would depend on their professional commitments. However, a preference was expressed to see one male and one female graduate. A letter of thanks for their co-operation was sent to each manager, together with a list of the issues proposed for discussion during each interview. These paralleled those of the Graduate Questionnaire, to permit a deeper exploration of the data already gathered by that means. The recruitment managers undertook to pass on the lists to each graduate to be interviewed, to allow them to reflect on the questions. They were requested to be available for at least an hour, to ensure coverage of all questions, and allow time for any exploration or elaboration which proved lengthy.



Ten graduates, five male and five female, were interviewed, and each interview audio-recorded. Only brief notes of anything of particular significance were taken, which promoted rapport between researcher and subjects. The shortest interviews lasted a few minutes over an hour, the longest nearly two hours; most were in the region of an hour and a quarter. All took place in attractive and comfortable rooms well-suited to the exercise, and were free of significant interruptions. Each interview was semi-structured, having thereby the advantages cited by YOUNGMAN (1984) of allowing respondents to express themselves at some length, but having enough shape to prevent aimlessness.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has achieved a number of things. Firstly, it has established the survey as essentially within the positivist research tradition, but has acknowledged some debt to ethnography, principally in its concern with generating ideas.

It has shown that a small-scale survey can be a useful way to highlight the significance of a range of issues, something of considerable value in an exploratory study. It has also illustrated the possibility of combining qualitative and quantitative data to give credibility to a study which might lack strength if reliant on one of these only. It has shown the importance of groundwork, conducted through preliminary interviews and questionnaires, to furnish or confirm the most appropriate topics to investigate. These exercises also proved valuable in offering a chance to improve on how organisations or

individuals were to be communicated with in gathering usable data, as well as in refining the structure, design and wording of the questionnaires. Documents, too, in the form of recruitment prospectuses, have been established as having a contribution to make, and the range shown of organisations from which they could be drawn. The importance of interviews, and how they are intended to complement the data gathered by the other means described, has also been illustrated. Finally, the number of contacts and responses have been tabled, with some possible explanations for any lack of response.

BORG and GALL (1983) propose that sampling "involves the selection of a portion of a population as representative of the population". It is felt that the selection and the response to each of the three questionnaires, together with the range of graduate prospectuses examined, plus the ten graduate interviews, go some way to fairly representing graduate recruitment literature and the views of the three groups consulted; nevertheless, each sample is too small for any claim of representativeness to be made for it. However, as has already been said, the role of the small-scale survey in facilitating exploration can legitimately be advanced as a justification for modest sample-size.

Chapters 1 and 2 have established the legitimacy and feasibility of the study. The next major stage will be to analyse the data collected for clues as to the nature and extent of any problems or issues which have a bearing on graduate realism.

## CHAPTER 3

### ARE GRADUATES REALISTIC?

#### INTRODUCTION

At this point it seems worth reiterating the main research questions, namely: is there an incongruence between what graduating students perceive to be the realities of employment and its actual nature? If so, does this lack of perception or this misperception amount to a problem for students on the verge of work and graduates just entered it, or for the recruiters and careers advisers with whom they have dealings at this significant time? Chapters 3-6 will attempt to answer these questions in the following way: Chapter 3 will address the issue of whether there is a problem with realism among graduates, while Chapters 4-6 will examine how far HE, recruiters and graduating students themselves contribute to their realism or lack of it.

This chapter will examine in turn the graduates', the employers' and the advisers' perspectives on graduate realism, identifying consistencies and discrepancies among these respondent groups. It will attempt to say how far realism or the lack of it extended within the graduate group, and whether this merits problem-status as a starting-point for the chapters which follow it. The first part of the data analysis will examine how far graduates thought they had been realistic, which ones thought they had and had not, and how far gender, occupational variations, subject(s) studied and HE sector were significant in this.

Moving on from scrutiny of the graduates, the chapter will continue by examining how far recruiters considered graduate entrants realistic, as well as relating these findings to the recruiting organisations, by type. Some attention



will be devoted to the way recruiters arrived at their judgements of graduates' realism. The focus will then shift to careers advisers, reviewing their opinions of students' and graduates' realism, while in the process not neglecting to identify and analyse these advisers by type of HEI, and to see how they arrived at their opinions.

An overview will then be made to show how far opinion among the three respondent groups correlates, where discrepancies lie, and the significance of these findings. Finally, there will be a general statement as to whether or not there is a problem with graduate realism, and what, in the light of this, will be the precise purpose of the three chapters immediately following.

The opinions of recent graduate entrants to employment were sought first. Forty-three first responded by questionnaire, then ten further entrants were interviewed. While the questions put to the smaller group were the same as those to the larger, the interview situation provided scope for elaboration of answers, and supplemented questions with a view to better understanding. The answers of the questionnaire group were also an aid to formulating what might prove the most useful supplementary questions. What the larger group said will be accounted for to begin with, to give a general picture of their feelings, then the interviewees' responses, which help flesh out this largely quantitative data, will be used to make further observations.

## **GRADUATE ANTICIPATIONS OF EMPLOYMENT**

### **Questionnaire Sample**

Item 1 in the Graduate Questionnaire (see Appendices), which was divided into seven parts, asked respondents whether their anticipations of graduate employment had been borne out by their first post in regard to:

- the scope of their responsibilities;
- how they spent their working time;
- the nature of their contact with colleagues;
- their own capacity for the job;
- training;
- promotion prospects;
- their level of autonomy.

**GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 1**

Have your anticipations of graduate employment been borne out by your first post in regard to:

		<b><u>RESPONSES</u></b>			
		<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>PARTLY</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
a)	The scope of your responsibilities	22	17	4	43
b)	How you spent your working time	23	15	5	43
c)	The nature of your contact with colleagues	26	14	3	43
d)	Your own capacity for the job	31	10	2	43
e)	Training	25	12	6	43
f)	Promotion prospects	25	14	4	43
g)	Your level of autonomy	20	16	7	43

**TABLE 3:1 GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS' ANTICIPATIONS OF PARTICULAR FEATURES OF EMPLOYMENT**

In all categories, the respondents generally thought that their anticipations had been borne out. Only in regard to the sub-question about autonomy was there less than a majority 'Yes' response. The number of 'No' responses was as low as 2 (5 per cent) in one category (d), and no higher than 7 (16 per cent) in any other. Taking all categories into account, an average of



only marginally more than 10 per cent of respondents thought that their expectations had actually not been borne out. However, in each category the remainder was made up of a considerable number of respondents claiming that their anticipations had been only partly met. This represents a high of 17 (40 per cent) on one sub-question (a) and a low of 10 (23 per cent) on one other (d). Unfortunately, the questionnaire permitted no assessment of interpretations of the word 'Partly', and how near or far from a 'Yes' or 'No' response any such answer was. What was clear was that within the respondent group, there was a considerable minority which registered non-fulfilment of expectation (either 'Partly' or 'No').

The highest positive response related to the respondents' own perceived capacity for the job (the lowest negative response was also earned here), strongly suggesting that their expectations of being able to perform the job had been fulfilled. However, the response may be explained by a degree of reluctance to assess personal capacity accurately, though some graduates could have anticipated their capacity as barely adequate, and been proved right. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that most graduates would have gained in confidence and respect for their own abilities through having been offered a job.

In contrast, only a slight majority felt they had anticipated the scope of their responsibilities associated with their first post. This could have been interpreted as referring either to the range of responsibilities (i.e. the number or type) or to the depth or complexity or other implications of known duties. The first (and intended) interpretation suggests some lack of realism, the second, by contrast, the limited degree to which any situation may be anticipated.

Only a modest majority of the graduates felt they had anticipated how they would spend their working time. They had probably interpreted this in terms of what they would be doing rather than what they would be trying to achieve, though either could have changed significantly with a swing in an organisation's policy or economic circumstance. However, given the fairly short gap likely between most job offers and post occupancies, it seems that in most organisations radical changes in activities or objectives would have been unlikely to occur.

The second highest ranked category correlation between expectations and reality related to the nature of contact with colleagues. This seemed surprising, since human relations would normally seem harder to foresee than work activities. However, successful applicants may have had the chance to meet their intended supervisors at the end of the selection stage, and been positively impressed. Alternatively, potential frictions with colleagues may have been avoided through the latter playing a less significant role in their work or adjustment to it than what they did themselves or the things for which they could be held personally accountable.

The 'Yes' responses to anticipations of training were very nearly as high as for contact with colleagues, though six respondents (14 per cent) gave a 'No' reply here. Training in reality is about specifics, while anticipations about it must often be (perhaps necessarily) general. This might help explain the negative responses, possibly caused by respondents having filled in gaps in their knowledge of training with their own (perhaps unduly rosy) mental pictures. However, quality training which offered much but which also demanded a lot may have taken some respondents by surprise, and negative responses here may have reflected the amount of effort the training required rather than being a comment on its standard. Quality training which offered



much reward but also demanded a lot of effort may have given some respondents a shock.

As many entrants as responded positively in regard to training did so when asked about promotion prospects. However, this still left 18 (42 per cent) expressing a lack of fulfilled expectation. It is difficult to say how far into their training any of these respondents began to feel reservations about it. On examination, however, there proved to be no connection of this sort, leaving it open to speculation whether lack of realism here is usually quickly dispelled through learning the experiences of predecessors, or whether greater subtlety or candour in self-assessment is usually first necessary.

The largest number of surprises related, however, to expectations about levels of autonomy. Seven respondents (16 per cent) said that their anticipations had not been borne out, and 16 (37 per cent) said that they had been only partly. Twenty respondents (46 per cent), (a minority, and the only sub-question of which this was true) gave a 'Yes' response here. A possible explanation of the overall response is that autonomy may be considered something most graduates want in their work. It may therefore be a criterion commonly applied by applicants and would-be applicants as a determinant of whether to accept, or even try for, a given post. Recruiters, keen to attract the best graduates, may have highlighted autonomy as a desirable work element, or at least not have disillusioned good applicants holding inflated ideas of how much control they would have over their own activities. On both sides, it may be seen as the 'right' thing to want autonomy - by graduates because it makes them look like promotion material, and by employers because it makes them look as if they want to accord opportunity. But how far does this reflect either side's true feelings? How many graduate applicants really do want to get on with things themselves, and how many recruiters would be willing to



let them?

Significant to interpreting the data in this subsection, and also relevant to other subsections relating to graduate opinion, is the existence of two general possibilities. One is that graduates had expected a lot of the thing in question (e.g. autonomy), and in which case had been surprised if they received less; the other is that they may have anticipated less and therefore been surprised by getting more. This is important in clarifying that both agreeable and disagreeable surprise can apply either to less of a feature or to more of it. Some graduates may have been pleased to get only a little of something, but pleased to have received more of something else, the disagreeable reverse, of course, being possible, too.

### **Interview Sample**

The graduate interviews highlighted some opinions distinctly different from those elicited by the questionnaire.

**GRADUATE INTERVIEWEE RESPONSES TO Item 1**

Have your anticipations of graduate employment been borne out by your first post in regard to:

		<u>RESPONSES</u>			
		<u>YES</u>	<u>PARTLY</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a)	The scope of your responsibilities	5	3	2	10
b)	How you spend your working time	3	7	0	10
c)	The nature of your contact with colleagues	6	4	0	10
d)	Your own capacity for the job	6	4	0	10
e)	Training	6	3	1	10
f)	Promotion prospects	4	4	2	10
g)	Your level of autonomy	7	3	0	10

**TABLE 3:2 GRADUATE INTERVIEWEES' ANTICIPATIONS OF PARTICULAR FEATURES OF EMPLOYMENT**

This group had been a good deal more surprised by how they spent their working time and by their promotion prospects, as well as by their own capacity for the job. They were also more surprised by their level of autonomy than the questionnaire group. However, the small size of the interview sample did not allow reliable comparisons, and it was the qualitative detail of what they said which proved most illuminating, sometimes by indicating the

direction of the surprises ('more' or 'less', as above) as well as their actual nature. Some of the things the interviewees had been displeased about seemed unlikely to consume or affect more than a small proportion of their working hours. However, this was not true of all of them; one interviewee commented on how much unexciting administrative work was required, saying that this might not have come as a surprise had his organisation made better use of him during his Summer placements there. This comment was typical in expressing not just a difficulty, but a possible answer to it, and the group as a whole seemed far from being disposed to complain without reason. Someone else had found the pace of different working weeks varied considerably, from frenetic to idle, but felt the lulls necessary to 'recharging batteries', and accepted it as in the nature of the occupation rather than a quirk of the organisation. A colleague, much of whose time was largely office-bound, writing reports, was disappointed by the similarity of her job's demands to those entailed in undergraduate study.

In my job I have to do a lot of research, I have to write a lot of reports, which is quite similar to being an undergraduate writing essays ...

(Graduate working in advertising)

Another respondent was, conversely, pleased at how far his academic skills were being put to good use. This contrast shows the fine line between fulfilling a hope or expectation by building on academic experience, and being thwarted by simply repeating it. One further interviewee found predictability itself disagreeable, but submitted to this as he knew change was imminent. Finally, the number of hours respondents worked was commented on, but never resentfully, and it seemed accepted that a long working day was essential to the achievement of professional (and possibly personal) goals. The thread running through these experiences seems that surprises, even when



unpleasant, were tolerated probably because respondents considered acceptance necessary to career progress. However, it seems fair to ask whether this acceptance was occupationally realistic or betokened lack of realism about other personal needs. The strength of interviewees' personalities was in most cases very evident in conversation, individuals coming across as people disposed to question and challenge, not just to accept.

Commenting on their own perceived capacity for the job, interviewees offered a number of interesting points: one advertising trainee felt that her lack of technical knowledge had acted as a frustrating brake on her strategic thought in a way she had not expected, though she was beginning to formulate answers to this problem.

Going from illustrated material to finished print product is a very technical process which really I should know a lot more about, but it's something that I suppose I'm just not really interested in and I just don't have much experience in, and I find myself very held back when I feel that people who have this print experience but might not be quite so logical or intuitive or such a solution-finder as I am - they're kind of telling me what to do and reprimanding me for not knowing as much as they do on this subject, and I feel very frustrated because I think, well, if I just knew these facts I'm sure I could use them better, I could apply them better to what I do. I suppose what I'm trying to say is I might not know how things are actually printed, but I'm sure if I did, I'd be able to work out cheaper, better ways and apply more strategic thought to it than I think they do, because that's what I feel at the end of the day I've been trained to do, whereas, you know, they've been to design school or print school or wherever it is they go. Just not knowing the facts of the business is so frustrating, because I'm dying to sort of sit there and write proposals and presentations and that kind of thing, but I just don't know it yet.

(Graduate working in advertising)

A colleague took her own attitude (characterised by appetite for knowledge) as a sign that she was coping. In both cases, it was apparent that coping did

not mean just being able to accomplish straightforward tasks, but rather to act with initiative to overcome barriers to their fulfilment. One engineer said that his capacity had begun to seem greater because he perceived an increasing amount of his degree knowledge becoming relevant to his daily work - to an extent he had not expected. Misgivings were expressed here and there about management's understanding of graduates' roles, one entrant saying that immediate superiors often failed to grasp that graduates were there to develop skills for the long-term benefit of the organisation, not just to do the 'dogsbody jobs'. This was surprising, since their supervisors seemed unlikely to be significantly older, and might therefore be expected to sympathise with such feelings and eliminate or reduce work practices likely to give rise to them. These answers showed that interviewees were thinking not just of coming up to scratch, but of the job being sufficient to their capacity - and holding enough room for them to expand into. Such a positive attitude seemed likely to lead to closer scrutiny of employing organisations - and in turn greater realism - than a simple concern to survive. However, it must be acknowledged that enthusiasm, ability and the wish to develop personally may not be enough to influence favourably adverse circumstances. For even some conscientious graduates, this sort of realism may only come with experience.

Promotion prospects came next. In one accountancy firm, promotion was automatic and annual for the first few years, regardless (within reason) of work performance. This sounded comforting for entrants, but one trainee was surprised by the policy and wary of it, saying he would have preferred to be rewarded for ability displayed. His second surprise related to the drop-out rate. It seemed that prospects for the capable were good, and that the firm was constantly on the lookout for management material. However, it was said that many staff left when they judged they had reached their ceiling within the firm. Graduates seemed to become aware of this soon after entry, resulting in



competitiveness which had even hard-pressed trainees volunteering for extra work to demonstrate commitment. This seemed to show realism about what was required to gain advancement, but did not confirm whether this was an appropriate route to ensure contentment at work. One trainee in an engineering firm had felt he had a much better sense of his potential after three months there, seeing progression being on the technical management side, rather than in production. A trainee in an electricity supply organisation, however, felt that it had been 'economical with the truth' about promotion, and since her arrival a flattening of the organisational hierarchy had made advancement less likely.

Promotion's definitely something that they emphasised right from the start in all the literature, and at the interviews we were told that we were the management of the future, that we were being taken on to be the senior managers in the company in the future. It sounded wonderful. We've since realised that it would appear that they were being rather economical with the truth there. I think maybe that things have changed beyond what the managing director and senior managers in this company have been able to control, which is that our company is such that we have had to contract and lose staff to be able to stay in business, and therefore the management structure has become flatter, and even in the last year I've noticed changes. I mean, since being privatised we've had to lose a lot of staff, and a lot of management, which of course are the most expensive employees, therefore the promotional opportunities are probably not what they would have been a couple of years ago - that's something we're very aware of. But, I believe that they're there if you want them, and, you know, there are ways and means if you want to get on through your work.

(Graduate working in electrical supply)

Despite this, an anticipated beneficial spin-off was more knowledgeable staff, since with more sideways moves, graduates would gain wider experience, a sentiment echoed by her fellow-entrant. In the advertising firm, opinion was split between promotion prospects being well-defined and hazy. One trainee



there felt that the firm had not offered reassuring messages about promotion, because the many applications it received had made this seem unnecessary. Her two colleagues felt they knew what their prospects were, but this may be attributed to their doing different jobs, or to their receiving different messages on the subject from immediate colleagues. A third explanation may be that descriptions of prospects tended to be vague and were (in this case) subject to different interpretations. However, assessment of promotion prospects appeared to rest partly if not largely on a sense of professional direction. For some graduate entrants, promotion appeared to be available down one road only, but for many it depended on a chosen field or specialism within it, and this may be hard to select without significant experience.

Interviewees appeared to have more accurately anticipated their level of autonomy at work than had questionnaire respondents. One said that he enjoyed more discretion than he thought he would have (one example of 'under-expectation'), though this related only to when tasks were done, not to what had to be accomplished. The respondent in a brewing company said that she was able to organise her work as she wanted to. This was not related to experience, as she had been in post only a few months, and she attributed her freedom to the particular manager she was responsible to.

I mean, there are certain days ... where I might have to go away somewhere, 'cause I look after Humberside, so sometimes I have to go and do recruitment there, but as in my work, it's my own ... to organise as I want to. I can say, well, this morning I'm going to do such and such ... I think it's quite a lot to do with the manager, as such, 'cause he is the type of manager who lets you organise your own time ...

(Graduate working in brewing)

The engineers both said they were free to carry on their work in the way and

at the pace they considered appropriate. They were under no pressure, and had to break off their own work only if an explanation of something they had already done was needed.

### **Within-Sample Differences**

The interview sample was too small usefully to divide into categories, though this was possible with the larger questionnaire group. Gender was one appropriate division to make, and women graduates seemed to have been more realistic than men on the scope of their responsibilities, how they spent their working time, the nature of their contact with colleagues, and their level of autonomy. Only in relation to promotion prospects did they seem less realistic than their male counterparts, and this was gauged more through a high number of 'partly' questionnaire and interview responses, rather than wholly negative ones.

Breakdown by HE sector ('Old' university and 'New' university) brought out differences worth commenting on. No 'New' university respondents had been surprised by their anticipations either of the scope of their responsibilities or of how they spent their working time. Their expectations relating to working-time activities, nature of their contact with colleagues and their own capacity for the job all appeared to have been significantly more realistic than those of their 'Old' university counterparts. A ready explanation seems to lie in the higher vocational content of the 'new' graduates' courses, particularly where these entailed placements in organisations similar to those in which they eventually found themselves employed. This may have been attributable not exclusively to the placements,



but at least in part to departmental and personal preparations for such placements. Promotion prospects and level of autonomy were the only areas in which the 'new' respondents seemed to have had more than their share of surprises. The surprise of the 'new' graduates in the respects indicated may be explained by the possibility of an individual's advancement and of the nature or degree of his/her autonomy being in the hands of a very few members of staff, with the possibility of respondents being at odds with the views of these colleagues.

Although caution is required due to the small numbers available for disaggregation, breakdown of questionnaire respondents by degree subject area (Engineering/Technology; Business and Finance; Pure Science; Social Science; Arts) showed only a few clusters of respondents whose expectations had not been met. These were concentrated in the Business and Finance group, a third or more of whom had been surprised in regard to the scope of their responsibilities, their training and their level of autonomy. Of the five Arts graduates in the group, none claimed to have experienced any significant anticipations not having been borne out. It may have been that the Business and Finance graduates were knowledgeable and expected a lot, or perhaps they were just too ambitious in the areas in question. Conversely, the Arts graduates may have had less knowledge, but been less ambitious and more easily satisfied. This illustrates how, curiously, there is no necessary link between knowledge or preparation and realism. What, however, appears important in promoting realism is a balance of knowledge of occupation, organisation, etcetera, and of self; without self-knowledge, other information and understanding may not result in realism. There is no intended suggestion that ignorance or ill-preparedness are recipes for contentment at work. It may be useful here to distinguish between vicarious and experiential knowledge, the former being what most entrants are obliged mostly to rely on before



taking up appointment. Possessing a lot of second-hand knowledge may lull some applicants into a sense of security which makes the reality they find harder to accept. As with the observations in the following paragraph, the small sub-sample size encourages caution in respect of any conclusions to be drawn.

Breakdown of questionnaire respondents by occupational area (finance; production; service; information technology) highlighted the finance sector as the one within which the respondents seemed least content in respect of the issues put to them. In terms of autonomy and training, but also in terms of promotion prospects and scope of responsibilities, the group had its misgivings. It was interesting that the finance area figured much as it had in the degree subject area analysis, but then all those in the sample graduating in a Business/Finance subject had entered employment in that field also.

In all Item 1 categories, most questionnaire sample graduates thought that their anticipations had been borne out. The highest positive response and lowest negative response related to their perceived capacity for the job. The lowest positive response was for level of autonomy, while there were ones almost as modest to scope of responsibilities and anticipations of how time would be spent. The largest number of surprises related to expectations of autonomy, though this need not have indicated discontent, as some graduates may not have wanted it, anyway. Conversely, it may have indicated that some graduates were pleased at what they were entrusted with.

The opinions of graduate interviewees differed a good deal. Overall, they had been more surprised by how they spent their working time and by their promotion prospects, as well as by their capacity for the job. They were also less surprised by their lack of autonomy. The interview group appeared

to tolerate unpleasant surprises, often because they saw this as necessary to career progress, though some of their personal needs may have suffered as a result. However, they did not seem given to accepting things without reason, and appeared to have high levels of self-expectation, and were keen to use their initiative, rather than merely cope with what was given them. A number said that they wanted to fulfil their own standards, not just those of their organisation. In this connection, though, some reservations were expressed about managers having a limited understanding of their own role. Interviewees often appeared willing to take on extra work, something which suggested realism about the need to seem keen, but something perhaps betokening less realism about how to be content at work. Others, however, appeared under little pressure, and pressure and type of organisation did not seem unrelated, financial ones seeming likely to exert it, for example, engineering ones not.

Women graduates, overall, seemed more realistic than men, except in regard to promotion. 'New' university graduates seemed to have better anticipated job activities, colleague contact and their own capacity for the job. This may have been explained by work placements, but seemed to reflect different departmental approaches too. The 'new' graduates, however, were more surprised than their 'old' counterparts about promotion prospects and autonomy.

**GRADUATES' VIEWS OF SATISFYING AND DISAPPOINTING WORK**

**Questionnaire Sample**

Questionnaire Item 2 asked respondents whether there had been any feature of their work which they had not anticipated but had found either particularly satisfying or particularly disappointing. A sizeable majority (30, 70 per cent) of respondents had found some unexpected satisfactions. The surprises and their frequency are categorised as follows in Table 3:3

<b><u>GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 2(a)</u></b>	
Is there any feature of your work which you did not anticipate but have found particularly satisfying?	
<b><u>NATURE OF SURPRISE</u></b>	<b><u>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</u></b>
1) Level of autonomy/responsibility	7
2) Camaraderie/nature of colleagues	7
3) Quantity and choice of training	5
4) Scope for initiative in setting up/arranging projects	5
5) Information Technology aspects	4
6) Client contact	3
7) Team interaction/departmental interaction	3
8) Involving others in work	2
9) Sense of involvement	2
10) Range of work	2
11) Technical knowledge required	1
12) Opportunities for overseas travel	1

**TABLE 3:3 GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS' UNEXPECTED SATISFACTIONS**



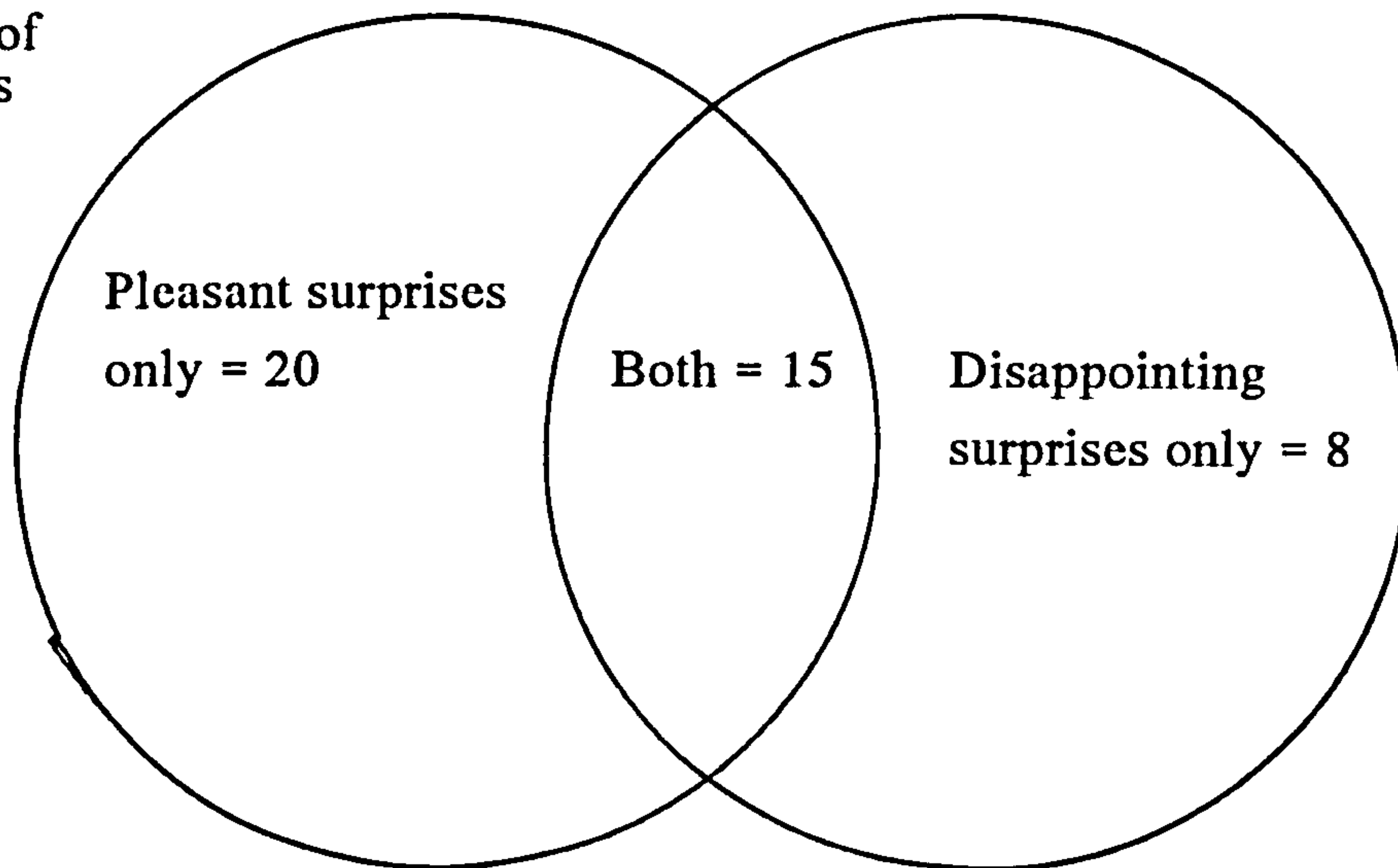
It was clear from this that many graduates had found aspects which exceeded their expectations. However, this indicated a degree of unrealism, since, while some of the features instanced would have been hard to foresee and assess, others did not seem so. The surprises seemed essentially of three kinds - operational, social and discretionary. An operational surprise would have to do with a work task or the reasoning underpinning it; a social surprise would reflect something unexpected about colleagues' attitudes towards work or towards the respondent, or the ways they reacted to one another; a discretionary surprise would concern the latitude or the restrictions on personal discretion or initiative. The operational ones outnumbered either of the other two, despite being probably the easiest of the three to anticipate, having to do with definable activities rather than with personal feelings or reactions. This poses the question of whether applicants' selection of the organisations they come to approach is influenced by lack of information or understanding concerning everyday activities. An organisation which fails to address any such misunderstandings may be lacking the services of graduates they could otherwise have recruited, to their (and the graduates') possible disadvantage.

Few respondents had experienced disappointing surprises. The range may be represented as follows: excessive clerical duties; scant need for degree knowledge or intellectual ability; movement which made setting and gaining responsibility difficult; lack of proper training; lack of real responsibility or work opportunity; too much time spent inappropriately; excessive bureaucracy and politics; poor teamwork; inexperienced supervisors; difficulties of the sudden transition to managing people; slow salary increases; poor information dissemination; lack of interest in and respect for issues important to newcomers, and, finally, monotony. Some of these perceived shortcomings seemed likely to significantly influence the

outlook of the graduate concerned. The criticism of work requiring little special knowledge or intellect is particularly ironic, as is the accusation of monotony, since graduates in general bring to employment more knowledge and intellect than any other group of starting employees in the workforce. It is these qualities and the initiative they encourage that is likely to make them feel monotony more keenly. Other criticisms (like poor teamwork or lack of proper training) tell, because they suggest conscientiousness rather than indifference on the part of those making them. The complaints seemed less related to discretionary elements, being almost entirely confined to operational and attitudinal ones, the former, as with the pleasant surprises, predominating.

It was interesting to compare the satisfactions of those claiming to have experienced disappointment, and the negative surprises of those who were generally, or especially, content. The eight generally disappointed graduates had nearly all found satisfaction in something, and none seemed bitter or cynical. Twenty of the remaining 35 sample members seemed very content, but the other 15 did express major reservations. These showed that even many of those who were generally content had not fallen into sluggish indifference or lost their critical faculties. These results may be more clearly expressed in the form of a Vern diagram.

Number of graduates  
= 43



**DIAGRAM: SURPRISES EXPERIENCED BY GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS**

**Interview Sample**

Of the ten interviewees, eight said they had found surprise satisfactions. The features mentioned were:

- 1) Doing a special job entailing computer skills learned elsewhere.
- 2) Winning a presentation skills competition.
- 3) Seeing one's name at the bottom of letters and reports.
- 4) Receiving positive feedback, giving a sense of contribution.
- 5) The confidence derived from preparing and making a good presentation.
- 6) The speed with which responsibility was accorded.
- 7) The good relationships enjoyed with colleagues.
- 8) Doing enjoyable work.



The last two points suggest that some interviewees had expected little in the way of occupational or social satisfaction, but this may be too severe an interpretation. In one or two other instances, the surprise had come as much from how the respondent had found him/herself reacting to a feature (e.g. having their name on the bottom of a report) as to the feature's occurrence. In short, people had sometimes been surprised at what had surprised them, and while the questionnaire respondents' answers seemed to reflect general conditions presumably enjoyed by all, most of the interviewees' answers mirrored self-recognition or implied recognition by others. This may be a much deeper and more satisfying form of surprise than the mere enjoyment of favourable conditions, encouraging in turn, perhaps, the formulation of new goals and the search for higher levels of performance consistent with the augmented self-image. However, these examples also illustrate how limited self-concept and the gradual opening-up of the work situation and what it affords may cause apprehensions about employment which subsequent experience proves unfounded.

Seven of the ten interviewees said they had been disappointed by something. These mentioned the routine nature of the work, and being managed by someone only a little older; being excluded from an event because of junior status; liaison duties which reduced time for research and creativity, and carrying the onus of having to ask for feedback were spoken of also. By contrast with their pleasant surprises, these elements related to imposed conditions rather than things which might have left respondents feeling the authors of their own disappointments. Whether the continuance of things which caused disappointment had been challenged, or had been accepted as unalterable, was not clear. There seemed a possibility that a number of the disappointments might have been negated by graduates individually or collectively representing their feelings to their immediate

supervisors, if not to management. Except for the routine nature of the work, the surprises mentioned were so particular that they could hardly have been foreseen, even with excellent preparation. Monotony did seem to have caused some discomfort, but it may not have been the monotony itself which had not been anticipated, but its degree or the effect it produced on those experiencing it. Clearly, surprise may relate to the intensity of an experience rather than its mere occurrence. The overall responses from the interviewees suggested that they had been realistic to the extent that most disappointing surprises were not obviously the result of poor preparation or misguided premises on their part.

### **Within-Sample Differences**

After disaggregation, gender showed nothing significant, with an almost perfectly even distribution, both for satisfactions and dissatisfactions, in the questionnaire group. None of the female respondents appeared to think that being a woman was distinctly disadvantageous, but it must be asked whether they were being realistic in holding this opinion.

Only a slight majority of 'new' university graduates had found something particularly satisfying, while this was true of a large majority of the 'old' university graduates. Could this have been because the 'old' graduates were likely to have had less experience of typical work settings related to their study and their career plans?

The degree subject area breakdown brought forth little of note, except



that most of the Business/Finance graduates seemed particularly disappointed by something, while all the Social Scientists had been particularly pleased by something. The level of disappointment in the occupational categories again brought the finance workers to the fore (most had found something particularly satisfying, too, lest it be thought they were just a sour bunch). The information technology group's level of disappointment was high, too. Service industry graduates were high in particular satisfactions.

The surprises expressed were essentially of three kinds - operational, social and discretionary, the first being most frequent. Looking at the agreeable surprises of the graduate questionnaire and interviewee groups showed differences between them. Level of responsibility/autonomy, nature of colleagues and general camaraderie, quality and choice of training, together with scope for initiative in setting up/arranging projects were the four most often cited by the questionnaire respondents. The interviewees seemed to have been pleased by other, often more specific things. They mentioned gaining confidence through recognising their own achievements, and obtaining or using particular skills. Good working relationships and speed of responsibility were not overlooked, but often interviewees expressed surprise at what had surprised them. Recognition of their own abilities and by their colleagues seemed more important to interviewees than any physical aspect of their work environment.

Graduate Questionnaire respondents were disappointed by the amount of time they felt they spent inappropriately. They also felt let down by problems of leadership and teamwork, and poor communications, these three features seeming not unconnected. Lack of financial motivation, and perceived scant need for their intellectual qualities or academic achievements were other fairly frequent laments. These bespoke a yearning for greater



organisational and personal effectiveness, and an appreciation that the second often depended on the first. The interviewees, too, seemed concerned that they could not always get as involved as they would like to, usually through being allocated peripheral duties, or being denied access to events or activities the prerogative of more experienced colleagues. However, there were only rarely signs that they had 'pushed' to get their way.

Beyond these categories, service industry graduates scored highly in satisfactions. By contrast, graduates working in finance seemed most dissatisfied, something to be explained possibly by excessive expectations.

### **EMPLOYERS' VIEWS OF GRADUATE REALISM**

Of the 43 graduate employers canvassed by questionnaire, a sizeable majority (70 per cent) felt that most applicants they interviewed for graduate posts were realistic in their anticipations of employment. If this figure was true for graduates interviewed, it would almost certainly be higher for those appointed, assuming that realism was a criterion on which applicants were judged. However, it had to be remembered that many (if not all) organisations would eliminate a proportion (possibly a large one) of applicants prior to the interview stage. It was therefore recognised that realism (as far as this could be gauged from an application form) might be a factor in determining exclusion as much as inclusion.

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, QUESTION 1**

Do you think that most applicants you interview for graduate posts are realistic in their anticipations of employment?

	<u>RESPONSES</u>			<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	
a) In your organisation as a whole	30	12	1	43
b) Regarding aspects of the work environment (including pay and conditions)	22	20	1	43
c) Regarding constituent tasks of the job	15	26	2	43
d) Regarding training and promotion	26	16	1	43

**TABLE 3:4 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF APPLICANTS' REALISM IN THEIR ANTICIPATIONS OF EMPLOYMENT**

A very narrow majority (51 per cent) of the employers felt that applicants were realistic in their anticipations of aspects of the work environment, including pay and conditions; 20 (47 per cent), however, were less certain. To quote one employer:

Very few graduates are completely informed/realistic, just those who have done industrial training. Even then, whilst this company offers challenging and demanding projects to placement students, it is possible that this doesn't happen within all companies.

Judgements may have been more subjective here than those on other sub-questions, since each respondent will have had his/her own idea of which

aspects of the work environment should count in making this assessment. Employers' reservations cited here gave cause for concern, since the nature and level of knowledge needed for realism might have been gained through organisational literature and a visit, the larger commitment entailed in such as work experience probably being unnecessary. The high apparent lack of realism attributed by employers here suggested that a significant proportion of applicants were not making the basic effort needed for information-gathering, or were in some way being misled by basic information, work experience or what they had been told in their contacts with established employees.

However, it was about constituent tasks of the job that employers considered applicants least realistic. There are a number of ways in which this might have been identified: ignorance that certain tasks had to be accomplished; awareness of the tasks but uncertainty of what they involved; failure to assess personal capacity for the tasks required. Lack of realism might have resulted from an individual's broad-ranging enquiries about different and perhaps numerous jobs, but failure to have researched any one in the detail necessary to making a proper judgement about it. The Science or Technology graduate might have been at less risk than his/her Arts counterpart here, the former's job applications having been perhaps more likely to focus on opportunities requiring a more concentrated range of skills or aptitudes. The possibility must not be overlooked, though, that organisations in their recruitment literature and other vehicles of information had concentrated on communicating messages other than ones covering job-content.

Employers thought applicants much more realistic about training and promotion, 26 (61 per cent) giving 'Yes' answers to this question. Constraints on questionnaire space led to training and promotion being lumped together here, so the employers' responses may not reflect equality in graduates'



awareness of each. However, training and promotion are linked in the sense that both relate closely to professional development, and it seemed likely that an applicant realistic about one would have become so partly through an understanding of how it related to the other. It may have been that the apparently greater awareness here was related to the association of training and promotion with increased earnings and status. Also, there has recently been great emphasis on training as desirable or necessary as a national strategy relevant to all levels of employment, and this may have contributed to the apparent importance accorded it by applicants for graduate posts.

Thirty-seven of the 43 respondents felt that after a few months at work, graduate recruits had become more realistic. (Three thought they had not, and three did not know.)

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 10</u>			
Is it your impression that, after a few months at work, graduate recruits have become more realistic?			
<u>RESPONSES</u>			
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
37	3	3	43

**TABLE 3:5 EMPLOYERS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF WORK ON GRADUATES' REALISM**

The emphatic response was not a surprise, but employers' impressions of the ways or areas in which graduate realism had been gained, deserve comment. Four elements stood out, having been mentioned by five or more employer respondents. Pay and prospects constituted one of these, with respondents generally feeling that often entrants were less expectant about speedy pay rises or advancement, in most cases having become reconciled to a slower pace in both. For many, this reflected recognition that promotion had to be earned, and that opportunities for promotion were fewer than they had thought. Equally highly-ranking in the recruiters' eyes was a greater realism about personal contribution and responsibilities. In one or two cases this had meant entrants having come to understand that they were accountable, and might therefore periodically have to assume roles unfamiliar to them and which might (at least initially) cause them anxiety, such as managing other people. However, it was also evident that in some cases greater realism had meant entrants coming to see the limitations of their immediate role, and grasping that their organisation saw their purpose being to achieve certain fairly well-defined objectives, rather than having some sort of roving remit to expand their capabilities.

The third factor identified was becoming more realistic about how the employing organisation worked. This was usually meant in the sense of how different departments interlinked and of what was really important to proper functioning (for example, financial elements and processes), even if these had not been much in evidence before. The fourth main employer observation in this question was entrants' better appreciation of the pressures and constraints under which an organisation, and in turn those who work for it, operate. Greater awareness was seen as being rooted in the induction programme and from the recognition that having a degree did not confer professional respect automatically. It was also attributed to 'ownership' of entrants' training, and

understanding that progress depended on their own motivation, as well as to their recognition that within the organisation there were people more knowledgeable than themselves.

Other ways in which entrants' realism was said to have been raised (in each instance by at least three employer respondents) were a sense of their own limitations, the importance and value of working with others, and the nature and degree of standards of their employing organisations. Entrants were said to have become more realistic through greater awareness of the career paths available and their own career direction, through a sense of the need to be well-organised, through becoming oriented to dealing with clients or customers, recognising the importance of profitability and becoming used to routine. We are reminded here of the earlier observation that realism is about recognising elements of the work setting and becoming aware of personal capacities and attitudes. Recognition of both kinds seemed important to entrants who wanted to build successful careers within the organisations constituting the employer sample.

The employers canvassed were at one point in their questionnaire presented with two series of short statements relating to final year undergraduates' and graduates' awareness respectively, and were asked to indicate (on a scale of 1-5) the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The responses to the first series are stated in Table 3:6 below.



**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 12A**

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:

- |                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 = Agree strongly          | 4 = Disagree generally |
| 2 = Agree is generally true | 5 = Disagree strongly  |
| 3 = Not sure/don't know     |                        |

**DO YOU THINK THAT MOST FINAL-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES:**

<b><u>STATEMENT</u></b>	<b><u>RESPONSE</u></b>					<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
	<b><u>1</u></b>	<b><u>2</u></b>	<b><u>3</u></b>	<b><u>4</u></b>	<b><u>5</u></b>	
Gather enough careers information	3	17	14	8	1	43
Can evaluate careers information properly	0	21	11	11	0	43
Are unduly influenced by images of work	8	17	13	5	0	43
Are unduly influenced by the prevailing job-market	10	16	8	9	0	43
Apply for work suited to their capabilities	0	23	12	5	3	43

**TABLE 3:6 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FINAL-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES' CAREERS INFORMATION ACTIVITIES**

Employers' uncertainty about some of these issues was apparent from this table. In every case but one, between 25 and 30 per cent of the sample were uncertain. Few very strong feelings were expressed, though 8 respondents (19 per cent) felt emphatically that graduates were unduly influenced by images of work, and 10 (23 per cent) that they were unduly influenced by the prevailing job market. Of at least equal significance, however, were the greater number of respondents in each category who believed the proposition generally true. Interestingly, 23 respondents (53

per cent), a majority, thought graduates applied for work suited to their capacities, yet no-one felt this strongly. A statistic meriting concern was that 11 employers did not feel that graduates were able to evaluate careers information properly. It was recognised that there were issues of which employers might be less likely to be knowledgeable than graduates or advisers, but their selection procedures, plus the feedback they would receive on graduates in post made these questions considered to be within their capacities.

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 12B</u>						
Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:						
1 = Agree strongly			4 = Disagree generally			
2 = Agree is generally true			5 = Disagree strongly			
3 = Not sure/don't know						
<b>DO YOU THINK THAT MOST RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS:</b>						
<u>STATEMENT</u>	<u>RESPONSE</u>					<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
Are satisfied with their level of autonomy	7	23	8	5	0	43
Are satisfied with the training they receive	13	24	1	5	0	43
Have difficulty adjusting to working with others	0	8	7	22	6	43
Have difficulty learning work methods	0	5	5	24	9	43
Find work stressful:						
a) physically	2	11	1	21	8	43
b) emotionally	0	13	10	17	3	43
c) intellectually	1	10	5	24	3	43

**TABLE 3:7 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS' SATISFACTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES**

Of the 43 respondents, 30 (70 per cent) agreed generally or strongly with the proposition that most recent graduate entrants were satisfied with their level of autonomy, only 8 (19 per cent) claiming to be unsure, or not to know. This seemed optimistic, since graduate entrants had been a good deal less positive, only 20 out of 43 (46 per cent) saying that their expectations with regard to autonomy had been met. The wording of the Employer Questionnaire differed a little from the Graduate Questionnaire in that the latter asked whether expectations had been met, which allowed for this not having been so. However, it seems a fairly safe assumption that most (if not all) graduate entrants who declared their expectations met had been content with this outcome.

An even more emphatic proportion of employers felt that entrants were satisfied with the training they received, fully 37 (86 per cent) feeling this strongly or generally, and only one respondent unready to offer an opinion on this. The graduates' responses on this issue were generally favourable, only 6 (14 per cent) saying that their expectations had not been met. It seemed reasonable to suppose that employers would be likely to canvass entrants' feelings about training (than, say, autonomy) since those feelings might influence the training's effectiveness. It should be remembered that some of the entrants' reservations about training may have related to aspects other than its actual quality, for example, because of the demands it placed on them.

No employer thought strongly that graduates had difficulty adjusting to working with others, and only 8 (19 per cent) thought this was even generally true. Some respondents stated that they did not know, or were unsure, but 28 (65 per cent) disagreed generally or strongly with the statement. Perhaps the key here is the word 'adjusting', and that the employers were really saying not that entrants made an immediate adaptation, but that



they could cope with the process and pace of changing from being a solitary worker (i.e. a student) to an interdependent worker (i.e. a graduate employee). Most of employers' disagreement with the statement, however, was general rather than emphatic. This may indicate that the group exercises often used as part of the graduate selection process did not always show the capacities of otherwise successful applicants. Perhaps they did not always eliminate unsuitable ones, either (assuming that this was one of their purposes).

Responding to the proposal that graduate entrants have difficulty learning work methods, only 5 employers (11 per cent) thought this even generally true, and 33 (77 per cent) disagreed generally or strongly. Five respondents (11 per cent) were unsure of whether or not they did. That they should be thought to experience difficulty leads to one of three possible conclusions: the entrants' learning capacities were in some respect deficient; their training was poorly delivered; the employers were mistaken in their assessment, or had paid insufficient attention to making one. Any of these interpretations raised a question over employers (if only a small proportion of them) in terms of personnel selection or training delivery.

A large majority of employers felt that most applicants they interviewed were generally realistic in terms of employment. However, it must be recognised that many (possibly most) of those not getting as far as the interview stage may have failed to progress on account of not being realistic. Employers viewed applicants as least realistic about the constituent tasks of jobs; one of the possible explanations for this was that in applying for a range of posts, students/graduates failed to research any one of them in sufficient detail. Employers considered applicants most realistic about training and promotion; the latter's greater awareness may have had to do with these features' association with status. It was felt emphatically that graduates were

more realistic after a few months at work, employers feeling that they had less expectation of advancement or speedy pay rises. It was also said that they recognised that promotion had to be earned, and that they had responsibilities to fulfil rather than being allowed to develop in whatever way they pleased. Some time in the job also appeared to bring a better understanding of how the organisation worked, and the constraints within which it and its staff operated. A sense of the importance and value of working with others, the usefulness of particular personal qualities, and a better sense of the possible (and more desirable) career paths were also said to develop during this period.

Employers mainly believed that graduates were satisfied with their level of autonomy, and a high proportion thought them happy with their training. Few recruiters thought entrants had trouble adjusting to working with others, though they may have meant this to be true over a period, rather than immediately. They saw no real difficulty in graduates learning work methods, fewer than a quarter of employers thinking they might have any problems at all.

### **CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS OF GRADUATE REALISM**

Item 1 of the Careers Adviser questionnaire (Do you think that most students you interview have realistic anticipations of graduate employment?) raised some serious issues about graduate realism.

Outside their particular field, students have very little career sense and are disturbingly naive about the job market in general.

Increasingly students seem unprepared to spend time researching career options or potential employers. This leads to them developing only a patchy view of what faces them upon graduation.

... final-year students are unduly influenced by the experiences of friends who graduated a year earlier. This year we see apathy out of proportion to the number of jobs available. Companies are withdrawing from the 'milkround' due to a lack of applications.

I do believe students have a limited view of work. This is different from a mistaken view.

... gender, sex (sic) and age all influence how realistically students approach first employment.

Increasing numbers of students are working in McDonald's, etc. to stave off debt, which reduces the time available for both study and careers research.

We see most students only once. Answers tend to be based mostly on personal feelings rather than fact.

These quotations are fairly representative of the rather gloomy picture of graduate realism which careers advisers in general expressed.



**CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 1**

Do you think that most students you interview have realistic anticipations of graduate employment?

	<u>RESPONSES</u>			<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	
a) In organisations generally	16	21	5	42
b) Regarding aspects of the work environment (including pay and conditions)	17	19	6	42
c) Regarding constituent tasks of the job(s)	10	27	5	42
d) Regarding training and promotion	14	22	6	42

**TABLE 3:8 CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS ON STUDENTS' ANTICIPATIONS OF EMPLOYMENT**

In the four sub-questions, which were the same as those asked employers about applicants and asked of graduate entrants themselves, the answers were illuminating. It must be remembered here that the careers advisers were being asked to assess features of students in general, not employed graduates or final-year applicants only, and that more modest estimates of realism might therefore be expected, since this group embraced freshman students as well as those on the verge of leaving HE. Nevertheless, the bulk of university careers interviews are requested by students

approaching or beyond the half-way mark in their studies, so for the most part we are talking about people other than those just out of school or lacking the opportunity to take advantage of their institution's careers information and educational facilities, or to benefit from such arrangements as work experience.

Asked whether they thought that most students they interviewed had realistic anticipations of graduate employment in organisations generally, only 16 careers advisers out of 42 (38 per cent) agreed, only 5 (12 per cent) not venturing a clear opinion. Oddly, the last statistic cited may be the most interesting, since it suggests either that the advisers felt unable to judge of those (or a significant proportion of those) they interviewed, despite this probably being a major objective of most interviews, or (perhaps more seriously still) that they lacked the knowledge of organisations necessary to making such an assessment of their students. It was also important to recognise the possibility of some advisers having read the question as referring to students before they had had a careers interview, while others may have made post-interview assessments, by which time most students were likely to be more knowledgeable and possibly therefore more realistic, perhaps significantly so. The first interpretation is the one intended, and which seems the more likely to have been made, but the alternative has to be acknowledged.

Asked about student realism relating to aspects of the work environment (including pay and conditions), the advisers' answers were only marginally more positive than those to the previous question, with 6 indicating they did not know.

Perhaps it is unreasonable to expect a higher level of realism about one



aspect of a situation than about the whole situation (i.e. graduate employment) itself. On the other hand, exploration may have taken place into one or more aspects of employment which students considered most readily indicative of the things they wanted to know. However, if this were so, then it is hard to explain why the lowest level of awareness (according to careers advisers) was in relation to constituent tasks of the job(s). In this sub-question, only 10 advisers considered students realistic, and, with 5 not knowing, 27 felt their students lacking. While the assessment by employers on the same question was more favourable, still only 15 (36 per cent) considered applicants realistic, so awareness between first consultations with careers advisers and first applications to employers did not seem greatly increased. It may of course have been that a contribution to the advisers' estimation here was a body of students who consulted them because they were not being offered graduate posts, and that this was in turn explained (at least partly) by a lack of realism as adjudged by recruiters.

The figures regarding training and promotion were no more encouraging, only 14 advisers considering students realistic, 6 not knowing, and 22 giving a negative reply. Training and promotion are topics usually covered in recruitment prospectuses, and it was not clear whether students did not read these properly, whether the literature misrepresented reality, or whether careers advisers were themselves ill-informed. The last seems unlikely, particularly since advisers were likely to have gained a good deal of information of this kind from visiting employers and from students making assiduous research and reaching the advanced stages of selection. Two clues to careers advisers' views being more critical than those of recruiters were their gaining extra knowledge in the ways just instanced, or by being instrumental in students' gaining the extra experience or understanding which gained them a higher reputation with recruiters.



**CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 10**

From the feedback you receive from alumni and graduate recruiters, is it your impression that after a few months at work, graduate recruits are more realistic?

<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
33	0	9	42

**TABLE 3:9 CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECT OF WORK ON THE REALISM OF GRADUATE ENTRANTS**

In Item 10, careers advisers were asked whether, from the feedback they received from alumni and graduate recruiters, graduate recruits were more realistic after a few months at work. Of the 42 adviser respondents, 33 (78 per cent) felt recruits did become more realistic, none thought they didn't, but 9 (22 per cent) didn't know. Four of the nine had five or more years' experience, and three of these had experience in industry or commerce as well as education before becoming careers advisers in HE. Lack of breadth or length of experience therefore seemed to provide no explanation, and it may have been simply that these nine advisers were so busy meeting the demands of current students that they had no time to assess how former ones were getting on.

It is worth examining the positive responses to Item 10 in more detail, to see how entrants became more realistic. The advisers' responses in this regard can be reduced to six essentials:

- 1) Entrants have after a few months learned what the work really involves.
- 2) They have begun to learn their own preferences respecting the range of work available to them within their organisation.
- 3) They understand the short-term demands of work.
- 4) They know what employment-related pressures are.
- 5) They have a better idea of their prospects of climbing the career ladder.
- 6) They recognise discrepancies between work as advertised and the real thing.

It is arguable that none of the above could have been learned other than experientially, since all are or could be represented by quite subtle kinds of knowledge, both organisation/task-related and self-related, too. However, it also appears that points 3, 4 and 5 represent areas in which awareness might have been highly sharpened without the medium of employment. It is to be expected that none of the above forms of increased awareness were entirely revelatory to entrants, but rather a refinement of the knowledge and impressions they had held on entry, rather than a contradiction of them.

In Item 13, careers advisers were asked whether most students realistically assessed a) their prospects of doing postgraduate study, and b) the occupational value of doing it.

CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 13

Do most students realistically assess:

		<u>RESPONSES</u>			
		<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a)	Their prospects of doing postgraduate study	17	22	3	42
b)	The occupational value of doing it	8	30	4	42

**TABLE 3:10**      **CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS OF STUDENTS' REALISM ABOUT POSTGRADUATE STUDY**

Responses to part a) showed 17 advisers (40 per cent) feeling that most students exhibited realism here, with 22 (52 per cent) saying they did not, and 3 (7 per cent) not knowing. The occupational value of such study was something the advisers were much less positive about, only 8 (19 per cent) feeling students were realistic, 30 (71 per cent) that they weren't, and 4 (10 per cent) unsure. Ignorance of the competition for places, and of the prospects of funding for any place offered, whether vocational or academic, were major concerns related to prospects. So was academic guidance, which it was said students gained only through persistence. One adviser thought that students considered postgraduate study harder than it actually was, especially in the



scientific/technical field. One felt that there was:

... still a strong tendency (encouraged by some academics) for students who are academically qualified to do a higher degree to do it because it is available than because it fits into a long-term career plan.

Another commented that:

... some [postgraduate] courses are not particularly work-related even if they purport to be, and PhD study places are frequently not seen in any employment strategy.

One described postgraduate study as:

... looked on as a stop-gap until a job can be found.

Part of students' lack of realism, according to one adviser, was the (mistaken) belief that a postgraduate qualification would always impress an employer.

Another adviser said that some students had:

... an unrealistic attitude towards their academic ability, and the need for an excellent first degree.

Others commented on failures to realise how difficult funding was to obtain.

Clearly, according to the advisers, anxiety about not being offered work prompted some students' interest in postgraduate study. This would have been more understandable had it taken place after a proper assessment of the job market, but many advisers' comments suggested otherwise. Ironically, this meant that some students' unrealism (as perceived by advisers) about postgraduate study, based on undue optimism, was only compounded by

unrealism about employment, but founded on undue pessimism; some ended up falling between two stools. However, a suspicion was left that possibly many employers were being inappropriately dismissive of supplementary study. It must also be recognised that though a postgraduate qualification may not have been linked to an occupation or a career plan, it may have helped a student to resolve both, as well as affording personal growth and boosting academic capacity, leading ultimately to a fuller working contribution than would have otherwise been possible.

**CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 14(B)**

**AGREE/DISAGREE SECTION (Part 2)**

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:

- |                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 = Agree strongly          | 4 = Disagree generally |
| 2 = Agree is generally true | 5 = Disagree strongly  |
| 3 = Not sure/don't know     |                        |

**DO YOU THINK THAT MOST RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS:**

<u>STATEMENT</u>	<u>RESPONSE</u>					<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
Are satisfied with their level of autonomy	0	4	25	13	0	42
Are satisfied with the training they receive	0	16	24	2	0	42
Have difficulty adjusting to working with others	0	4	13	19	6	42
Have difficulty learning work methods	0	5	12	19	6	42
Find work stressful:						
a) Physically	0	15	13	11	3	42
b) Emotionally	0	13	20	6	3	42
c) Intellectually	0	4	16	20	2	42

**TABLE 3:11 CAREERS ADVISERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS' SATISFACTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES**



In Item 14(B), advisers were asked to give a graded response to the same statements asked of employers. Firstly, they were asked whether, in their opinion, graduate entrants were satisfied with their level of autonomy. None agreed with this strongly, and only a few thought it generally true. Thirteen disagreed generally, none strongly. Clearly, there was quite widespread belief that graduates were less than happy with this feature of their work. However, perhaps the real surprise was that 25 advisers (59 per cent) felt unable to offer an opinion. This drew further attention to advisers' uncertainty about the thoughts and experiences of people no longer their nominal responsibility. It seemed likely that a good number of the graduates seen by advisers were former students who had sought their help again on account of unhappy work circumstances, and that issues connected with autonomy were among these.

The second question, covering whether graduate entrants were satisfied with the training they received again brought no emphatic agreement or disagreement, but a reversal in view, 16 respondents (37 per cent) agreeing generally with the statement, only 2 (5 per cent) disagreeing. Again, however, 24 (58 per cent) expressed indecision or ignorance. It may not have been that respondents were disinclined to survey what evidence there was for this; rather, there may have been so large a body of knowledge supporting each side that only a middle-ground opinion was considered fair.

Asked whether they thought graduates had difficulty adjusting to working with others, 25 advisers (60 per cent) disagreed or disagreed strongly, 13 (31 per cent) were unsure, and only 4 (10 per cent) felt that the statement was generally true. This did not seem a problem area, and far fewer respondents than in the two previous questions expressed uncertainty. This suggested that this was an issue which careers advisers rarely had to deal with

in their contacts with graduates, so perhaps it was something rarely causing sufficient discontent to prompt resignation or alternative job-seeking.

The responses in relation to whether entrants found learning work methods difficult was much the same, 25 (60 per cent) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the proposal, 12 (29 per cent) uncertain, and 5 (12 per cent) feeling that the statement was generally true. It seemed strange that advisers, each of whom must have seen a wide range of students, could hold such divergent views, even allowing for differences in such as careers education policy within different institutions. This may be explained by the particular type of graduate/student dealt with by each adviser, and in this instance it was considered that the five advisers who thought entrants did have difficulties might themselves have been specialists advising students from one faculty only, and that this might indicate a correlation between students' degree subjects and the effectiveness with which they acquired skills at work. However, as on examination only two of the five did not deal with the full student range within their institutions, and as the group's experience embraced industry as well as former posts in education, and the amount of time they had been careers advisers varied considerably too, there seemed no obvious explanation for their collective opinion on this issue.

Finally, careers advisers were asked whether entrants had found work stressful in any of three ways: physically, emotionally or intellectually. No adviser felt strongly that they had, but in the physical and emotional spheres, 15 (36 per cent) and 13 (31 per cent) respectively agreed with it generally. Thirteen (31 per cent) and 20 (43 per cent) respectively did not know or were not sure, while 14 (33 per cent) and 9 (22 per cent) respectively disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement. Reasons for physical stress, other than in jobs where this may occur as a natural part of ordinary duties (e.g. the



Armed Services or the Police), seemed most likely to be the length of the working day and/or travelling. The student's working day is typically shorter than the average employee's, and most students live near their academic institution, and often on the campus itself. Emotional stress seemed likely to arise from the trauma of relocating, having to adjust to established colleagues (including professional superiors) and possibly sharing one's living space. There was surely also the sense of a need to perform satisfactorily, with perhaps fewer chances to 'get it right' than when in HE.

Advisers saw the intellectual arena as the one in which graduates were least likely to experience stress. Only 4 out of 42 (10 per cent) thought intellectual stress even generally the case, while 22 (52 per cent) disagreed generally or strongly, and 16 (33 per cent) registered ignorance or uncertainty. As with earlier questions, a very high proportion of advisers were uncertain of an answer, particularly in regard to emotional stress. A proportion of graduates referring themselves to HE CAS after unhappy experiences of work had no doubt expressed their feelings, but some advisers, while recognising stress during such interviews, may have hesitated to ascribe it to a significantly larger group than those who sought help.

To summarise the most salient points, only a minority of careers advisers felt that students realistically anticipated graduate employment generally, or those aspects of it about which they were also asked. They did feel, though, that greater realism was quickly acquired by graduates once in employment. Advisers felt that most students/graduates did not relate postgraduate study to occupational considerations (though the legitimacy of other justifications for such study should not be denied). A high proportion of advisers were unsure about stress levels among graduates, but those venturing



an opinion rated the incidence of emotional pressures higher than perceived physical ones. Generally, careers advisers seemed in a good position to judge some features of student/graduate awareness, but less so others. This may reasonably be considered not unrelated to their limited opportunities to follow the fortunes of those undergraduates they advise.

## SUMMARY

Generally, graduates thought they had anticipated employment quite well. Few in either the Graduate Questionnaire group or the interview group felt they had not had their expectations borne out. When reservations were expressed, this was more often because expectations had been only partly confirmed rather than completely contradicted. Employers thought applicants realistic in the main, but were less convinced in regard to their grasp of specific aspects of work. For instance, more than half thought them unrealistic about constituent tasks of the jobs they were applying for. However, careers advisers were even less positive. Only a minority considered students they interviewed realistic in their anticipations of graduate employment in organisations generally, and less than a third considered them realistic on specific aspects, notably constituent job tasks and training and promotion. A possible explanation of the advisers' opinions was that typically they saw students at different stages of career exploration and awareness, (and therefore many undecided or poorly-prepared) whereas recruiters' contact normally came later, often after applicants had had the chance to benefit from the ministrations of advisers.

The Graduate Questionnaire group felt they had been particularly

realistic about their capacity for the job, though the interview group, while still positive overall, were less emphatic about this. Joining the data from the two graduate groups showed that they had not well-anticipated how they spent their working time, their scope of responsibilities, or their promotion prospects. Level of autonomy was something over which interviewees seemed to have significantly more positive feelings than questionnaire respondents. It was interesting that two of these relatively low-realism scores (scope of responsibility and promotion prospects) were on matters of status, and this raises the question of whether organisations and their applicants/entrants have differing ideas over such as the status of graduates. The breakdown of Graduate Questionnaire respondents by degree subject area illustrated that graduates were not always realistic in proportion to their relevant knowledge, in fact, such knowledge appeared sometimes possibly to act as a barrier to realism by giving rise to higher expectations or ambitions. However, where knowledge was experiential (e.g. through work placement) rather than abstract, realism was likely to be higher.

Respondents experiencing surprise found themselves the victims of over- or under-expectations. Interestingly, however, either could produce positive or negative effects. An example of negative over-expectation might be an entrant finding scant need in the job for the specialist knowledge gained through his/her degree course, while an example of under- negative expectation might be represented by surprise at the difficulties of management or supervision. An example of positive under-expectation was the scope for initiating projects, which pleased some respondents, while over-expectation bearing a positive effect was the discovery of at least one respondent that the workplace had a less formal (and consequently more agreeable) atmosphere than had been expected.



Surprises were of three essential kinds - operational, social and discretionary. The first usually had to do with a work task or the logic underpinning it; a social surprise concerned colleagues' attitudes or how they reacted to the newcomer or to one another; a discretionary surprise reflected freedoms or restrictions on responsibility or initiative. Operational surprises were most common, something possibly explained by respondents having a clearer expectation, but therefore finding reality more jarring when it differed. The positive surprises most frequently mentioned by Graduate Questionnaire respondents had to do with responsibility, training, and relations with colleagues - all of which reflected being valued. This was also true of almost all the satisfactions mentioned by the interviewees. Disappointing surprises in both groups were related to imposed conditions rather than things of which graduates might have considered themselves the authors. Most disappointments had to do with being little-regarded or disregarded - the exact reverse of what gave particular satisfaction.

Survey data were broad-ranging, but their limited quantity did not permit detailed exploration of opinions expressed. By contrast, the graduate interviews allowed more investigation which often provided a fuller understanding of realism or the lack of it. For instance, most interviewees appeared to work long hours, which encroached on their own time, directly or indirectly. However, this was not usually mentioned with surprise or disappointment, but rather accepted as part of the price of career progress. This raised the larger question of whether graduates/students sometimes failed to be realistic about things which had a greater effect than suspected on their personal lives. However, the interviews also revealed that their subjects were also finding solutions to not having been realistic about something - like the advertising graduate who was beginning to see how she could acquire the knowledge of a technical process outside her own sphere in order better to



fulfil aspects of her own job.

This chapter has established a 'prima facie' case for the investigation of realism or the lack of it among students on the verge of graduation. A number of things contributed to this: firstly, many of the graduate respondents had had, as students, either a contradiction of their expectations about important aspects of employment, or only a partial fulfilment of them; secondly, many entrants to graduate posts had experienced surprises, both agreeable and disagreeable, some resulting from over-expectations, some from under-expectations, and it appeared that at least some of these might have been foreseen or guarded-against through better preparation; thirdly, while most recruiters were positive about students'/graduates' overall realism, some had reservations about this, and many held doubts about their realism on specific aspects of work; fourthly, most careers advisers had doubts about significant pieces in the jigsaw of student realism, seeing shortcomings particularly in their own institutions' awareness-raising provision; fifthly, data from graduates, employers and advisers suggested that lack of realism among graduates was not attributable solely to any one group, and that any solution might emerge only through examining and comparing the opinions and efforts of all three groups, a task which the next three chapters will undertake.

## CHAPTER 4

### DO RECRUITERS CONTRIBUTE TO GRADUATE ENTRANTS' LEVEL OF REALISM?

#### INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter posed the question of whether graduates were realistic in their anticipations of employment. In answering it, and to establish the credibility of the question itself, much attention was devoted to evidence of entrants' level and type of realism or lack of it. However, in this Chapter (as in the two immediately following it), attention will be devoted to factors which affect both realism and the lack of it.

Graduate recruiters as a whole constitute a major player in the realism game. Partly because they command the attention of graduating students at a time when many of the latter are seeking landmarks, and partly because they possess the resources to impart powerful messages, their influence deserves to be monitored. A major hazard they may represent individually or collectively was encapsulated in a statement by the author in Chapter 1 which forms one strand of the theoretical fabric of the thesis:

Recruiters mislead applicants and potential applicants about the nature of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs.

(Page 30)

Two writers cited in Chapter 1, Gordon (1983) and Bachhuber (1988), see employers as being significantly (though not solely) responsible for what they

separately regard as shortcomings in the realism of graduating students about to join the workforce. In essence, Bachhuber (1988) sees the potential remedies to this being founded on sounder information, with breadth and objectivity the characteristics he sees as exemplifying the kind of material he feels likely to be most positively influential, together with a more accurate and descriptive language of employment. Gordon (1983), while acknowledging the importance of information, rather sees the way to communicating what is needed being through experiential means, with graduate recruiters working together to offer facilities which promote student awareness.

The evidence offered in Chapter 3 raises a number of issues particularly relevant to employers' efforts in this context. One is that however diligently an organisation tries to prepare potential entrants for working life, there may be limits to students' capacity to anticipate. Another is how clearly definable the purposes of particular employment are, and how successfully these definitions can be communicated to prospective entrants. A third issue is the distinctiveness of individuals, since even co-starters progressing along similar paths are clearly affected by different influences at work, a factor affecting not only the way they view their prospects, but how they see retrospectively the preparations they made and messages they received leading towards what must have seemed a realistic decision in accepting their first post. These and other topics will be debated, with an eye always on recruiters' position in relation to them.

Essentially, though, this chapter will attempt to assess the part employers play in graduate realism. As well as a more detailed scrutiny of some evidence presented in Chapter 3, this will involve looking at additional elements. Employers' impressions of how far graduates are realistic will be



assessed, along with their own facilities and processes, such as recruitment literature and the selection process itself, for clues to their educative effect or otherwise. The chapter will pose questions about the graduate characteristics favoured by recruiters and the employer features sought by applicants, both of which together form a good platform for the in-depth analysis of recruitment prospectuses, to assess the messages these seem likely to convey to potential applicants.

Fairly early in Chapter 3, misgivings were expressed about management's understanding of graduates' roles, perhaps best summarised by the failure of some supervisors to recognise that graduates had to develop skills equal to the future demands of the organisation, not just be used to do the more prosaic or less palatable tasks. Perhaps the most promising starting-point is to look as closely as the data will allow at recruiters' concept of graduates, and to determine the implications this had for graduate realism. We need not look far into the Employer Questionnaire responses to obtain some clues.

### **EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF APPLICANTS' REALISM IN ANTICIPATING EMPLOYMENT**

Table 3:4, where this information is first presented, shows that nearly three-quarters of employers (30, 70%) considered most applicants realistic in their anticipations of graduate employment in their organisation as a whole. Twenty-six (60%) of recruiters also considered this true of them in regard to training and promotion. However, as already presented in Chapter 3, only the narrowest of majorities (22, 51%) felt applicants were realistic about aspects

of the work environment, and only 15 (35%) felt they were about constituent job tasks. Only one respondent in each of the four categories expressed uncertainty, leaving a large 'No' response in three of them. Interestingly, realism was adjudged greater the larger the feature under scrutiny. However, this need not have corresponded with an applicant's own sense of the feature's importance, or its likely actual importance. For instance, it may be more important that an applicant is more realistic about the constituent tasks of a job than about the organisation as a whole, since, at least in the short term, these touch his working life more. In short, the seemingly small things may be more important than the large ones, yet despite their concerns about applicants' awareness, recruiters did not seem bent upon conveying this.

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 2</u>				
Do you think that the selection process (from application form onwards) makes applicants more realistic?				
<u>RESPONSES</u>				
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
36	5	2	43	

**TABLE 4:1 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SELECTION PROCESS TO GRADUATES' REALISM**

The above figures show the strength of employers' belief in the selection process as a means of raising applicants' awareness. Those who

disagreed may have felt that applicants were so concerned to impress that their minds were not free to take in what was new.

Nevertheless, the perceived awareness-raising is available only to those choosing to apply, and we lack so far any assurance that influential misconceptions did not occur at the brochure-reading stage. Responses to the next question are illuminating here, in respect of job-tasks.

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE , Item 3</u>				
Do you think that your graduate recruitment literature is strong in conveying:				
	<u>RESPONSES</u>			<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	
a) Constituent job tasks	19	22	2	43
b) Aspects of the work environment	33	9	1	43
c) Training and promotion prospects	38	2	3	43
d) Corporate ethos	36	4	3	43

**TABLE 4:2 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THEIR GRADUATE RECRUITMENT LITERATURE**

Just over half the employers (22, 51%) felt that their recruitment literature was not strong in telling applicants the essentials of what they would



be doing at work. This reinforces the point sometimes made in Chapter 3, that where recruiters had doubts about their own practice, this was an area worth examining. The opinion of many employers that their recruitment literature lacked strength to convey an important element of the work they offered might have been expected to influence them to investigate and remedy such material. However, to the supplementary question 'How might your literature be altered to increase realism?' there were only four responses, and none of these referred to improving job-definitions.

A tentative conclusion to be made from this is that graduate recruiters do seek to convey relevant information about their organisations and the prospects they offer, but that their endeavours seem notably more successful with applicants who clear the first hurdle of selection (the application form), and proceed to direct personal contact (selection interviews, assessment centres, etc.). The relatively modest awareness (by the recruiters' judgement) among applicants generally seems to relate (at least partly) to quality of recruitment literature and other pre-application organisational contacts, such as campus talks and 'Milk Round' interviews. Recruiters may consider this unimportant, feeling that high-profile campus presentations and handsome brochures will attract more than enough good applicants, anyway. However, a less optimistic possibility is that really discerning students will consider any organisation which does not early on give details of such as job tasks to be deficient, and choose to apply elsewhere.

Another way in which recruiters tried to facilitate selection was in the features they looked for in applicants:

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 6**

Which four characteristics do you particularly favour among applicants for graduate posts?

(In rank order)

Communication skills (25)	Maturity (5)
Interest/Enthusiasm (21)	Business Awareness (5)
Intellectual/Academic ability (14)	Decisiveness (4)
Team spiritedness (9)	Realism (4)
Knowledge/experience (8)	Initiative (4)
Strategic thinking (7)	Personable/Presentable (3)
Leadership/Management skills (6)	Practicality (3)
Relevant Training/Study (6)	Personality (3)
Flexibility/Adaptability (5)	

Figures in brackets indicate the number of respondents mentioning this characteristic.

Total number of respondents: 43

**TABLE 4:3      GRADUATE APPLICANT CHARACTERISTICS  
FAVoured BY EMPLOYERS**

This was an open question, with the classification shown in the above table being made by the author. In most cases, the terms employed reflect the words used by respondents, though in other instances an umbrella term was thought fit to draw together a number of different terms whose meanings seemed similar enough to allow this.

The range of characteristics most popular among recruiters cannot make it easy even for applicants with some awareness of them, since the qualities sought vary with the organisation. However, another obstacle is how the terms employed are understood by the recruiters using them. What exactly

is 'maturity', 'decisiveness' or 'business awareness', or, more precisely, how might an applicant aware of their desirability try to convey such qualities, or even judge whether he/she possessed them in the first place? The fact that the recruiter respondents were not more specific suggests either that they had something particular in mind, but could not find terms exact enough to express it, or (and perhaps more likely) that they were in fact open to being impressed by quite a wide variety of applicant. The evidence suggests that if there is a 'corporate man/woman' image to which the graduate applicant must conform, then it is true only in relation to some individual organisations, not to graduate recruiters as a whole. However, the observation of one accountancy interviewee cited in Chapter 3 suggested that some employers recruit for the short-term as well as the long. This is explained by their recognition of there being room for the promotion of only a proportion of graduate entrants beyond a certain grade. The qualities sought in the recruit likely to hit a 'low ceiling' are probably different from those expected in an applicant likely to progress further.

Asked about what appealed to applicants, recruiters offered a wide variety of attractions.



**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 7**

Which four things which your organisation offers do you think most attract applicants for your graduate posts?

(In rank order)

**RESPONSES**

Training (28)	High-technology (8)
Variety (15)	Opportunity to postpone career choice (8)
Progress (14)	Egalitarian ethos (7)
Good salary (14)	Travel (5)
Status (12)	Youthful environment (4)
The challenge to contribute (10)	Professional qualification (4)
Security (9)	Graduate culture (4)
Responsibility (8)	Glamour (3)
	Location (2)

**TABLE 4:4 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ATTRACTIONS  
THEIR ORGANISATIONS HELD FOR APPLICANTS**

As in the preceding table, covering applicant characteristics favoured by employers, the questions were open, and, where necessary, responses were summarised in the terms felt to convey their meaning most accurately.

No recruiter claimed that what appealed to applicants was the opportunity to work in the occupational field which the organisation mainly represented (i.e. banking, engineering, etc.). No doubt this was rightly taken for granted in organisations recruiting applicants whose courses represented a training or vocationally-specific preparation. However, there were many whose degree subject and recruiting organisation offered few restrictions, and whom recruiters may have been prepared to slot in as they saw fit. Moreover,

if the recruiters of vocational course graduates had thought them attracted by specific work features, why did they not say so? The impression left by the recruiters' responses was of graduates lacking any strong vocational orientation; they seemed attracted by peripherals, rather than to a particular field of endeavour. We are left wondering whether this reflected either a lack of job-specific commitment among graduates, or a recognition among recruiters that graduates were willing, even eager, to pursue career advancement at the price of specific work-orientation. Chapter 3 has already put the positive point that most recruits seemed to want to contribute something, and to have a job they could expand into - not just one where the only achievement was to 'come up to scratch'.

Employers judged applicants they interviewed for graduate posts to be fairly realistic overall, though only by a slim majority regarding aspects of the work environment, and only just over a third of recruiters considered applicants realistic about job tasks. Very few 'Don't Know' responses in this area suggested that employers felt confident in expressing an opinion on these issues. They also appeared confident that their own selection processes promoted realism, and felt much the same about their own graduate literature, having doubts, however, of how well it conveyed constituent job tasks (a response squaring with their feelings about applicants' knowledge of these). There was strong evidence of employers favouring particular applicant qualities, though often they used terms so general as to make it hard to know what they were really looking for, or how they might expect it to be conveyed. There was a suggestion that some organisations were looking for different qualities in applicants they earmarked for swift progress through the organisation than in those whose advancement they expected to plateau at lower levels. Recruiters' responses left the impression that most graduates lacked strong vocational orientation, and looked instead to climb the career

ladder through any job which offered them room to expand into.

**CAREERS ADVISERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RECRUITMENT LITERATURE**

Having looked at recruiters' concept of graduates in relation to realism, it now seems appropriate to turn the tables, to see what graduates thought of recruiters, also taking into account the views of careers advisers. This offered a way of discovering whether and how recruiters were perceived to have been responsible for any lack of realism careers advisers or graduate entrants had perceived or experienced. To take the careers advisers first, early on in the data they provided, there was an implicit criticism of employers.

<b><u>CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 3</u></b>				
Do you think that graduate recruitment literature is strong in conveying:				
	<b><u>RESPONSES</u></b>			<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
	<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>DON'T KNOW</u></b>	
a) Constituent job tasks	13	26	3	42
b) Aspects of the work environment	19	19	4	42
c) Training and promotion prospects	29	7	6	42
d) Corporate ethos	34	4	4	42

**TABLE 4:5 CAREERS ADVISERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW SUCCESSFULLY GRADUATE RECRUITMENT LITERATURE COMMUNICATED PARTICULAR WORK FEATURES**



There was a majority feeling that constituent job tasks were not well-conveyed, and an even split regarding aspects of the work environment. This offered a close correlation with employers' opinions offered in Table 4.2.

The evidence in Chapter 3 showing uncertainty among advisers on some issues is confirmed here. In their answers to these first two parts of Item 3, in which they express their doubts about the material's power to depict aspects of the work environment and constituent job tasks in particular, careers advisers may have been hinting at perils not only for graduates but for themselves, since these materials are a major source of information and understanding for them, too. In fact, they may be the more hazardous recipients, since their misconceptions may be passed on to numerous students. There were positive responses regarding training and promotion, and corporate ethos.

'How might literature be altered to increase realism?' was the question posed as a follow-up. Advisers said that the literature should:

- Be independently written
- Offer statistics on applications, intake and retention
- Include negative aspects
- Be condensed
- Offer more opinions of recent entrants
- Be less 'glossy'
- Offset underestimates of the demands of work
- Show timetable of likely promotion
- Feature detailed case studies/profiles.

Implementing some of these suggestions would more easily enable advisers to raise with students issues on which a realistic outlook is considered important. Where recruitment literature lacks the desired features, advisers may find students not taking them fully seriously. Given the less advantageous light in which some recruiters might be placed by following

certain suggestions in particular, the realism of advisers who hope for their introduction must be questioned. Such as statistics on applications, intake and retention, and timetables of likely promotion may be seen as useful or otherwise partly by advisers' willingness to produce a version of these themselves, if only for illustrative purposes. However, this may be unfair, since Chapter 3 indicated that advisers were hard-pressed, and that their individual specialisms may act against the production of collective coherent statistics.

Graduates' comments on recruitment literature's power to convey certain features are also worth featuring.

<u>GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 4</u>			
Do you think that the graduate recruitment literature you read during your search for employment was strong in conveying:			
	<u>RESPONSES</u>		
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a) Job descriptions	20	23	43
b) The work environment	14	29	43
c) Further training	31	12	43
d) Career paths	28	15	43
e) The corporate philosophy	28	15	43

Are there any ways in which you feel such literature might be altered to raise awareness among readers?

**TABLE 4:6 GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW SUCCESSFULLY GRADUATE RECRUITMENT LITERATURE COMMUNICATED PARTICULAR WORK FEATURES**

The questionnaire graduates did not offer quite the negative response to constituent job tasks which advisers did, but a majority still had serious doubts of the literature's conveying these, and even more (just over two-thirds) felt it did not properly convey aspects of the work environment. This group seemed fairly content with what it communicated about further training, career paths, and the corporate philosophy. The overall responses were broadly reflected by the graduate interviewees, who, however, had an even poorer opinion about the work environment's depiction, and had serious doubts about how the corporate philosophy was portrayed. The graduates' suggestions as to how literature might be improved were largely in line with advisers' recommendations. However, details of former graduates' projects and achievements were requested, and there was some enthusiasm for a structured and similar presentation format among prospectuses.

### **GRADUATES' SATISFACTIONS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS, AND THEIR VIEWS ON THE SELECTION PROCESS**

Turning to the data gathered through the Graduate Questionnaire, it is evident that not everything was to the entrants' liking.



GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 2

Is there any feature of your work which you did not anticipate but have found:

	<u>RESPONSES</u>		
	<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a) Particularly satisfying	30	13	43
b) Particularly disappointing	22	21	43

**TABLE 4:7      WORK FEATURES WHICH PLEASED AND WHICH DISAPPOINTED GRADUATES**

The slight majority of entrants who expressed disappointment cited the following as sources of discontent:

Quantity of clerical duties  
Scant need for degree knowledge/intellectual ability  
Movement which makes settling down/gaining responsibility difficult  
Lack of proper training  
Few offers of real responsibility/work opportunity  
Too much time spent inappropriately  
Bureaucracy/politics  
Poor teamwork  
Inexperienced supervisors  
Difficulties of sudden transition to managing people  
Slow salary increases  
Poor information dissemination  
Lack of interest and respect for issues important to newcomers  
Monotony.

With a few exceptions, the list reflects deficiencies rather than complete omissions, suggesting that the organisations in question believed

that most features giving rise to criticism were up to scratch and unproblematic. This would explain their not being mentioned in the literature, if the general and subjective nature of some remarks were not explanation enough. However, quantities of clerical duties or limited intellectual demands within a job seemed fairly ascertainable, and to such potential detractors recruiters appeared obliged to draw applicants' attention, if they were not subsequently to be considered to have to some degree misled them.

Still considering graduate entrants' impressions, the employers' selection processes made some impact, but probably less than might have been expected.

<u>GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 3</u>				
Do you think your employer's selection process made you more realistic about:				
	<u>RESPONSES</u>			
	<u>YES</u>	<u>PARTLY</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a) The organisation itself	23	11	9	43
b) Employment in general	9	15	19	43

**TABLE 4:8 GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THEIR EMPLOYERS' SELECTION PROCESS ON THEIR OWN REALISM**

The fairly numerous 'Partly' and 'No' responses to (a) may reflect that knowledge contributing to realism had already been gained through other means (such as work experience or familiarisation visits) rather than any neglect among applicants or shortcomings in the selection process. Responses here, as in (b), may have been influenced by whether the respondents had already passed through a selection process elsewhere, and in turn how receptive they had been to variations on a theme. The nine respondents claiming to have learned something about employment in general cited the following discoveries:

- Hardness of work/own capacities
- Current industrial trends
- Need for commitment to the organisation
- The importance of earlier contact/research in getting a job
- Knowledge of the quantity and quality of competition for posts
- Actual job requirements
- Training route/career pattern.

This understanding seems well worth the effort. It must be presumed that other respondents had already grasped these observations, or assumed that they had. However, it is to be hoped that what respondents were interpreting as general trends were not in fact true only of the particular organisations they had visited.

## **EMPLOYERS' VIEWS OF THEIR RECRUITMENT METHODS**

Any assessment of the contribution of recruiters to graduate entrants' levels of realism must not overlook what the recruiters themselves feel that students/graduates should be doing to increase their own knowledge and understanding. It must, in doing so, recognise any excessive expectations on



the recruiters' part in terms of the efforts graduates may make. The employers were therefore asked about student/graduate self-help.

The general issue of co-operation draws in employers' use of consultant agents in preparing recruitment material, and the implications of this.

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 11</u>			
Do you consult any outside agency (such as H.E. institutions) before producing your graduate recruitment literature?			
<u>RESPONSES</u>			
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
13	26	4	43

**TABLE 4:9 HOW FAR EMPLOYERS CONSULTED OUTSIDE AGENCIES IN PRODUCING THEIR GRADUATE RECRUITMENT LITERATURE**

Only 13 respondents said that they sought assistance, but the range of their sources make them worth listing:

- Consultants
- Students/graduates
- Careers Advisory Services
- Agencies
- Higher Education institutions
- Own Public Relations department
- Specialist publishers
- Previous graduate recruits
- Advisory bodies/committees.

Gathering the opinion of students, previous graduate entrants, CAS and HEIs seemed likely to have been particularly helpful. However, very few

institutions had resorted to more than one or two sources, despite the likelihood of their material being better-tailored through several types of contact. The 26 'No' responses may be explained by organisations being determined to produce material strong on image and free of controversy. Image and political correctness seem to have been in the minds even of some of the 'Yes' respondents, who mentioned consultants and their own public relations departments. The 'Yes' respondents mentioned the following as advantages of consultation:

- Ensures realism
- Helps find what 'customers' want
- Encourages consideration from different points of view
- Aids the lay-out and construction of brochure
- Helps target efforts more effectively.

The level of response to what the 'customers' want will depend on whether the 'market' is a buyer's one. If the better graduates are likely to receive more than one job offer, promising strategies to attract them will surely be taken seriously. However, the number recruited may also play a part. If a firm takes on only a handful of graduates, then encouragement via individual preference-related 'packages' may prove most successful. However, large-scale recruiters may consider this unduly troublesome. Helping to formulate the lay-out and construction of brochures was a significant contribution. The length of most such items meant that any ways of capturing and retaining readers' attention had to be looked at seriously. This comment suggests the need to balance print and photographs effectively, and to convey appealing messages early on.

The effort to contact other agencies suggested a healthy scepticism of their own understanding of students/applicants among those organisations which did this. Because applicants have a vested interest in how recruiters

view them, they may be unlikely to volunteer remarks possibly perceived as critical, despite such comments being perhaps essential to an organisation's success in acquiring and retaining good workers.

Chapter 3 indicated that recruitment literature might be used in ways other than to fulfil its primary informative purpose. The nature of recruitment literature clearly made it influential in an educative as well as an informative sense, and its success in these respects was something employers were asked about.

Interestingly, on the evidence of Table 3.5, the only area in which there seemed a lack of employer confidence related to constituent job tasks, which also came up as a shortcoming in applicants' knowledge, in the view of recruiters. In careers advisers' eyes, this was also the weak spot in applicants' realism and in graduate recruitment literature. Asked how their literature might be altered to increase realism, recruiters identified the following:

- Include detailed profiling and the progress of recent recruits
- Offer a more detailed picture of the organisation
- Give details of stressful work elements
- Encourage readers to self-select themselves out.

Detailed profiling offers applicants the chance to measure themselves against those who have already convinced organisations of their worth by having been appointed by them. It does not leave a vacuum into which students might project a mistaken notion of the qualities and standards desired. An actual amount of an individual's progress, moreover, seems likely to promote realism in a way that a portrayal in abstract terms does not. True rate of advancement is one feature profiling can bring out, and given that 22 careers advisers (52 per cent) and 16 employers (37 per cent) had reservations



about students' anticipations on this score, its usefulness was evident. The second suggestion, advocating a more detailed picture of the organisation, depends for its usefulness on the nature of the details, which in themselves have the potential to illuminate, but also to confuse. Job tasks in different parts of an organisation seemed one area which details could usefully embellish, as this might remedy ignorance by linking job knowledge to how business operates.

The suggestion to give details of stressful work elements hinted that bold references to stress may not have been enough to alert entrants to pressures. These details might have been particularly successful if included in the personal profiles just mentioned, as this might also show that vulnerability need not prejudice success. Self-selecting out, the last suggestion, is not hazard-free, since while this seemed advanced as a measure clearly advantageous to recruiters and students in terms of economy, there remains the risk of good but modest students eliminating themselves, and moderate but assured ones applying, surely the reverse of what was intended.

The capacities of graduates and the other influences acting upon them are important issues following on from the above. In their Questionnaire's Agree/Disagree section, recruiters were asked how far they supported or did not concur with several statements relating to perceived influences on final-year undergraduates.

Realism might be expected to rise significantly through a well-chosen period of work experience intelligently undertaken. However, the sharpest learning curve might reasonably be seen as the first few months in a graduate post.

Recruiters offered the following as the work features about which they believed entrants became more realistic. They are listed and grouped in order of frequency of mention:

- Pay and prospects )
- Personal contribution/responsibility )
- How the organisation works )
- Pressures and constraints )
- Own limitations )
- Working with others )
- Company standards )
- Own career direction )
- More 'streetwise' )
- The need to be organised )
- Available career paths )
- Profitability )
- Customer orientation )
- Routine )

Items on the list suggest that increased graduate realism may owe more to factors besides promotional strategies or materials than is generally acknowledged. However, because many undergraduates rely heavily on the latter, this implies that there exists one level of realism commonly regarded as sufficient to decide whether to apply to an organisation (or accept an offer from one), and a higher level emerging from experience and forming a basis for choosing a particular path or specialism within the organisation, or for deciding to seek work beyond it. This sort of evidence could boost a case for organisational information (however presented) to show how career ideas may not become focused until long after entry, with possible consequences for the way in which students select organisations or the posts available within them.

## GRADUATE RECRUITMENT LITERATURE

Broadly defined, graduate recruitment literature is the written material recruiters make available to would-be applicants for graduate-entry posts. Typically, it takes the form of a prospectus or brochure describing the organisation - its function, size, growth pattern, goods or services, job opportunities and career ladder. Its function is to offer information in a form likely to interest readers and project an image likely to attract them. As such, it carries potential for raising students' and graduates' realism, but also for leading them to apply to organisations whose image is more enticing than its opportunities are suitable.

Specific graduate recruitment literature may be actively sought or may be seen fortuitously. In the first instance, it must not disappoint those whose interest has already been aroused; in the second, it must stand out among abundant rival material. In either case, the initial impact will probably be significant if not conclusive, and this makes important the physical characteristics (such as size, shape, material and cover design) of such material. Despite this, surprisingly few organisations seem to offer prospectuses which are really distinctive. However, all such documents fulfil criteria which have come to be synonymous with success and prestige, such as glossy covers, quality paper, slick design and impressive photographs. The following observations were made on the 30 graduate prospectuses whose collection for data purposes was mentioned in Chapter 2.



## Appearance

Most prospectuses conform to A4 size, clearly advantageous for display and storage purposes, for which anything larger could pose problems. Judging by its scarcity, recruiters also seem nervous of smaller-format material. The standard size, however, makes the two-dimensional impact of most items much the same. Rarely, too, is the thickness of a prospectus a distinguishing feature. Most run to between twelve and thirty pages, a few exceed forty, and one in the sample ran to seventy-two. A few take folder-form, holding separate information-sheets in preference to the normal binding. Covers almost invariably carry a gloss or sheen finish, and some combine these. These slick casings suggest organisations who value graduates, have a lot to say to them, and are not short of the money to do this impressively. But however high the quality of a prospectus, it seems unlikely to attract attention unless favourably displayed in a careers centre. A crucial stage of the recruiter's advertising strategy is therefore beyond his control. From the reader's perspective, the literature's potential as a force for realism depends partly on his CAS, and on his own resourcefulness if display is not one of its strengths.

Cover design offers recruiters their best chance of visual impact. One important choice they face is whether to emphasise the company name or logo (usually resulting in a fairly conservative design), or to opt for a lively design possibly eclipsing organisational identity. Some companies play down both to feature photographs of (mostly) recent entrants. Usually this takes the form of patchwork, collage or montage, with the occasional cover featuring a lone individual, usually engrossed in some professional task, or relaxed and smiling at, or past, the camera. Not infrequently, two people, one of each sex, are so featured. Where several people appear, one usually belongs to an

ethnic minority. This last approach suggests that, whoever you are, the organisation has a place for you, while the single portrait suggests that it values individuals and will help you fulfil your ambitions. All cover photographs show people who are well-groomed, smartly (sometimes elegantly) dressed and physically prepossessing in poses suggesting confidence, energy and purpose. Subjects are sometimes posed against a background of the employing organisation, sometimes photographed from below to emphasise the stature of the building (and, presumably, of the organisation and its staff). The impression conveyed is that only dynamic people are recruited, or that the entrant can, through training, become like that. In this regard, the line between inviting and alienating seems a fine one. In fact, the reader may be in conflict between who he feels he/she is and who he/she thinks he/she would like to be. Identity sounds like the price of a desired role.

A few other cover features are worth mentioning. One is the inspirational caption, this sometimes being linked to the design. The design usually incorporates photographs, but sometimes a drawing from a photograph. Sometimes it cleverly links the worlds of education and employment, suggesting the possibility of smooth transition. One brochure features only an area of camouflage clothing, words being considered unnecessary to identify the organisation. Occasionally the cover design seems to have no connection with the organisation's work, inviting the viewer to open the brochure to see what the connection is. Words on covers are chosen carefully: one large retailer lists major contents, magazine-style; one accountancy firm states mutual expectations of itself and its graduates, repetition being employed to add force and apparent sincerity. Muted cover colours are sometimes reflected inside, creating an impression of conservatism and tradition.



## Written Content

The first inside page of the prospectus is used in various ways. Some feature a photograph of the chief executive and a message from him/her. This conveys the organisation's esteem of graduates, gives a human face to management, and perhaps offers early encouragement at emulation and career-building, especially where the featured executive looks fairly young. Citations from presumably knowledgeable yet ostensibly unprejudiced outsiders are sometimes featured, and occasionally a collage of newspaper clippings broadcasting the organisation's deeds and successes. Both items convey the firm's significance before any recruitment information is set out. The images and messages of the first page seem to appeal to quite different sensibilities, depending on the prospectus. Some appeal to human values - the photograph of the happy group, the quotes from contented staff, the emphasis on equal opportunities - others are strong on company identity and good organisation - the 'mission statement', list of recruitment locations, table of subject degree entry specialisms. Sometimes the reader is drawn in by being asked about himself and what he wants from his employer or career as a whole. Graphics and text, even (sometimes especially) when brief, suggest that the reader has a good sense of his own identity and values, and can recognise merit in the organisation's view of its own. Stating flattering assumptions about the reader sometimes helps firms make claims for themselves. However, this rather takes advantage of graduates' uncertainty, posing questions and answers which sound 'right', but which may not be the ones about which readers really want, or need, to know. Readers' assessment of reality is here threatened by their vulnerability.

Next, something is usually said about the organisation's history. Some prospectuses offer a 'small acorns to large oaks' story, carefully itemising



changes and developments. This seems favoured by long-established bodies, suggesting stability and perhaps implying conservatism. Recently-founded companies prefer to emphasise speed of growth and need for change. They stress the need for adaptability, focusing on the future rather than the past, what can be achieved rather than what has. At this early stage, some pedigreed organisations feature household-name offspring companies, information likely to cause a measure of surprise and to increase respect. Recognition, however, is no token of suitability.

After trying to convey their own importance, many recruiters like to establish the significance of the work they undertake. Those deeply rooted in the establishment usually employ only a brief preamble to this end. Others take pains to list their operations, as though to spread the risk of not establishing credibility. An increased proportion of graduates in the workforce suggests a change in the nature and image of the work itself. Organisations representing types of work only recently prominent may be at an advantage in not having to vie with established images, being able to create their own relatively unchallenged. However, this may make them more of a risk in the reality stakes, since there may be little material with which readers can compare their claims.

Recruiters are quick to establish the geographical breadth of their operations. This suggests that staff may at some point be expected to relocate, something invariably presented as an opportunity for personal development rather than an unwelcome upheaval. It is one manifestation of the broader message that recruits must be adaptable, adaptability being appealingly presented as fulfilment. However, quality is never threatened by location. Company standards, it is implied, remain constant, ubiquitous standards seeming to be higher ones. Conversely, geographical narrowness suggests

insignificance or modest standards. Quality and dimension become synonymous.

Salary and security surely figure highly among reasons for job selection. Curiously, however, only rare mention is made of either in most recruitment literature. Perhaps salary statements are left vague since, besides dating rapidly, precise figures might offer too direct and sometimes a disadvantageous comparison with other employers. Security is mentioned rarely, probably because organisations are subject to forces beyond their control; however, this may be considered a rather prosaic feature to present as an attraction. Some organisations may not seriously expect graduates to have, or even want, long-term careers with them. They know that new entrants are likely to move within a few years, which may be in company interests by introducing new blood and spreading their reputation through training staff whom other organisations find attractive. Turnover is not mentioned, only further opportunities within the organisation. However, no indication is given of the proportion of graduates who do progress. Regarding salary, some prospectuses hint at earnings where profiles refer to their lifestyle and accommodation. However, this is usually vague, and open to inflated interpretation.

Personal profiling is among the commonest ways of offering information while emphasising the human face of the organisation. Most feature the comments of recent young graduate entrants on why they chose their employer, their work and training to date, and their prospects. Comments are personal, with little analysis of each job's component activities. Hardly surprisingly, most remarks are laudatory, with negatives minimised or turned to advantage. Some make technical references, implying that readers should already be familiar with these, or that as employees they, too, would



learn to recognise them. Presentation methods differ, though - some organisations offer numerous profiles, others concentrate on just a handful; some telescope career paths, others offer more detail; most imply that entrants had never had a thought of working anywhere else; most are careful to identify profilees, but one company presents them anonymously. Clearly, graduate recruiters vary in their beliefs about the most effective approach. Perhaps this is useful, since prospectus readers are, at least in this section, likely to appreciate the differences, and draw a variety of messages from them. However, certain of these features are not necessarily helpful to realism, since (for example) laudatory remarks of the featured graduate(s) might legitimately have been balanced by less complimentary ones, had other entrants been allowed their say. It is more than possible that personal profiles are in fact written by the organisation and only ratified by the graduates featured, with possible distortions to enthusiasm or seeming personality. In short, any disagreeableness of work may be masked or distorted, while the profile can be a way of making cursory reference to many work features which deserve to be described in more detail.

### **Picture Content**

The nature of some organisations' work allows them to benefit particularly from illustrative material. People-dealing ones and those whose range of recognisable activities is broad, such as the Police and the Armed Services, score most heavily. The Police prospectus relates human situations and describes personal reactions to them, offering an emotional content unmatched elsewhere. Police recruits seem to grow quickly through exposure to the gamut of human life. The Armed Services offer growth through situations contrived to test capacity. Field exercises, foreign locations and



complex equipment constitute the flavouring in many of their prospectus photographs. Organisations involved in practical activities can always use these as background, whereas such as financial organisations must be content to maintain interest through the quality of photographs and image they convey, rather than through actual content. This would appear to advantage photogenic occupations. However, it may be that where a serious level of interest already exists in a less photogenic one, the comparative lack of pictorial interest is not a handicap. Perhaps photographs are more confirmatory than revelatory.

### Layout

Layout varies. Some recruiters seem determined to utilise every available space, subordinating clarity and aesthetics to information volume. Sometimes an impression of spaciousness is attempted by, for example, leaving a coloured margin on a white page, but this is often in turn filled with additional material. Happily, some firms seem content to present much less material than others. They draw in broader strokes, possibly working on the assumption that interested readers will enquire further, something prospectuses often invite. There seems no consensus of how long a student is likely to devote to a single prospectus. Even an hour's reading would scarcely do justice to some, yet with so many prospectuses beckoning, to expect this seems unrealistic. Recruiters have the task of interesting and informing in a single publication - perhaps shorter brochures would better achieve both objectives. Students have concentration and boredom thresholds as well as time constraints. Some prospectuses feature pages bearing single, uncaptioned photographs. Often aesthetically pleasing, these pictorial oases help to make quantitative information easier to digest. Print size is surely a

factor, too, yet there appears little thought as to whether the printed page invites or discourages perusal. If recruitment brochures are to promote realism, unwelcoming layout seems to put this at risk. Material which has to be read cautiously seems likely to contribute more to understanding than material whose layout results in it not being read at all.

### **Locations**

Where an organisation has its headquarters in an attractive town, this can be a selling-point in its prospectus. However, most firms seem so at pains to represent all their work and every location that they neglect the chance to make a feature of one. Doing this might even excite readers' interest in unfeatured work and locations. The present practice dilutes impact - the reader is offered a patchwork of people and places but no sense of a particular working environment. Altering this would also help to show how staff interact, something currently rarely, if ever, attempted. Realism seems more likely to be imparted by encouraging among readers a well-informed imaginative leap by which they can picture themselves at work. This, however, entails depicting the work environment in some detail, with workers, as well as the places they work, a focus of attention.

### **The 'Typical' Day**

The daily tasks of graduate students are rarely mentioned, the focus being on objectives rather than means. It is therefore refreshing to see the occasional outline of the newcomer's 'average day'. How average it is is questionable, but itemising times and activities at least offers some ideas of



what the job involves. It can also indicate organisational norms. Staff's apparent readiness to change arrangements and work overtime in response to demand are two apparent differences between the public and private sectors, though the philosophical cheerfulness with which graduates seem to accept this is a little hard to believe. It suggests that the 'pros' of work are borne in mind while the 'cons' are being experienced. The 'average day' also tends to neglect what equipment is used, the need or value of colleague contact, the prevalence of deadlines, need for care and concentration, autonomy and the spread of workload. Perhaps grateful for attempts to depict the average day, readers possibly overlook how much needs to be said in order to do this adequately. Realism may here be influenced less by what is covered than by the rather limited way in which this is accomplished.

### **Equal Opportunities**

Equal opportunity policy is mentioned in several prospectuses, and usually supported by photographic material, in these and most others. However, no statistical breakdowns of the proportion of entrants who are women, mature, handicapped or belong to ethnic minorities are anywhere given. Women and ethnic minorities are visibly represented, but those in the other groups scarcely at all. There may be legitimate reasons for handicapped people not being recruited to certain jobs, but few for older graduates being so treated. Few prospectus photographs feature new entrants over the age of twenty-five, and there is not a wheelchair in sight. Furthermore, no statements are made about the progress of minority groups within organisations. The failure to represent mature graduates is surprising, since most are surely young enough to have full careers with most organisations, and a sizeable proportion of most institutions' graduates can be termed



'mature'. It is possible that employers do recruit more members of these minorities than their literature suggests, excluding their appearance there in order to present a more attractive front to their majority readership. If so, however, they seem to be running a risk of alienating whole groups from which they have at some time seen fit to recruit. When completing even one application form takes considerable time, it becomes important to be realistic about chances of acceptance when deciding whether to try for a particular organisation. Because no employer seems likely to say anything deviating from political correctness on this issue, readers must make inferences from omissions, or from positive signs or statements. A photograph of a graduate belonging to an ethnic minority may sufficiently suggest no disadvantage to this group; however, factual information, such as stating the ages of profilees, may be necessary to convince mature applicants that they have a chance.

### 'Perks'

In some organisations, social benefits and 'perks' are considerable. The availability of sports and social clubs suggests that new entrants need not be lonely. Financial advantages are a highlight of work in the financial sector, with discounts on products a feature of retail work. Medical insurance and pension plans are broadly available, though it is unclear whether these have particular appeal to young people. Some perks are both socially inviting and financially advantageous, such as the free restaurant available to the employees of one large firm. This might tip the balance in favour of private sector employment over public among some would-be entrants. However, attractive 'perks' may prompt some readers to ask whether these should play a part in any decision about employment, or even to question the ethics of organisations which appear to be using them as 'bait'. Perhaps the truly

realistic applicants will have determined in advance the characteristics of any organisation which they will allow to influence their decision, though this is surely to expect considerable will-power, as well as careful thought.

### Assumptions about Readers

All prospectuses make certain assumptions about their readers. One is that graduates want a job with particular characteristics and offering specific rewards. Precisely what these are is not easy to say, but the rewards include recognition within and beyond the employing organisation, responsibility, a handsome level of remuneration, prospects of fairly speedy advancement and personal fulfilment, while the job characteristics require skills of knowledge and decision-making, with the expectation of ambitions fulfilled. They also assume that the reader will be ready and able to make a smooth transition from a study environment to a working one with very different rules, standards and expectations. It is as if the suitable applicant will be someone who foresees no difficulty with any of this. Another assumption is that readers will take what is said on trust. Prospectuses are remarkable for their lack of justification of claims. They seem to expect readers who have for three or more years been encouraged to be critical and sceptical not to read between the lines. However, perhaps non-academic material, belief in which increases employment prospects, is drunk in uncritically. The power to assess realistically may be being underused for reasons of security. It is unrealistic to expect organisations to tell the whole truth about themselves, but even some attempt to address the possibility of readers' doubts might help dispel any. This bolsters the evidence that prospectuses are used more for 'trawling' than 'gatekeeping'.



## **Work-Patterns**

Most organisations have a work-pattern which in important respects is cyclical, yet no prospectus mentions the working calendar. This may be born of a shyness to suggest that repetition is a feature of work. However, besides being part of reality, a cycle can be a source of satisfaction, offering reassuring predictability and regular sense of achievement. However, this is not the view of prospectus-writers, who imply that graduate jobs offer ever-new and challenging tasks (in at least some cases) at roller-coaster pace. This constitutes part of image-building, where organisations strive, sometimes from scant materials, to create an identity. Relatedly, where existing image is unexciting, counter-measures are taken to dispel the negatives. Most commonly, this entails presenting as fun ostensibly dry occupations. This is often done through pictures, and readers wishing to be realistic may have to resist the apparent spirit of some prospectuses which feature photographs which suggest much but actually say very little. This is not to claim that what is suggested is untrue, only that confirmation of it must be sought elsewhere.

## **Personal Qualities**

Very few organisations cite as essential specific personal qualities, though some are encouraged. To suggest the usefulness of qualities rather than insist on them possibly results in a larger applicant pool. Also, the wisdom of insisting on all but the most obviously necessary applicant characteristics is questionable, since readers' understandings of these and whether they have them will vary. Also, qualities can be developed through training and experience. However, it is possible that some characteristics are



very hard to acquire, and suggesting that training will impart them may be misleading - applicants may over-estimate their own malleability. Moreover, the detail of the company picture may at times lull readers into forgetting that they must fit into it, reminders of which may not come amiss. One organisation offers a short series of applicant questions, answers being scored and related to suitability. A smaller applicant pool, and the loss of potentially good employees, may result. However, the general quality of applicants may be raised. It may also be felt that good self-assessors will make better career progress, to their own and their company's benefit. This is one form of prospectus information which turns readers back on themselves rather than encouraging them to seek more from the organisation. In terms of realism, such material may prompt prospective applicants how to demonstrate desired qualities in such as application forms or interviews, thereby orienting them to the selection process itself.

### Stress

Potentially stressful aspects of work are normally presented as stimulating, and features entrants might find difficult are rarely mentioned. This may suggest that: i) the selection process identifies the right people, and everyone copes well; ii) no-one likes to admit to difficulties and covers these up; iii) organisations fear readers' inflating the significance of difficulties. In any case, it is difficult to say what causes stress, and mistaken to think that entrants will be unable to find means of relief from it. Perhaps there is an unspoken assumption of 'caveat emptor'. Certainly, this is one area in which readers may reasonably expect prospectuses to be unforthcoming, and thereby grasp the importance of using other sources. Current graduates seem the most obvious of these, and any organisation

denying applicants or potential applicants access to them may raise suspicions about how much pressure its newcomers are under. This is one example of realism being increased through one resource prompting the use of another.

### **Domestic Considerations**

The failure to mention domestic considerations presumes that applicants will be young, free and single. Apparently, successful applicants have no domestic or emotional ties and carry only a tooth-brush. Prospectuses' silence on the subject of adjustment may well underplay the feelings of even young and enthusiastic graduates. However, some graduates and students may avoid major recruiters for failing to cover this. It may be that organisations consider this beyond their scope of responsibility, and shun a 'nanny' image. However, their avoidance seems unlikely to encourage older graduates. To be fair to recruiters, many may feel that readers' circumstances and attitudes will vary so much that addressing this issue in a prospectus is unwieldy, and their omission need not betoken unwillingness to discuss domestic considerations. Most may feel, though, that any applicant they might wish to recruit would take the initiative in putting forward any such issue, or these may be covered in a general way as part of the selection process. What prospectuses do suggest, however, is a receptiveness in their organisations which might reasonably be considered to include domestic considerations. Prospectuses seem unlikely to promote realism, though, if their tone is not matched by the employer's attitude.



## **Entry Requirements**

Some prospectuses tell readers early on whether their degree subject will be acceptable to the organisation. The most helpful table job/subject correlations and place these at the beginning. This prevents readers unsuited by academic discipline wasting their time. Specific qualifications are named mostly for work in scientific and technical fields. Business skills, however, are sometimes cited as a desirable addition to professional knowledge, so an aptitude for these is also useful, however academically distinguished an applicant may be. This does not seem an area in which applicants' realism seems particularly likely to be at risk of distortion, since the relevant information is usually stated early on and prominently enough to state eligibility unambiguously. Where such information is spread through a publication, however, it seems reasonable to expect this to be highlighted, especially in long prospectuses. This is often the case, but where it is not, the realism of readers about the organisation and its opportunities is at risk.

## **Study**

An expectation to study for professional qualifications after a day's work is sometimes mentioned, indicating how committed entrants must be. A hallmark of some graduate-level jobs is their assumption of graduates' willingness to work during their 'spare' time. The implication is that the job will take priority in the employee's life. Some companies may be trying to offset this when they claim to be flexible, and propose the work package as something negotiated between entrant and employer. However, this may ring hollow against the fact of having to study in the evenings, and do little to alter



the apparent balance of power. Recruiters may, though, feel little need to elaborate on study requirements since their graduate entrants will have until recently been immersed in this, while this may be reinforced by nonchalance among applicants at the prospect of further study. However, many applicants may come to find the typical day at work more demanding than its campus counterpart, and be less fresh or less motivated to study than anticipated. No prospectus in the sample even mentioned typical weekly hours of home study, which might have held some meaning for readers. In failing to do this, the recruiters were perhaps less informative than they might have been.

### **Training**

Even where considerable space is devoted to it, training remains mysterious. What emerges is a vague assurance that training will be given and that staff will learn from it. The recognition that entrants are not expected to 'know the ropes' may be reassuring enough for readers not to mind lack of detail. One organisation says that its staff are encouraged to plan their own training; another that it is integral to the job and essential for membership of professional bodies; one emphasises modern training methods, referring to the 'facilitation of learning' rather than 'didactic methods'. However, these terms are rather vague - just what do they refer to?

This last example suggests that even the terminology used to refer to training may be unhelpful to realism. Perhaps there is an argument for training to be embraced within personal profiling, to help translate it into everyday terms and draw in personal experience. Given that the survey's sample of employers believed training to be the feature most attractive to applicants for graduate posts, it appeared to merit coverage which made it

more meaningful. This may be particularly true where there are options within a training programme, advance knowledge of which may help an applicant to emphasise his/her interest during selection or further investigation prior to appointment.

### **The Future**

Organisations frequently give themselves a dynamic image by invoking the future and their plans to shape it. Where they appear concerned for the graduate's future this seems to lend them even more appeal. Mention of postgraduate study sponsorship and instancing constructive career moves to other organisations suggests that the employer is keen to allow the entrant to develop himself, not just to exploit his/her talents. This may appear the motive behind the occasionally-stated willingness to hold over offers for a year, though the real explanation probably relates more to recession-influenced staffing problems. However, the vulnerability of organisations to the swings of economic fortune have meant that implicit promises to graduates collectively have at times remained unfulfilled. Organisations may nevertheless give notice of their intentions by this means, which could assist graduates' realism. However, the realistic applicant also seems likely to try to ensure that the work offered will be satisfying even without the predicted opportunities and/or expansion.

### **Application Forms**

It seems possible that the length and layout of graduate post application forms, and the information they request, may have a bearing on which



organisations people approach, and perhaps how they come to view themselves as applicants, in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Length and layout vary little among graduate application forms, nor does the kind of information they request. Despite this, only one organisation in ten uses the standard application form approved by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). Where forms vary, completion requires time for thought, something final year students are short of. A form which, once completed, could be copied directly, would be helpful, since most forms are four pages long. The rest are usually two.

Forms usually ask for two kinds of information. Into one category fall such as the applicant's educational history, health and interests. Into the second fall reasons for applying, thoughts on the HE experience, and career plans. Some of these questions cannot be answered properly without examining the recruitment literature closely, something which one company's form actually urges applicants to do.

Some forms are more searching than others, something justified (in cases such as the Police) by the nature of the work. Some questions seem primarily interview conversation-prompters, such as those asking about work experience or perceived achievements, though they are perhaps included also to learn something of applicants' values. Accompanying questions about marital status and ethnic origin are assurances that these are asked only in the interests of monitoring. Some recruiters even devote a separate sheet to this information, to reassure that it will not be used in selection. Stating preference for such as working location may limit opportunity. Particularly hazardous in this respect may be questions about mobility. Multi-choice questionnaires seem a good way of learning more about applicants and therefore streamlining the selection process. However, it may have



limitations, as only one organisation in the sample used it. The statement in support of application offers a catch-all which may offset most other deficiencies of a form.

The length of application forms may have an effect on graduate realism. Long forms may be avoided because of the likely time needed to complete them. Shorter forms will probably seem more inviting, but their organisations may be less suited to the would-be applicant. Because the demands of most forms permit the completion of only a limited number, applicants must choose organisations carefully, since prospectuses must be studied as well as forms filled in. Many application forms appear neutral in the questions they ask and the wording of these. No doubt they are so to be (or at least seem) fair to each individual. However, it is interesting to consider the consequences of forms whose questions make more apparent what the recruiter is seeking. Some unsuitable people would no doubt apply, but it may also lead to potential (though equally unsuitable) applicants turning their attention elsewhere to more constructive ends.

## **The Implications for Graduate Realism**

- 1) The length of the typical prospectus suggested that to gain sufficient information to make helpful distinctions between organisations, a student would have to spend considerable time reading. It seems possible that some students had failed to do this, with the further possibility that they had made career decisions based on insufficient knowledge to be considered realistic. This relates to this chapter's title question by casting some doubts over how far recruiters promote realism through their prospectuses, a facility many would-be applicants appear to use as a major (and possibly only) source of what these organisations have to offer. More precisely, it invites consideration of how far good features of a prospectus may be obscured by a more obvious unattractive feature.
- 2) The potency of images in some prospectuses suggested that these have the potential to make a great impact on readers, perhaps more than factual information. Images seemed likely to have particular potency where they introduced a dramatic note, such as by depicting (even in simulation) some form of confrontation (such as in the Police or Army prospectuses), or power, (as through angular photographs of organisations' architecture) or breadth of endeavour (via such as photos of or in international locations). Where these images were at variance with most of the work they affected to represent, there seemed a risk of some readers applying without a realistic perspective.
- 3) There was a strong similarity among prospectuses, particularly among those representing the same occupational field. It seemed possible that lack of distinctiveness may have discouraged breadth of reading (across

occupational fields) or depth of reading (within one field), both of them potentially prejudicial to realism. It seemed unlikely that a recruiter would contribute to readers' realism unless the publication not only offered interesting content, but invited perusal in the first place. However, similar prospectuses representing organisations in the same field may, in suggesting their sameness, possibly rightly draw attention to a conservatism within these organisations to be aware of which is instructive to readers.

- 4) Few prospectuses seriously attempted to explain the newcomer's work, often focusing attention instead on middle and long-term career prospects. However, it seemed that applicants lacking knowledge of the likely tasks of their first post would be unrealistic, and might not reach middle or long-term careers in the organisation because dissatisfied in first posts. It is important to recognise that in looking at realism this chapter asks not only whether recruiters contribute to applicants' understanding of opportunities and prospects, but to their awareness of tasks and conditions at entry level. Realism concerns the present state of things as much as the future.
- 5) Most prospectuses made assumptions about their readers, and about their aspirations particularly. It seemed that readers lacking awareness of their real feelings and motivations relating to employment matters risked categorising themselves in accordance with these assumptions and accordingly being less than realistic in their choice of organisation and perhaps occupation. Organisations earnestly seeking to raise readers' awareness may reasonably be expected to encourage self-examination among them rather than to present an image which those not having done this seem more likely to accept uncritically.



- 6) Prospectuses implied that every entrant could advance within the organisation as far as he/she wanted, though statistically this seemed improbable. Actual prospects of advancement, and the qualities needed to achieve this, were kept vague. This did not aid the realism of the would-be applicant who had thoroughly investigated the nature of potential first posts, and was in a position to make judgements about application based on likely longer-term satisfactions.
- 7) Prospectuses did little to promote realism among significant if untypical groups, such as mature or handicapped students and graduates. Such people might have been forgiven for thinking themselves unemployable, since the prospectuses in the sample without exception represented only graduates confirming the youthful, able-bodied stereotype.
- 8) The notion of competition rather than candidate/job matching was conveyed in what prospectuses said about selection strategies. This may have encouraged some readers to strive to fit the organisation than to expect it to meet them half-way. The sceptic might say this was realistic in the present economic climate. However, such an approach may represent only a time-bomb of discontent.

The above points highlight negatives, or at least potential difficulties or dangers, but there are positive things to be said, too. Because they present information bearing the potential to interest readers and put forward images likely to be found stimulating, prospectuses attract to useful information students who might otherwise remain ignorant of it. It is also possible that they encourage readers to live up to the positive elements in the images projected (though how successfully they do this is unknown). They may raise

the confidence of readers whose abilities merit self-confidence. The range of work, operations and specialisms depicted can help readers find a particular niche, perhaps, where their ideas had been only general before. Individual personal profiles can give a sense of identity to organisations which might otherwise seem impersonal. The depiction of members of ethnic minorities may encourage applications from students in this category who would not otherwise have made them. Some prospectuses endeavour to aid readers by telling them early on which qualities or qualifications (e.g. specific degree subject) they are looking for. Just by featuring certain work elements, prospectuses also tell or remind readers of the sort or number of things which usually need to be considered in making decisions about graduate employment. Application forms, too, can aid realism by showing those interested the effort required to earn consideration by even one organisation, and therefore of the advisability of being selective. The criteria by which such judgements are made seem likely to emerge from a fusion of factual information and self-awareness, something to which several prospectuses in the survey draw attention.

## **SUMMARY**

The employers' contribution to graduate realism was made through three principal means: their recruitment literature, their selection process, and the access to their organisations permitted potential applicants prior to the recruitment process. The success of any of these was at least partly dependent on how well it was supported through the efforts of HEIs, and taken advantage of by students.



Fewer than a third of the employers in the sample had consulted an outside agency in the composition of their recruitment literature. This appeared to risk material not being as useful in content or as precisely-pitched as it might otherwise have been. The range of people or organisations on which those resorting to this had drawn their help was testimony to the amount of assistance available. There was concern among all three respondent groups over how well graduate recruitment literature conveyed certain things, notably constituent job tasks and aspects of the working environment. Employers thought that undergraduates were unduly influenced by images of work, despite the part which they (the employers) played in communicating these through the content and style of their literature, and possibly via campus presentations.

On close examination of a range of prospectuses, the written and pictorial content of recruitment literature proved to be subtle and powerful. There appeared little doubt that much information was conveyed thereby; however, the similarity of many prospectuses risked readers finding it hard to assess the distinctiveness of any single organisation. The length of many prospectuses posed the question of how long students would spend reading them, and therefore how successfully they would compare organisations, or be likely to examine in detail more than a few. Recruitment literature did appear potentially educative about employment in general, though its main purpose and actual use did seem to be in relation to job-hunting specifically. Both careers advisers and employers themselves largely agreed on the need to improve aspects of recruitment literature and on the aspects requiring this. Job content was one area felt to deserve better representation. These moves to improvement, while encouraging, did suggest that student readers had not yet been made as aware as they might have been by this particular means.



The recruitment process appeared to have told applicants much more about the organisation than about employment in general. This may have been because those invited to selection programmes were already well-versed in employment lore, or because employers felt applicants should look after their own general awareness, seeing their business being solely to promote their organisation. This, however, appears a policy which might rebound on recruiters taking on graduates on whom awareness dawns at a later (and more inconvenient) stage.

The kinds of surprise which some graduates experienced, particularly the less agreeable variety, were mostly hard to anticipate, and often the product of a particular situation. Employers could hardly have prepared applicants for these, other than perhaps by offering work experience ahead of graduation in those departments in which the student might work eventually. Such a procedure was likely, however, to be an option open only to organisations whose line of work enabled them to identify students' potential at an early stage during, if not before, their undergraduate course. Students on technical vocational courses, such as Engineering, seemed the most likely beneficiaries of such a preparation. However, few organisations felt able to make such a commitment to individual students at so early a stage, nor, perhaps, wished to invite students to, either. Three organisations inviting contact (such as for visits) probably aided realism by allowing students to discover different organisations and compare them. It would have been interesting to know how far students taking the trouble to do this progressed in the organisation's selection procedure, that is, assuming such contact did not dissuade them from applying.

## CHAPTER 5

### DO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS CONTRIBUTE TO GRADUATE ENTRANTS' LEVEL OF REALISM?

#### INTRODUCTION

There are within any HE institution two main potential agents for the promotion of employment realism among students. One is the academic department or faculty within which a student studies, and to whose staff he/she may be presumed to have access; the other is the CAS whose information facilities are readily available, and whose advisers may be consulted, usually by appointment. Faculty and/or CAS may also offer a programme of on-campus careers events to which students are invited. The existence of these agents and their offerings does not in itself, however, guarantee raised awareness, which depends partly on the quality of what is offered.

The nature of these potential influences is likely to be affected by several factors, among them the health and extent of relations between the CAS and each department within the institution, whether departmental courses are mainly vocational or otherwise, and the importance which individual teaching staff accord careers and the energies they feel willing and able to devote to its promotion. This is not to underplay the significance of individual students' contact with advisers. However, in their obligation to conserve resources, CAS and departments alike are likely to try to raise awareness partly through working with students in groups. Neither, though, would wish to lose sight of the particularity of each student's situation,

ambitions and consequent needs, and any assessment of the contribution to student realism which CAS and academic departments make will recognise the tension between their need at once to generalise assistance (for resource reasons), and to find an anchorage in the minds of individual students in order to be effective.

The theoretical context for this chapter was first outlined in Chapter 1, with the following hypothetical statement:

There is an influential discrepancy between the kinds or degrees of awareness which HE promotes, and what needs to be known to make informed decisions about employment and to avoid being surprised by work.

(page 30)

This hypothesis was underpinned by stating the case for it through the work of two theorists associated with its position. One is Watts (1977), who sees effective vocational preparation within HE settings as being inhibited by three major characteristics of the institutions themselves. To recap, these are:

- 1) the institution's view of career exploratory activities as external to its real function, and in some cases hostile to it;
- 2) its having a value system very different from most workplaces, and a focus on academic and intellectual values which encourages stereotypical notions of other ones; and
- 3) the homogeneity of the campus population conceals most adult role models against which self-evaluation could take place.



These cause Watts to question in turn the traditional activities of campus CAS as effective realism-promoters among students. Herriot (1984), meanwhile, believes that Services have concentrated on their student clients rather than those same clients' relationships with organisations. This has been driven by a remedial concept of guidance, with the student seen as someone with a problem to be solved rather than someone to be educated to ask deeper questions about himself/herself and address issues which have a bearing on successful career choice. However, even if CAS were successfully to promote this, it is doubtful that they would be in step with the efforts of academic staff, for whom the notion of educating students in any deep sense is likely to be subordinate to the need to produce a graduate, a result acceptable to the authorities on which institutions depend for their funding. This is bolstered by the point made by ROBERTS (1985) that

... it would seem that researchers and teachers in universities, polytechnics and colleges are much more interested in investigating the world beyond their immediate experiences. In doing so they may make assumptions about the worlds they inhabit that they would criticise in other situations they directly observe ... They also seem to have been less interested in the perceptions students create in the institutions they share together.

(p.991)

Studies such as the one by WILDER (1982) clearly place part of the responsibility for awareness-raising with the academic departments or faculty, and do not rule out assistance by CAS at the design or implementation stages. However, the study by Drew Smith (1990) is critical of the quantity, quality and scrutiny of training in British organisations. It demonstrates the value of students recognising the importance of discovering what is really meant by the term 'training', as advertised by a given organisation, and of assessing this against the nature and requirements of the job itself. HE's role in encouraging

this may be more easily fulfilled through closer employer liaison than many seem to have. The description of the U.K. Teaching Company Scheme instanced by Humble (1989) however, illustrates the educative value of this (to say nothing of raised goodwill between recruiters and institutions) with regard to not only graduate trainees, but undergraduates, whose understanding of and interest in training seem likely to be raised thereby.

A problem for job applicants and those advising them is the imprecise nature of the terms frequently used to describe selection criteria, and lack of clues these provide as to the interested person's suitability. Reutersward (1988) believes that institutions of HE lack the internal flexibility to shift their resources in response to changes in the world of employment. If this is so, it is not hard to see how students might find this unhelpful in relation to self-assessment for the job-market. For example, an upsurge in the career opportunities in a given occupation may not result in a comparable expansion of courses or course places, nor may syllabuses reflect recent changes, particularly in scientific and technological fields.

BRADSHAW (1989) identifies the importance of teamwork skills in employers' views of desirable applicant characteristics. The author points to his study's findings that teamwork depends, however, on more than intellectual ability. This is recognised by employers, who identify numerous desirable characteristics besides academic competence or intellectual status. However, HE's prime objective is the promotion of these latter aptitudes. Moreover, in pursuit of them, students work alone rather than towards a collective success. The teamwork concept so important in the world of work is largely redundant among the student body in HE.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF CAS - THE EMPLOYERS' VIEW

Data from the Employer Questionnaire show us how recruiters thought CAS were or were not contributing to graduate realism.

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 9(a)</u>				
Given the necessary resources, could Higher Education Careers Advisory Services better promote realism among students?				
<u>RESPONSES</u>				
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
25	4	14	43	
If 'NO', what more could they do?				

**TABLE 5:1 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW FAR CAS CONTRIBUTED TO GRADUATE REALISM**

Clearly, most employers thought Services had a bigger role to play here. They suggested the following as worthwhile additional activities.

- (1) Arranging visits to industry

That CAS arrange visits to industry was recommended by no fewer than



8 of the 25 recruiters giving an affirmative answer to the question. One respondent felt that advisers should have not only students in mind for this exercise:

The careers advisers themselves should have experience of working in industry/commerce and should not have purely academic backgrounds. This experience should be refreshed from time to time with company visits, etc.

(Food and drink manufacturer)

The CAS enjoying the largest staff would appear to have the best chance to implement such a suggestion; the smaller ones are so hard-pressed that releasing staff even for very short periods could adversely affect services to students.

The other respondents seemed to see work experience as a student activity exclusively, mentioning it alongside other activities, such as mock interviews, which were clearly student-focused. One respondent hinted at work experience by advocating that Services

... increase the range of activities in which students and employers could participate to facilitate the greater awareness of the former re. careers in industry and commerce.

(Engineering firm)

This expressed a valuing of greater mutual knowledge, something which could have been promoted through formal or informal discussions. Perhaps panel presentations (often used by firms) or round-table discussions were also in mind here.

More than one firm saw the value of work experience, feeling that

Services should advocate it, yet acknowledged their own part in the difficulties of arranging this:

... this is an administrative problem for our organisation.

(Postal Service)

... this is extremely difficult at the moment with limited placement opportunities.

(Manufacturing organisation)

Despite the barriers to it, there are dangers in organisations failing to offer placements, since this could reduce the applications they receive. Employers might have to consider more imaginative ways of sustaining contact with potentially interested students.

## (2) CAS employing staff seconded from business

Only one recruiter actually advocated secondments, though some of those organisations advocating better contacts in general may have been willing to consider and adopt the practice. Arguable benefits of such an arrangement would be the education into business thinking of advisers currently ignorant of it, together with a possible increase in respect for the work of CAS among organisations currently sceptical of their efforts. However, introduction of this suggestion seems unlikely on a broad scale, since seconded staff would have to take some time to be trained in advisory skills and occupational knowledge sufficient to answering the needs of a varied clientele, or CAS would have to be content to limit their contact to students aspiring to those occupations the secondees represented. Work shadowing, currently used by many organisations, even for school pupils,

might be a more economical and realistic way of communicating the understanding from which both sides might benefit.

(3) Building special links with particular recruiters

Several organisations either mentioned special links or implied them by the nature of the contact they were suggesting. One employer saw such arrangements as involving not only HEIs, but schools from which a proportion of their students would come. Another felt that timing was important, and that employers should become involved earlier in the awareness-process. This may have reflected a measure of employer discontent with the prevailing practice of students making their first substantial links with industry well into the second half of their degree courses. Possibly there was a feeling that organisations needed more time to get to know students, as well as the other way around. Again, though, there was recognition of this not always being plain sailing for advisers to arrange:

They [the Advisers] could be more proactive in contacting employers, but there is a problem in that since employers are often too busy to devote sufficient attention to them.

(Engineering firm)

The durability of any 'special relationship' might be undermined at any time by an employer not appointing any (or fewer than usual) students to graduate posts. The quality of the students themselves is likely to be a factor in whether they do so. However, obvious cherry-picking by employers runs the risk of devaluing the links as essentially educative, and mainly for the benefit of the general student population. In fairness to all students, and to make the contacts consistent with the tenets of HE, any such exercises will be



essentially educative rather than recruitment-oriented.

(4) Finding out what recruiters expect of graduates

It was under this heading that the least diluted criticisms of CAS by employers emerged. Certain remarks suggested that Services had been at fault through omission:

[They should] find out what companies do and what they expect from graduates. In ten years of graduate recruitment we have never been approached by careers services for this information.

(Engineering firm)

However, the limited resources of CAS, and consequent incapacity to contact more than a fraction of total employers of a particular type, is understandable. Unfortunately, some recruiters may judge their own omission by Services as a sign of general neglect.

One remark could have been prompted by the respondent's particular experience, but may have reflected wider feelings within his industry:

Stop telling students that with a qualification they automatically become managers.

(Hotelier)

Possibly more worrying are comments such as the one saying that Services:

Need to realistically assess graduates' strengths and direct them towards the right companies or occupations.

It may be no more than loose use of words, but if substantial numbers of

recruiters believe that Services have the resources to 'assess graduates' strengths', and ought to 'direct' them and can recognise 'the right companies or occupations' for their clients, then CAS risk their actual functions continuing to be misunderstood and perhaps being mis-represented further afield. Contact with organisations seems essential if only to guard against misconceptions of their role and the potential resulting loss of the co-operation instrumental to raising student awareness. If students themselves are the sole ambassadors for CAS, there is a significant risk of the philosophy and activities of the Service being misrepresented. However, if Services communicate an accurate (if basic) idea of what they see as their role (and particularly the practical limits of it), there seems a better chance not only of their avoiding misunderstanding, but of recruiters finding ways to complement what Services do rather than working at odds with them or duplicating their efforts.

(5) Investing more in awareness programmes

Four employer respondents mentioned awareness programmes, including talks, workshops and seminars. Most spoke in general terms, but one person clearly spoke with the conviction of familiarity:

Invest more in programmes such as 'Insight into Management'.

(Postal Service)

That only one respondent named an awareness programme may not be suspicious, on the other hand it may mean that few if any had made real impact with recruiters. The latter situation would have left CAS freer to

choose or devise their own programmes, whereas the knowledge of employers approving of particular existing ones might have made it hard to bypass these even if they were not quite suited to the Service's intentions. Another probable hazard facing advisers was the need to hold true to methods of awareness-raising which placed students first and which employed terms and explanations designed to facilitate their self-understanding and occupational orientation, rather than adopting ones possibly popular among recruiters through orienting recipients to organisational norms. Recognised impartiality is important as a way for CAS to establish and retain credibility among students. This extends beyond not actively promoting any particular recruiters, to not adopting methods other than those so widely used as to hold no special associations for their clientele.

6) Stressing to students the need for personal skills/business awareness

In this context, one employer respondent spoke of

[the] development of a personal skills set.

while another advocated that a means to this was for advisers to

... establish drive and motivation ...

among students, while a third suggested they offer interview experience partly as a way of recognising their own skills and aptitudes, but also as a way of teaching students how to advertise to recruiters what they had to offer. Few as they were, there was a hint in these comments of the careers adviser being perceived in some quarters as a sort of 'coach' rather than an essentially



disinterested professional helping students to set their own agendas. This issue is interesting, since positive factors such as motivation may have to be established before skills can be acquired. If the careers adviser does not implant these, no-one else may, yet to expect this of them may be to demand of advisers an extension to their competence or their role beyond what they feel able and/or willing to accept. This evidence supports the argument for Service/employer contact for role-clarification, mentioned earlier.

(7) Trying to attract a higher proportion of the undergraduate population

Only one employer respondent mentioned this specifically, but incidental comments from other recruiters suggested that they believed Services did deliver useful help, and were worth contacting. Whether it reflected careful thought about how Services might deal with a higher proportion of students, or of whether different (and perhaps more limited) kinds of assistance would have to be the order of the day, was less certain.

It is notable (though hardly surprising) that nearly all the suggestions as to what CAS might do additionally to raise awareness related to greater knowledge of organisations or business practice, rather than knowledge of occupations or specific job-content. This may be because recruiters look to the long-term in choosing graduates, hoping to appoint people they can groom for management responsibilities rather than just a job. The Graduate Questionnaire, however, while offering data in support of this, also gave evidence of other needs.

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF CAS - THE GRADUATES' VIEW**

<b><u>GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 9</u></b>			
Do you think that your Higher Education institution's Careers Advisory Service adequately promoted among students:			
	<b><u>RESPONSES</u></b>		
	<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
a) Understanding of jobs	25	18	43
b) Knowledge of particular employers	33	10	43
c) A grasp of their own ability and potential	22	21	43

**TABLE 5:2 GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW FAR CAS PROMOTED ELEMENTS OF AWARENESS AMONG STUDENTS**

For the first two items in the Table, respondents felt that their Services had been adequate. The third item, relating to promoting a grasp of their own ability and potential, was more marginal. This may relate to the motivational element mentioned in the last section, as well as to any educative role Services might be seen to have. The following two sub-tables offer breakdowns of Table 5:2 by, in order, gender and type of institution.

	<u>YES</u>		<u>NO</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>
a) Understanding of Jobs	Male: 10	Female: 15	Male: 11	Female: 7	43
b) Knowledge of particular employers	Male: 14	Female: 19	Male: 7	Female: 3	43
c) A grasp of their own ability and potential	Male: 7	Female: 15	Male: 14	Female: 7	43

**TABLE 5:2(a)**      **BREAKDOWN OF TABLE 5:2 RESPONDENTS BY GENDER**

	<u>YES</u>		<u>NO</u>		<u>TOTAL</u>
	'Old' Universities	'New' Universities	'Old' Universities	'New' Universities	
a) Understanding of jobs	21	4	13	5	43
b) Knowledge of particular employers	28	5	6	4	43
c) A grasp of their own ability and potential	19	3	15	6	43

**TABLE 5:2(b)**      **BREAKDOWN OF TABLE 5:2 RESPONDENTS BY INSTITUTION**



Asked to say what they had found notably deficient in any Service's provision of the above, Graduate Questionnaire respondents made numerous comments. These may be fairly represented under a number of sub-headings.

(1) Careers Advisory Services' Literature

In regard to this, it was apparent that even when a respondent had felt that something had been provided well, this had not prevented him/her from perceiving the absence of something else generally considered valuable and necessary:

[The CAS] relied heavily on employers' own literature which is weak in [promoting understanding of jobs] but has facts galore for [promoting knowledge of particular employers].

(Economics graduate employed by a Bank)

Another graduate spoke of job awareness being

... left to numerous booklets ...

while another, in the same context, spoke of the Service as having

... only offered company literature.

One graduate's comment suggested that at her university (where she gained a first-class honours degree) literature had been used as a substitute for proper investigation and guidance:

The Careers Service, especially with Law students, simply points them to Law brochures and don't look at alternatives.

This last remark leaves us to wonder whether the comment of another first-class graduate, male this time, reflected a lack of trust in his Service to offer much in the way of awareness-raising:

I did not attend my Careers Advisory Service,  
save to get brochures.

(Mathematics graduate)

In fairness to CAS, more information about how information enquiries had been dealt with would be needed to judge whether they had provided students with adequate access to literature. Any shortcomings perceived by students in this context may have been because the gatekeepers to information, such as reception staff, were not qualified to assess clients' career investigation needs, and acted only as signposts rather than diagnosticians.

(2) Lack of knowledge/understanding

The readiness with which the advisers in some of the Services mentioned above appeared to refer students to literature need not have been indicative of any lack of knowledge or understanding on their own part. Certainly no-one else in the questionnaire sample matched the vitriol of one male classics graduate, who said of careers advisers:

... their 'insights' are appallingly trivial and dated.

A few quieter comments, however, gave cause for concern:

I felt there was lack of understanding, especially  
in technical fields.

(Male Electronics graduate in an Electricity Company)

[Careers Advisers] didn't talk about abilities, just how to get a job in the present climate.

(Female Chemistry and Materials Science graduate working in Production Research)

[Advisers] only had knowledge of large employers. [There was] not much actual counselling.

(Male Accountancy and Finance graduate employed in Accountancy)

Again, this has to be seen in the context of generally positive opinion on two of the three question items.

An adviser may legitimately omit information which he/she knows a student can easily obtain in a more readily-consumable and perhaps reliable form, and it may be that careers advisers in general took pains to point out what kinds of information they regarded as students' own responsibility to obtain. However, the last three quotes show that even when information was offered, each respondent had come away feeling the lack of something. Perhaps what they had been looking for was for the adviser to translate available knowledge or understanding into something which had meaning for them. Though this reductive skill was something rarely (if ever) mentioned by the graduates in the sample, it may have been on this that careers advisers were judged, rather than on their inclination or ability to cite basic facts.

(3) Failing to provide certain aids to awareness

The aids referred to here are forms or sources of help other than available literature. Clearly, the graduate respondents who did feel that they



should have had more assistance lamented the absence not of particular educative input, but, more generally, activities involving knowledgeable others. Significant human contact may have been lacking in their careers libraries, and a number appeared to feel that it was a necessary ingredient in the facilitation of some kinds of awareness, and perhaps self-knowledge, particularly.

[There were] no tutorials to explain what happens after you leave College.

(Female accountancy graduate employed as accountancy trainee in a television manufacturing company)

[The] Careers Office had closed down on campus. No Milkround [was] organised.

(Female French/Economics graduate working as a finance trainee in a transport organisation)

Nothing was done to bring out [a grasp of your own abilities and potential], such as psychometric testing.

(Male Engineering graduate employed by electricity distributor)

[The Careers Advisory Service] should have provided psychometric testing ... [and] mock interviews.

(Female French graduate employed in a retail organisation)

One thing which most of these activities offer is the chance to plug perceived gaps in understanding through asking questions to tailor knowledge/information to the individual. From what the above and other respondents said in this regard, it did appear that to a proportion of the graduates, a measure of discussion and checking was important, possibly seeming more so

when it had not been forthcoming. Psychometric testing was mentioned by at least two respondents, but may not be an option for most universities because of its resource-intensiveness. However, it would have been interesting to know whether a more easily-run facility could have produced a similar raising of awareness and/or an equal level of satisfaction in the client. It would also have been interesting to know how many respondents advocating particular facilities knew what these involved, and their likely benefits, psychometric testing being a case in point. Some graduates may have felt reassured by having been through a supposedly beneficial process, without really understanding it properly. A potential hazard of some aids (particularly scientific-sounding ones) is to disenchant their users with equally (if not more) useful ones which sound less impressive.

(4) Lack of interest

While it cannot be said to have been a frequent observation, three respondents did draw attention to what they perceived as a lack of interest (or of limited interest) in their career options by advisory staff:

The Careers Service would find a job/possibilities within the area which you told them you were interested in. They wouldn't necessarily ask why you were interested ... and point out what other types of career this might offer.

(Male, Business Studies graduate working as an accountant in a construction firm)

They really did not seem interested.

(Male Electronics graduate working for an electricity distributor)

**"I found the Service to be too academically biased in most cases, to properly assess each individual - unless a student was particularly well-known to them."**

**(Male, Economics/History graduate employed by a computer firm)**

One or more of these negative impressions may be explained by consultation with an adviser having taken place at a stage in the academic year when proper consideration of a wide range of possible options would have been difficult. This is only surmise, however, and not an excuse. The comment about academic bias is interesting; advisers are often specialists in particular occupational fields, or have duties only to specific departments or faculties. This might explain why someone considering careers unconnected with his/her course might have discussed matters with an adviser not fully conversant with these. In some institutions, there may be an argument for better screening of students seeking advice, perhaps with referral to specific advisers in some cases. However, resources may not have permitted either in the Services canvassed.

**(5) Organisational promotion**

Two respondents commented on their Services' advertisement of employers:

**In some instances, it seemed as though certain employers were being promoted more than others ...**

**(Male Engineering graduate working for a news agency)**

**The Careers Service promoted companies rather than fields of work.**

**(Male Computing Science graduate employed by an information technology firm)**



The obvious danger here was of students' trust in the Service as a neutral agent being reduced or lost through any appearance of favouring particular organisations. Even if there had been no collusion with organisations, any obvious effort by advisers to draw students' attention to particular firms risked seriously interfering with the students' attempts to gain knowledge or effect analysis conducive to realism, since they might have neglected other organisations not mentioned, or dismissed those recommended out of suspicion at apparent favouritism. Because no details of how the promotion in question was effected, however, it may have been the effect produced by the unwitting prominence of recruiter display material rather than the result of any urgings by advisers themselves. Some advisers may have referred to particular firms to illustrate points about career selection or recruitment, and this been misperceived as promotion by some students.

Another important element was the extent to which advisers felt that their Services could better promote realism if they had more generous resources.

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF CAS - THE CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEW**

<b><u>CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 9(a)</u></b>				
<p>Given the necessary resources, could your Service better promote realism among students?</p>				
<b><u>RESPONSES</u></b>				
<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>DON'T KNOW</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>	
35	1	6	42	

**TABLE 5:3 CAREERS ADVISERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAS' POTENTIAL TO PROMOTE STUDENT REALISM**

Clearly, there was a strong belief in there being room for improvement. Advisers highlighted a number of areas in particular:

(1) **Better publicity of/access to careers information**

Better access to information [and] better publicity about existing information.

Buy more books and videos to help students.

Inject more resources into the Careers Service so that it can become more functional for the students.

... providing more sophisticated information resources, especially case study material and job profiles.

Within this survey it was true to say that advisers seemed to see furnishing resources or the means to using them as being enough. There was no mention of students having to be educated in the use of them, though this need not have been the case in regard to careers education materials. Finance seemed to provide the main obstacle to obtaining what the advisers regarded as desirable materials or equipment. Better access may simply mean more copies of items students found helpful. At particular times of the year, demand for particular resources may exceed supply, perhaps considerably. Borrowing facilities can result in late returns, and (sad to say) the possibility of theft is always present. Consequently, some Services may see their task being to preserve and, if possible, refine existing access arrangements, rather than strive to develop new ones.

(2) More opportunities for guidance

This was seen as one-to-one discussions between advisers and students, rather than group activities, whether run by advisers or academic staff. Thoughts about increased guidance included the following:

More staff would enable us to better promote 'realism' and preparedness in students before their final year.

More opportunities for guidance.

More work with First and Second-Year students ...

With most, if not all, institutions offering students written information and some form of awareness-raising through groupwork or presentations, it was individual personal contact which seemed to be missing. This would require



extra careers advisers, a prospect having much bigger resource implications than funding for information. As one adviser said:

Increased staffing levels would enable careers counsellors to play a more pro-active role ... but with two-and-a-half careers counsellors for 7,000 students ... this isn't easy.

The variation in student-adviser ratios among institutions probably reflected not only different levels of resourcing, but differences in institutional philosophies about the purpose (and, perhaps, worth) of guidance within HE. The encouragement to greater consistency in this (such as through government and/or a professional body), appeared the only likely means of approaching parity among Services in terms of what assistance could be provided to any given student. This would bring HE into line with current practices in schools and FE colleges, and reflect the principles of the Students Charter on Higher Education (DFE, 1993), which include

... well-informed guidance from your tutors and careers staff ...

(p.14)

(3) More careers-related activities within the curriculum

Advisers felt there was considerable scope for this, as their comments indicate:

Teach Careers throughout the University.

More built-in participation in courses from the beginning.

Lobby staff to demand a more realistic curriculum...

Provide a structured programme within the curriculum: a careers issues package and possibly vocationally-related projects.

Formal links with teaching departments, a small but progressive careers education/awareness theme within the curriculum, a coherent careers application package for the unfocused ...

At first sight this may appear to be a way for already pressurised careers staff to spread their burden, as well as achieve more with clients. However, the thrust of the above suggestions carries major resource implications for Services, too. One is the need to devise an awareness programme suited or adaptable to the way most subjects are taught and departments are run. Another is to negotiate the programme's introduction with each department or faculty. A third is to train, monitor, and where necessary support the academic staff assuming responsibility for all or part of its delivery. This represents a great deal of work, some of which need be done only once (such as achieving co-operation), but some of which may prove ongoing, as staff delivering the programme leave or acquire additional academic duties which oblige them to abdicate any careers responsibilities. One respondent had ambitious plans for his academic colleagues, saying that the Service should:

... use the entire staff to seek out more vacation employment, courses, work shadowing and placements.

Another adviser, however, was more cautious:

I feel greater 'realism' could be achieved only by a substantial 'culture change' within this institution ... One department, working in consultation with careers, has adapted its course content and teaching methods with this objective in mind, but the College culture continues to reign supreme amongst the students.

Prospects of cultural change are, however, limited, since CAS in HE are outside the academic mainstream within which items for change may more easily gain credibility. Their marginalisation gives most CAS a steeper slope to climb.

(4) More and better links with employers

Some respondents simply recommended increased contact with recruiters, but most were more specific than this, with students going into industry and commerce to acquire a taste of particular occupations being seen as valuable:

Arrange work experience for all students.

Organise workshops - involving employers and training providers. [Arrange] 'mock' interview programmes with actual employers.

Increase the involvement of employers in presentations.

In many institutions there are departments who have already built substantial contacts with recruiters, particularly local ones, and may have no need of more. It would be interesting to see how far individual departments were willing to bless the attempts of other departments to benefit from these existing links, or how soon possessiveness would become evident. For departments offering non-vocational courses, these employers might be a source of help, but contacting them might also be a potential source of friction within the institution. The best prospects of students benefitting from employers seemed to be through a framework of institutional/organisational links. However, the importance to individual departments of acquiring



specific kinds of visit or work placement has meant that these have not always been spread evenly or to best effect.

(5) Offer more campus facilities

This general heading covers a range of suggestions which include an increase in existing ones and the introduction of new ones:

Organise more one-day careers events.

Make more places available on CRAC courses  
(Insight into Management).

Group-based personal development seminars ...

[Provide] a careers issues package and possibly  
vocationally-related projects (not work experience).

Extend our present commitment, e.g. psychometric  
tests.

There seemed to be more enthusiasm for increasing tried and tested activities whose benefits were recognised or assumed, rather than venturing into uncharted waters. Possibly staff were not as conservative as may have appeared, but felt that greater credibility would come from building on existing successes. Convincing others of more unusual or ambitious methods may have been thought thereby to be easier. There may be a fine balance between organising new or additional events, and attracting enough interest in them to ensure their survival. This is especially true when representatives from other organisations are involved, since they will probably deploy their resources where these are most likely to attract applicants.

(6) Help students identify their own abilities

This was clearly something which many of the suggestions already made would have promoted, but other comments were worth noting, too:

Provide opportunities for students to measure their own strengths, weaknesses and needs.

Do more work on self-assessment and career choice.

Spend more time to help students to identify their abilities.

These remarks indicate that advisers saw self-help on the part of students as something they should not be left to do unaided. Moreover, the second comment above makes a close link between self-assessment and career choice, suggesting that these are unavoidably linked, implying that career choice without self-assessment is no proper choice at all. This reinforces what another commentator said earlier about the need to do more work with first and second-year students, many if not most of whom might be more receptive to self-assessment exercises, having been less likely than their final-year counterparts to have made a career choice. The younger students may also be freer of the pressures which beset final-year students and sometimes prompt them into precipitate judgements about the sorts of people they are and what they are good at. Importantly, the three quotations suggest that the academic programme which many students undertake is insufficient to raising self-awareness to the level desirable, or giving students the mental tools to do this themselves. This buttresses the arguments already given for CAS and faculties/departments to work together.

Two quotations from advisers sum up the predicament of many CAS:

Most students are reactive in their approach to deadlines of any description, particularly Careers. Thus many only come to us in their final year. Thus it would be difficult given the time restrictions in [the] final year to address 'realism' on a large scale.

Good careers education and guidance has to be based firmly on realism, and more work on this can always be done. Extra work will require more resources and will probably only come about after a policy directive in the institution. Also, careers advisers' perennial problem is, when promoting 'realism', [that] they are often criticised for a) being/sounding too pessimistic or b) giving out false, rose-tinted information.

The importance of Service/departmental links has been firmly established according to the perceptions of advisers, and how far advisers felt academic staff played a role in raising students' awareness will now be assessed.



**THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF - THE CAREERS**

**ADVISERS' VIEW**

<b><u>CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 9(b)</u></b>				
Do you think academic staff at your institution adequately promote realism among students?				
<b><u>RESPONSES</u></b>				
<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>DON'T KNOW</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>	
7	25	10	42	

**TABLE 5:4 CAREERS ADVISERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW FAR ACADEMIC STAFF HELPED RAISE STUDENTS' AWARENESS**

While 10 respondents said they did not know the answer to this question, only 7 gave a positive reply. This was the most negative response to any question directed at any respondent group in the survey. Careers advisers saw their academic colleagues as guilty of four major failings.

- (1) They were ignorant themselves, and offered students incorrect information.

[They] don't often have adequate information on careers themselves, and base their ideas on [their] own past experience.

Lack of information leads them to highlight exceptional instances rather than the more humdrum reality.

They are unrealistic, hence students are unrealistic.

Because academic staff spend much more time than careers advisers with a given student or student group, their influence over the course of one or more academic years may be greater, with their accumulated remarks possibly exceeding in volume and effect any CAS advice or evangelism. This is another argument for Services having early contact with students, to reduce possible risk to them of unsoundly-based advice or impressions from academic staff.

It would hardly have been surprising to find advisers concerned over academics' contributions, since in many cases these seemed to be not only not assisting what advisers were trying to achieve, but actively working against them. Presumably some academics would have been willing to remedy their ignorance, but saw no need for this.

(2) They lacked interest themselves, and saw employment as irrelevant.

Most [academics] are out of touch and some out of sympathy with the labour market.

Many academics actively discourage students from thinking about the future ...

Few academic staff have even rudimentary knowledge of the employment market and some see employment issues as irrelevant to the educational process.

Some departments have no real interest in the world of work ...

Many members of academic staff (including some who are concerned with vocational courses) are not sufficiently interested in the future careers of their students.

Many academics still do not regard what happens to their output as anything really to do with them.

They accept students onto courses where it is obvious they will have problems finding work later.

It is surprising to hear of indifference to student destinations among staff running vocational courses. Putting aside the welfare of young people they have worked with and come to know, it seemed in the interest of vocational course providers that they should be aware of and concerned with this, since the placement of former students into work related to their course content seems a likely area of investigation by prospective students. There seems a likely correlation (in the vocational sector, at least) between the perceived success of a degree course as credible preparation for work, and its popularity. Regarding the last of the above quotations, it seems reasonable to think that courses whose former students have had problems finding work would do all in their power to promote awareness and remedy this, since failing to do so would seem to put their own continuance at risk.

- (3) They discouraged breadth of view about work, often seeing their academic specialism as the priority.

Academic skills were certainly uppermost in academic staff's minds, judging by the comments of advisers:



There is still widespread misunderstanding of the relative importance of academic knowledge and personal transferable skills.

Some only give regard to the academic element.

Probably all [academic staff promote realism] in terms of suitability for postgraduate academic study.

They are all generally motivated by a traditional outlook; they don't feel that it's part of their responsibility to promote any awareness of the world beyond the academic institution.

The alleged intransigence of some academics' views may reflect a probable lack of pressure through institutional policy. The 'traditional outlook' persisted partly because it was allowed to. Postgraduate work seemed to enjoy a status disproportionate to the number of students likely to benefit from it, and some departments' policies seemed to favour this minority over the majority who would obtain undistinguished degrees and need a job soon afterwards.

(4) Many held an outdated view of the value of a degree.

Many have no realistic ideas of the outside world themselves. [They] give false information about qualifications needed for jobs and about how/when to apply.

The academic staff has a conveyor belt-type attitude, that if they send their students out with good degrees, they could walk into employment.

Many only know academia and still think a degree is a magic qualification for entry to work.

These comments may reflect limited value placed on the work experience of applicants for academic posts, and possibly also the age of those appointed, so many seemed ignorant of current trends and practices. According to advisers, a possible explanation is that many graduates succeeded in finding congenial work which reflected their academic interests and performance, but were appointed chiefly for perceived qualities of a quite different sort. This might have left many academics thinking that continued single-minded insistence on academic values was the way to ensure comparable employment success for future graduates. However, it may just be that the best students academically constituted many of those with the personal characteristics employers most value. A question posed by this evidence is why the learning situation is never formally reversed, to enable staff to learn from their students, since this would give the former knowledge and perhaps greater credibility.

The impressions of employers about the role of academic staff in raising awareness are worth noting.

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF - THE EMPLOYERS' VIEW**

<u>EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 9(b)</u>				
Do academic staff adequately promote realism among students?				
<u>RESPONSES</u>				
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
2	18	23	43	

**TABLE 5:5                      EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW FAR ACADEMIC STAFF PROMOTED REALISM AMONG STUDENTS**

While a large proportion of employers felt unable to offer an opinion here, it is significant that 90 per cent of the remainder felt that academic staff were not doing enough.

A slight majority of the respondents felt they lacked the knowledge to offer an opinion on this. However, only one tenth of those who did feel able, expressed a favourable opinion. Those who commented on possible ways in which academic staff might have done more, said they could have:

- 1) played down the significance of degree studies in isolation;
- 2) promoted practice in testable skills;
- 3) arranged work placements/shadowing;
- 4) presented the world of work more attractively;
- 5) taken more interest in their



students' destinations. None of these represents only an extension of existing academic duties, and would require staff to train or otherwise spend time acquiring the necessary knowledge. The suggestion nearest employers' requirements was the one advocating practice in testable skills, though this might mean testing, too, to check on the success of the practice. The first and last suggestions would probably be the easiest for staff to accomplish, the latter being a good way for them to discover their students' aspirations.

The graduate respondents were asked a similar question.

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF - THE GRADUATES' VIEW**

<u>GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 10</u>			
Did teaching staff at your H.E. institution help raise your awareness of particular occupations or employment generally?			
	<u>RESPONSES</u>		
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
14	29	43	

**TABLE 5:6 GRADUATES' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW FAR TEACHING STAFF RAISED THEIR AWARENESS OF PARTICULAR OCCUPATIONS OR OF EMPLOYMENT GENERALLY**

The graduate group certainly had more positive feelings than the careers advisers or the employers, but this was still true of only a third of the respondent group. Perhaps the reason for the higher positive response was that the graduate group was composed of people who had been accepted by recruiters, and were therefore more aware than many of their peers, and had perhaps been more active in asking staff for their opinions and help. The large number of negative responses, however, reinforced the messages already gained from the two other respondent groups, to the effect that teaching staff had a much bigger role to play.

When asked to say how staff had raised their awareness, graduates said that they had: (a) offered information on recruiters of graduates in their subject; (b) arranged work experience; (c) shown interest; (d) run occasional career-related tutorials.

When asked what more they thought staff could have done, they said: 1) run mock job interviews; 2) run career/subject seminars; 3) offered help in completing application forms; 4) discussed career paths they might have taken; 5) not depicted industry/commerce unfavourably; 6) shown how theory was applied in industry; 7) said what knowledge/action had been useful to them.

Clearly, some graduates found the idea of a personal account appealing, even if staff were talking about things which happened years ago. The wisdom of hindsight (which most students have had no chance to acquire) may have been an attraction. In one instance, staff were being asked only not to be negative, in another, only to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical situations, so it did not seem that improvement would depend on significant extra work.

There were a number of common points between what advisers had said about academics, and what graduates and employers thought about them. The need to put in perspective the importance of their own subject, and even of academic achievement generally, was one. So was the need to take more interest, and to become more involved in awareness-boosting activities, whether in the classroom or via work experience arrangements. However, neither employers nor students regarded with such urgency as advisers, the need for academics to gain some up-to-date knowledge of graduate employment trends and recruiters' preferences or requirements. Possibly the advisers were simply in an advantageous position to judge the breadth and depth of academics' knowledge.

### **THE BACKGROUNDS OF CAREERS ADVISERS**

Most of the careers advisers had what could reasonably be termed significant experience of work in HE.

<b><u>CAREERS ADVISERS - BACKGROUND INFORMATION</u></b>		
How long have you been a Careers Adviser in Higher Education?		
Less than 3 years	-	13
3 - 5 years	-	7
5 - 10 years	-	10
Over 10 years	-	12
<hr/>		
TOTAL	-	42
<hr/>		

**TABLE 5:7**                      **LENGTH OF SERVICE OF CAREERS ADVISERS**



Exactly half the Advisers had experience of industry, and most of these had worked in HE in another capacity. This made a numerically convenient split for assessing significant differences of opinion. The justification for this question was to investigate whether those advisers having experience of industry held largely different viewpoints on the issues raised, and whether these seemed more insightful or informed than the opinions of the other advisers. Any evidence to this effect might argue for advisers having industrial experience, or for opportunities for this being supplied in-post to those lacking it.

On comparison, there were a number of points worth mentioning. Those with industrial backgrounds seemed to feel:

- (1) Less convinced that students had realistic opinions of employment.
- (2) More convinced that students had realistic opinions of the work environment.
- (3) Less convinced about the worth of the contribution to awareness of academic staff.
- (4) A little more convinced that non-recruitment careers material adequately represented job tasks and objectives, sources of satisfaction, promotion prospects and material rewards.
- (5) Less convinced that students used academic staff as a resource as well as they might.
- (6) Slightly more convinced that students realistically assessed their chances of doing postgraduate study.

Other opinions showed no contrast worth remarking-on. It was interesting, however, that advisers with industrial experience were more sceptical of students' realism in general, but more convinced than their

exclusively education-based counterparts that students were realistic about one aspect of employment. This suggested that their background might allow them to make subtler distinctions about students' awareness. Similarly, while less convinced about the worth of academics' contribution to student awareness, the 'industrial' advisers also felt that the students failed to use staff as well as they might. On certain issues, these advisers seemed to be seeing two sides of the picture where the 'educational' ones saw only one.

## **SUMMARY**

A majority of employers believed that HE CAS could better promote realism. The ways to this they saw as being to a) arrange visits to industry; b) employ staff seconded from business; c) build special links with particular recruiters; d) find out what recruiters expect of graduates; e) invest more in awareness programmes; and f) stress to students the need for personal skills/business awareness.

It was also suggested that advisers might benefit from industrial placements, though staff shortages could make this difficult or impossible for many. It was acknowledged that arranging work experience often posed administrative problems for the employers themselves. The time normally necessary for proper training was a barrier to employing staff, but even a diluted form of this, such as visits, might have led to better mutual understanding and respect, from which CAS might, at least in the short-term, gain a good deal. The timing of contacts was seen to be important, one suggestion being that employers became involved earlier in the awareness process. It seemed important, however, that these links were firmly



established for educative purposes, rather than recruitment ones. Some recruiters lamented the lack of CAS contact with them, and some concern was expressed over the messages CAS were allegedly passing on to students. Some comments suggested that these organisations held mistaken beliefs about the purposes of CAS. The contact suggested above seemed a possible remedy for this. That only one employer (but 4 in general terms) mentioned an existing awareness programme suggested that these had made only modest impact on recruiters. Sometimes the adviser was perceived as a 'coach', with an obligation to motivate rather than help students to self-motivation. It was interesting that employers encouraged advisers to raise awareness of organisations and business practice in general, yet few if any mentioned occupational knowledge or job-content as important, despite their apparent concern with the latter.

A majority of graduates believed that HE CAS adequately promoted realism. However, in two out of three categories on which they were asked about this, (understanding of jobs and a grasp of their own ability and potential) the majority was slim. It was in imparting knowledge of particular employers that CAS were felt to be strongest. Asked to identify deficiencies, graduates had responded by citing shortcomings in the content or use of available CAS literature, often giving the impression they found referral to this a poor substitute for discussion. Several comments expressed doubts about advisers' knowledge or understanding, and occasional ones that they were being reactive to the current job climate rather than looking to the individual's long-term interests. There was some expectation that CAS provide facilities which they appeared not to have. Certain of these (such as psychometric testing) seemed probably beyond the resources of most CAS. It did not suggest, however, that some CAS may not have clarified their role and provision sufficiently at the outset, something which may have prompted



harsh judgement. Though only a few comments cited lack of interest in students and their plans, these were a reminder of the significance of a positive professional relationship in encouraging in students a state of mind conducive to awareness-raising. A final, though rare, criticism was that the CAS appeared to be promoting some organisations over others, or organisations in general over occupations. Again, both drew attention to the importance of the CAS being perceived as operating with integrity in order to fulfil its functions.

A large majority of careers advisers believed CAS could better promote realism, but this was something they felt depended heavily on resources. However, the strength of response and the kinds of improvement advocated suggested that improvements were called for. These included better publicity of and access to careers information, more and better links with employers, more campus facilities, and help for students to identify their own abilities. Obstacles to this were seen to include finance, but also the need to train academic staff to deliver careers exercises or other facilities to students. No mention was made of any need for students to be taught how to use particular facilities, though this was possibly in mind when advisers spoke of helping students identify their abilities. Discrepancies in advisory staff/student ratios appeared to put some institutions at a disadvantage, something which seemed likely to result in inequalities having a bearing on the appointment opportunities of graduates from different institutions.

Most careers advisers said they did not think their academic staff sufficiently promoted realism. Nearly a quarter of the sample claimed they did not know the answer to this question, but over three-quarters of the remainder felt academic staff's efforts in this regard were insufficient. Advisers saw academic colleagues' failings as: a) being ignorant themselves,

and offering students incorrect information; b) lacking interest themselves, and seeing employment as irrelevant; c) discouraging breadth of view, often seeing their subject specialism as the priority; and d) holding an outdated and inflated view of the value of a degree. The alleged ignorance of the academics seemed the biggest threat to any realism-building advisers were attempting, since this could result not only in students receiving (and perhaps acting on) erroneous information, but in advisers not even knowing which messages they needed to combat. The criticism that academics saw graduate employment as irrelevant to their own work seemed unlikely to promote realism, yet to remain hard to eradicate without dialogue and re-education. This alleged view on the part of academics seemed particularly surprising since the perceived success and popularity of any given course appeared likely to rest at least partly on the destinations of its graduates.

Employers in the main did not believe that academic staff promoted realism. While a slight majority of the respondent group said they did not know the answer to this, only 2 of the remaining 20 felt that academic staff did adequately promote realism among students. Three of their criticisms, that academics should play down the significance of degree studies in isolation, present the world of work more attractively, and take more interest in their students' destinations, struck a chord with what careers advisers said. However, the employers also advocated practice for students in testable skills, and work placements/shadowing as things in which academics ought more to involve themselves. Interestingly, the employers saw CAS as having a strategic role, with academic staff being more activity-based, clearly therefore perceiving each as having a distinct function.

Most graduates did not believe that academic staff had raised their (the graduates') awareness. Just under a third of Graduate Questionnaire



respondents felt staff had been helpful. Practical help in careers awareness and job application matters ranked high among the ways they thought staff could have done more, but staff's own professional/academic histories interested them, too. Knowing what a particular person had done (or would have liked to do) in similar circumstances to their own, seemed to appeal. Possibly through taking the initiative and, where necessary, pushing for answers to their questions, the graduates canvassed had gained more than most students from contact with staff. However, most graduates seemed to feel that staff could have done more, and saw academics' keeping scholastic achievement in perspective as one anchorage of this.

The length of careers advisers' service, which varied considerably within the sample, may have had a bearing on their advice. Half the advisers had experience of work in non-educational settings, and some of their collective opinions differed from those of the other advisers. This 'industrial' group was more sceptical than the others about students' employment realism, about how far academic staff contributed to that awareness, and whether students properly used academic staff as a resource. They were, however, more positive about students' realism regarding work environments, postgraduate study, and the quality of non-recruitment careers information, illustrating that their additional experience had made them more sceptical in some respects, but not more jaundiced overall.

Despite the criticism in many of the above comments, the job-satisfaction among most graduate respondents, their claims to having done or been encouraged to engage in awareness-raising exercises while undergraduates, the satisfaction of most recruiters with the graduates they had taken on, and the conviction among the bulk of recruiters and graduates that CAS were doing the best they could in their circumstances, suggested that a



great deal of realism-building was going on. How far students themselves were authors of their own fortune or misfortune, as far as these could be linked to awareness, will be the focus of Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 6

### HOW FAR DO GRADUATE RECRUITS CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR OWN REALISM, OR LACK OF IT?

#### INTRODUCTION

The last two chapters have examined how significant a contribution to graduate realism was made by employers and by HE CAS and academic staff. Data from respondents suggested that while both recruiting and education sectors might have done more, efforts within both to raise students' awareness of careers-related matters had been recognised. Whatever the quality of input from either group, however, it could make little impact unless students played their part. How well they were able to keep in perspective academic demands and messages about employment often conveyed through acquaintances, their institutions and the media in general, was also, however, likely to be a significant factor.

The theoretical foundation for this chapter originates in Chapter 1, in the following hypothetical statement:

Students insufficiently exploit the resources through which realism might be achieved, but even those who do use them to good effect cannot compensate for personal shortcomings such as limited self-concept or inherent difficulties in the process of career choice.

(p.30)

The basis for this statement is the work of Hatcher and Crook (1988), who identified discrepancies between expectation and reality as experienced by graduates during their first year of employment. While such as Dunnette

*et al.* (1973) and Herriot (1984) see the solution resting with HE , others, such as Gutteridge and Ullman (1973), Fredrickson (1984), Gottlieb (1975) and Bachhuber (1988) see information collection as the means to avoiding surprises, and view this as being within the powers of students themselves to effect. The inherent difficulties in career choice mentioned in the extract from Chapter 1 include the claim of Baumgardner (1976) that it may be misleading to think of career choice as something arrived at systematically because it implies order in a world where little exists. As has been said already, the Baumgardner view is extreme, and will not be taken as a basis for investigation here. However, the difficulties which may arise from limited self-awareness are acknowledged, and will be assessed in this chapter alongside an analysis of students' activities.

Self-awareness is, in fact, a good place to start. Unlike occupational knowledge, which students can acquire at any time, self-awareness seems a prerequisite of any purposeful career exploration and decisions subsequent to this.



## GRADUATE SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ABILITIES AND INTERESTS

### GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 8

When you began to apply for graduate posts, do you think you had already assessed:

		<u>RESPONSES</u>		
		<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
a)	Your own abilities	34	9	43
b)	Your careers interests	33	10	43

If 'No' to either a) or b), please say in what respects.

**TABLE 6:1 GRADUATES' ASSESSMENT OF THEIR ABILITIES AND CAREER INTERESTS**

While a large majority of graduates in the questionnaire sample believed they had properly assessed their own abilities, and the same was true of career interests, the rest acknowledged a number of perceived shortcomings. The study focuses on these, since no elaboration was required of 'Yes' respondents, this not being considered necessary. It may be worth remarking that the 19 combined 'No' responses came from 14 respondents, 5 respondents saying 'No' to both parts.

There was a broadly proportional response from interviewees to the two

parts of this question. Later in this chapter, some points will be illustrated through quotes from interviewee respondents. Graduate questionnaire respondents seemed surer than their interviewee counterparts of having properly assessed their career interests. That job choice was not always based on perceived personal suitability was illustrated by two interviewees, one of whom said that in choosing his occupation, he had been guided mainly by his wish for a particular income and lifestyle. Another said that she had responded to the image of her chosen profession, and had resolved to fulfil whatever qualities it required.

1) Lack of interview experience

Three graduates in the questionnaire sample clearly had felt unprepared for selection interviews, and this was reflected in the data of the previous chapter, in which the thought was expressed that interview practice or 'mock interviews' might have been offered by CAS. However, respondents were unspecific about how practice interviews might help. Whether they felt, for instance, that these might assist them to anticipate real questions, or rehearse answers, or just feel that they had made all possible preparations, was unclear. Their lack of elaboration may have indicated a grudging recognition that there was nothing quite like the real thing. An important distinction to make is between those preparatory activities likely to aid students by boosting their knowledge, and those which, while unlikely to help as obviously, result in raised confidence or carry some other psychological pay-off.

2) Limiting interest to lucrative jobs

This need not have meant that salary level or prospects had been decisive factors in joining their organisations, only that the two graduates who mentioned this had selected recruiters who happened to pay well. The hint of regret in the comment implied that less well-paid jobs might have offered satisfactions unavailable (or at least so far unobtained) in the current post(s). This may or may not have been so. In fairness to recruiters, and judging by the prospectus sample, very few organisations were specific about salaries, so students would have had to go beyond the literature to discover their likely earnings. However, some may have relied only on general reports of earnings within an organisation or a profession as a whole. No-one claimed to have been dissuaded from a job or occupation which interested them in order to focus their efforts on a better-paid but less interesting or otherwise satisfying field. However, if the focus had been always on pay, there was a risk that some kinds of work would never receive serious consideration, even by people who appeared fairly open-minded. One graduate interviewee illustrated this:

I applied for a lot of different things. I would have looked at different professions that offered the same quality of life to me. I was attracted by high salaries.

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

3) Underestimating the importance of characteristics besides intelligence

Two respondents mentioned this. Evidence provided elsewhere has already shown a difference between the qualities graduates thought employers were most seeking, and those which employers in the sample claimed to want in applicants. While graduates did not fail to recognise the desirability of other qualities, the frequency with which they suggested intellectual/academic



aptitude suggested that this was the one uppermost in their minds. This may have been because they believed in its importance, or because they felt it was the only substantial quality they had to offer. It may also have been one they felt they knew something about, whereas recruiters' references to other personal qualities rarely elaborated to encourage a proper understanding of what they were looking for. Ironically, one respondent felt that his knowledge of what recruiters wanted had clouded his ability to self-assess. This was an instance of one kind of awareness interfering with another, illustrating that more does not always mean better in matters of utilising knowledge.

#### 4) Friction with colleagues

The evidence in this regard suggested that two kinds of surprise had been experienced: the extent of problems of this sort, and respondents' capacity successfully to deal with them. In some cases the trouble had something to do with established staff resenting the newcomer's authority, particularly where his/her experience was much more limited than their own. This was surely one of the hardest things to anticipate, sources of friction and nature of feelings being hard to detect often among familiar colleagues. It is also, sadly, something which most graduates' youth and inexperience do not equip them well to deal with. It would have been interesting to know not only whether graduate entrants had been briefed about the staff they would be working with, but whether established employees knew the background of, and intended role for, any graduate joining them, particularly since some entrants' employment experience might have disposed staff favourably to them.

5) Keeping a broad view of work

This approach, which allowed options to be kept open, sounded sensible. However, three graduates felt they would have been better to focus on a narrower range than they did. Adhering to preferred areas of work or types of organisation was considered in retrospect wiser than embracing occupations offering better prospects, but for which they had little enthusiasm. Graduating students could not be expected to have real enthusiasm for more than a limited range of jobs or organisations. This is partly because realistic enthusiasm requires knowledge, and preferences worth acting-on, detailed knowledge. Moreover, it seems hard to expect a tempering of enthusiasm and a compromise at the start of working life, when much can be gained from harnessing positive feelings and the wish to contribute. However, some people seemed not to be enjoying work, yet to have little sense of direction, either:

I knew what I wanted to do ... which is quite rare looking at my friends ... a lot of people ... are quite happy to have a job and they'll stick it out, and it's not what they really want to do, but they can't think of anything else better to do ... these are the graduates from my year.

(Engineering graduate interviewee)

6) Ignorance of career paths

This was mentioned by three respondents. It did not appear to have resulted from reading company literature, though this often featured statements about career progression which were too general to be relied-on. Rather it was a failure to have consulted other sources, such as recent recruits,



which seemed to explain this. However, such contacts may not have been as helpful as possible. This may have been because recruits failed to communicate things which would have been illuminating, or students failed to ask the right questions or to properly digest the answers they received. The commitment likely to be required to follow a chosen path, however, had surprised some people, especially where this impinged on their lives beyond work:

... I don't necessarily think I'd choose differently given my time again ... the only thing now is that ... I didn't fully appreciate the implications of what I was choosing, the fact that if I did this, then other things would have to go.

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

Perhaps those applicants who turned down job offers because of these demands would have done well to let recruiters know this, as this may have discouraged recruiters structuring jobs in manner intrusive on their graduates' lives.

#### 7) Viewing a job as a long-term commitment

Much of the rhetoric of careers education and guidance encourages this, possibly to sober recipients into taking these processes seriously. However, the evidence was that many graduates in respondents' organisations had changed job after as little as a few months, though more commonly one to three years. After three to five years, many individuals who had not been promoted at the rate they or their organisation had wished, had moved or been encouraged to move, often into related jobs with organisations better able to recognise and utilise their particular interests and abilities. Some occupations



seemed to have regular change built into them, with altered responsibilities for entrants after fixed periods of satisfactory progress. However, graduate respondents' comments suggested that the nature of their work changed less than increased salaries or gradings indicated. Progress, in any personal sense, was illusory for some. Sometimes, ironically, an intended long-term commitment had been undermined by in-house training which had raised an entrant's awareness of other possibilities:

I think I just wanted to be a power engineer - I think that one of the things I've learned over the year [is that] I didn't actually want to be a power engineer. I don't not want to be a power engineer, but I know there's a lot more to life now with doing this accountancy diploma, and just generally seeing what other people do.

(Engineering graduate interviewee)

8) Being channelled occupationally by an academic course

Relatively few (3) graduates in the survey had taken degree courses combining a vocational content with an academic one (e.g. Information Technology and Maths). Despite the apparent advantages of such combinations, in career terms, their lack of appeal within the sample may have arisen from a fear of seeming uncommitted to an employer. However, it may have reflected greater single-mindedness among graduates, not just academically or occupationally, but socially, too, with time divided between two departments perhaps being seen as a poor formula for social contacts and activities. Most graduates in the survey appeared to have chosen vocational degree courses because these provided knowledge and/or professional status related to work which already interested them. Relatively few students join such courses without being to some degree occupationally committed. The

content of these courses steers students towards a particular point of the job compass, but most seem sure of and content with this. It would appear that it is those students whose courses are not vocational, and therefore arguably more versatile, who are actually at greater risk. This is because without proper investigation of their real potential, such courses may in some students' minds become or remain associated only with a single job or at best narrow lines of work (e.g. English degrees being good for only teaching or journalism). Academic influence can be traced further back than degree subject, though:

I went to a very traditional academic school.  
It didn't have that broad a range of subjects, really.

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

It seemed possible that in this case, a narrow range of subjects might have led to a vocational degree, where a broader range might have led to a non-vocational course which kept more options open.

9) Being influenced by the job-market

It was not surprising to find graduates conscious of the job market and aware to some extent of how it might affect their post-academic destinations. However, it had in some cases led to what seemed an unduly reactive stance, either to opportunities within a single field (as in the first excerpt below), or to work in general (as in the second). One thing this does is to create seeming decisiveness where little or none exists. This may have the negative effect of encouraging other students to do the same. The actions of the few in relation to the job market may help explain the choices of the majority.



I didn't really look at any other graduate jobs.  
I didn't really assess ... what else I could do.  
The accountancy firms came round in October,  
I applied for accountancy and got an offer before  
I'd really thought of applying for anything else.  
I think the state of the job market dictated what  
I did, really.

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

I think I thought I had assessed my own abilities.  
If I fancied the job then I would tailor my  
abilities almost to what they stated in the  
literature ... and I'll probably, when I come round  
to apply for my next job, do the same then - perhaps  
not really being that realistic about it, the goal is to  
get the job rather than to get the job that ultimately  
you'll be best at, which is a bit short-sighted...

(Advertising graduate interviewee)

The above points may be categorised under four headings: lack of knowledge/experience; basing judgement on restricted criteria; underestimation/overestimation of pertinent features; succumbing to external influence. Recognising personal limitations is part of self-awareness, and knowing these may prompt students towards resources equal to plugging holes in their knowledge or awareness. A good deal of space has been devoted here to examining the feelings of graduate respondents who thought they had not already assessed their own abilities or career interests before applying for graduate posts, despite their representing a minority of the sample group. However, it was felt right to do this, partly because it draws attention to the ways such prior assessment may fail to be achieved, and partly because it seems reasonable to believe that these will be more widespread among graduates not yet recruited for graduate posts.

It seems appropriate to end this section on graduate/student self-



assessment with four quotes, two of them fairly long. The first shows how an experience-based career choice led to a recognition of unsuitability and then to the discovery of an appropriate occupation, illustrating some of the processes and emotions which come to bear in such situations:

I don't know that I ever really thought 'what am I good at, therefore what would I be good at doing?' I thought [of] what I would like to do based on personal experience [which] meant that I had spent a lot of time in schools [and] I seemed to like children, so I seemed to think that teaching would be a natural career move for me. Also ... teaching would be a good career for me because if I ever wanted to get married and have children I would have the same holidays as my children, that teaching was a really good profession for a wife and all that kind of thing. Those sorts of comments were very strong in my head when I was about 16 or 17, and they stuck with me, and I did start up at teacher training college for a year, but I was so frustrated because my abilities weren't being channelled into the right areas, and I wasn't being satisfied by being given the kind of tasks I like to do ... because they're not in teaching, they're in marketing, for me. I didn't realise at the time, I just thought 'crumbs, I don't like this course, I don't like Cambridge ... ' I'm just going to move and do a general degree and think about it again at the end of that period.

(Advertising graduate interviewee)

The second excerpt shows how a happy ending was reached after the danger of being dissuaded from the 'right' path had been avoided:

I had a fair idea of what sort of person I was, what my good points and bad points were, and what I enjoyed doing. I think it was because of what I'd done - I'd done some things well and some things badly - how I handled responsibility. I'd always been attracted to advertising - it was always something that I'd wanted to do, and I felt that by the time I got to the end of my second year and I had started seeing a careers adviser that they (sic) were trying to sway me away from it, and I knew the situation with the recruitment, and I knew that things weren't good out there, and there weren't the same amount of jobs there were three years ago, and [they] were going to try for everything.

So I did get swayed, I thought, oh, perhaps marketing, perhaps marketing sales, and it wasn't me. Sales wouldn't have suited me at all, but I felt I was being pushed into ... perhaps wisely they were trying to broaden my chances of getting a job, but whatever happened I still wanted to do advertising ...

(Advertising graduate interviewee)

Both excerpts show some of the ways in which a student may be influenced by factors having little to do with the type of person he/she is or his/her real aptitudes. Despite their intelligence and earnest pursuit of what they wanted, and their acceptance of recruiters, both respondents clearly felt they had fallen victim to others' influence, which, considering the many students having less to offer, suggested that students were, in terms of realism, a vulnerable group where self-assessment was concerned. An important aspect of the first quote is the respondent's recognition of the important difference between liking an activity and deriving long-term satisfaction from it. It is significant that those entering HE must make decisions about things regarding which they may feel quite differently by the end of their course. The relative difficulty of changing tack despite changed feelings almost amounts to an inherent problem of HE deserving adding to Watts' list. The second respondent was throughout vague about her attraction to advertising, and her very acceptance of this attraction unsupported by explanation to the researcher raised a question over the appropriateness of how she had justified to herself advertising's suitability.

However, it must not be forgotten that the large majority of respondents had been happy with their assessment of themselves and their career interests. The two quotes following illustrate how the awareness which led two individuals into the same field of work had been at least partially gained through differing activities:



[what I learned was] largely through my own perceptions ... just working in general I think you pick up a lot ... [My work experience employers] didn't really teach me anything. I think the University prepared me reasonably well - my course was pretty vocational - you sort of get a grip on things from that ...

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

I went on this CRAC Insight into Management course ... and we did marketing case studies, production management, finance ... so I had thought about being taken on as a graduate and moving from department to department ... to choose after about 18 months the kind of work I was going to specialise in ...

(Accountancy graduate interviewee)

Because the graduate-respondent group were occupationally successful, having obtained posts commensurate with their education, it was felt useful to ask them about realism among the undergraduate body generally.



## GRADUATES' VIEWS OF RAISING STUDENT AWARENESS

### GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 11

Do you think that Higher Education students could do more to raise their knowledge and understanding of graduate employment?

<u>RESPONSES</u>		
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>
36	7	43

If 'Yes', please say how.

**TABLE 6:2 GRADUATES' BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS RAISING THEIR AWARENESS OF EMPLOYMENT**

It must be acknowledged that this question is a little 'loaded' but it was one difficult to frame completely neutrally. The large majority of graduate respondents felt that students could have done more to raise their awareness. Their suggested improvements were as follows:

1) Arrange visits/invite speakers

Arrange with companies for tours of [the] company, and speakers from industry to talk to finalists ...

Three graduates recommended arranging visits and inviting speakers.

While individual students can arrange visits for themselves only, inviting speakers (to an institution) has both a collective endorsement and (hopefully) response. A premise of British HE is that students' academic study is geared to individual success and it may be asking too much of most students to expect them to sustain simultaneously a self-centred approach to study, and a collective one to career awareness. Awareness, however, may be often better fostered collectively, something reflected in the range of careers education exercises offered on campus. The rarity with which students resort undirected to a collective approach is a symptom of the premise, one which, like the difficulty of changing academic direction, may be a contender to join Watts' dysfunctional elements of HE.

2) Investigate wider job opportunities

[Make] more investigation of job opportunities  
in all fields of employment.

(Male, Civil Engineering graduate in civil  
engineering firm)

Think about what sort of person you are and how  
your abilities would suit certain jobs rather than  
just assuming that because (for example) you have  
a science degree you will be good in research.

(Female, Chemistry and Materials Science  
graduate employed as a scientist)

Four graduates recommended investigating wider job opportunities. It was interesting that both the graduates quoted were advocating a broad outlook while having themselves entered jobs precisely related to their degree courses. However, both had first-class degrees, so it seems reasonable to suppose that each had received other offers. Their remarks hint at their

having known fellow-students who were subsequently unhappy in work despite the appropriateness of their course for it. It is worth reflecting that placement into work corresponding to degree course and utilising its content may nevertheless result in personal unhappiness, whatever its apparent sense economically. This need not mean that the course itself was the source of discontent, though the unhappiness spoken of did seem to relate to job content rather than peripheral matters. This illustrates the importance of self-knowledge alongside job-knowledge in making a career decision.

3) Use the Careers Advisory Service

No fewer than ten graduate respondents mentioned this. Some, however, spoke of 'more' or 'better' contacts, rather than suggesting that there had been none. Another respondent spoke of undergraduates being 'encouraged' to use their Service, suggesting some students had been hesitant about this. However, any prompts to 'screw up courage' may have been only a partial answer. Some students may have felt that pressure on advisers gave them little chance of an appointment. However, standby systems or clinic sessions may have afforded the access they sought. Perhaps the respondent advocating encouragement felt that this might have come from other students, rather than Services or academic staff.

4) Obtain relevant vacation work experience

Nine respondents identified work experience, particularly during vacations, presumably because this raised its chances of being substantial. One graduate put this forcefully:



From my own observation, students who join the company without any meaningful work experience have very little idea of the sectors of construction. While their heads are filled with the theory, and how to apply it in practice, they also lack confidence.

(Male, Civil Engineering graduate working for a construction firm)

Many respondents who had done work experience, had, however, none related to the job they entered. Their difficulties in seeking relevant placements were reflected by recruiters' acknowledgements of their own problems in offering it. The word 'meaningful' in the above excerpt, however, posed the question of whether work experience shorter than the typical vacation job would still have proved beneficial. Its brevity might arguably have been compensated for by concentrated investigation, yet still have convinced potential recruiters of applicants' interest. The 'taster' experiences mentioned by graduates took the form of established courses, usually run for groups rather than individual students, and normally lasting no more than a day or two. Another critical word, 'relevant', appears in the sub-heading, and it is not certain that recruiters' definitions of this were as restricted as those of graduates. If recruiters appreciated that though not directly related to their business, students' work experience had demanded aptitudes or imparted skills of potential use or worth in employment, then experiences of which some students had appeared dismissive might have come to be better regarded and more sought-after.

5) Attend careers events

These were recommended in various forms, by four respondents:

... more use of presentation evenings by companies and careers fairs.

... past graduates returning to give their experience ...

... make time to go to seminars arranged by the employers at the universities ...

... by attending more presentations and using careers fairs to look at [a] greater variety of careers.

These respondents clearly felt that events at which organisations were represented were of more value than those without them. This view may have reflected a wish to make a mark and gain an interview; on the other hand, the graduates may have felt that insight into any organisation or into graduate work itself was more likely through rubbing shoulders with those already involved. Students may have seen the value of such contacts, but it is less certain that they made the most of these opportunities. One question is whether some students acted against their own interests by meeting employers or their representatives in a (relatively) informal setting rather than a formal one. Another is whether students' views about the importance of such contacts corresponded with those of recruiters.

#### 6) Talk to graduates

Five respondents advocated that students make contact with those currently in work, particularly those having recently entered graduate posts:

... by meeting more graduates and talking to them about their work.

... try to find someone who works [in an appropriate organisation] to ask.

... chat to people they know already in work.

... talk to current graduate employees.

Nothing was specified about what to ask, or on which work features graduates might prove illuminating. Perhaps it was felt that this would become evident in discussion. It was interesting that three of the four respondents quoted suggested contact with 'graduates' or 'employees' (plural). Some lack of realism may be explained by students taking on trust what only one or two employees said, which shows realism to be founded partly on quantity of investigation as well as quality. It may not be going too far to say that without recognisable quantity, such investigation (or its findings) cannot be regarded as having real quality.

Five other kinds of effort were suggested. These were: to read relevant press items, contact employers for additional information and insights, examine how your own abilities suit particular jobs, take time out between graduating and beginning your career, and consulting academic staff for job-relevant information.

Many respondents seemed to feel that there was more they could do to develop their knowledge and understanding, but that these feelings related more to action than introspection. In one way this made things potentially easier, since the targets were clear; however, effort would then be needed, since thinking alone would not improve things. Respondents may have believed that the links between knowledge and self-awareness were very close, and that the first was the key to the second. On the other hand their disposition to action may have been because they found self-analysis difficult, and hoped to bypass it by gaining knowledge which they allowed to form the basis of their choices.



Nine of the 10 graduate interviewee respondents agreed with the proposition, proportionately slightly higher even than the questionnaire group. They suggested that students could do more to inform academic staff of what the job-seeking process entailed; that they devote more time to the jobhunting exercise during their final year; they try to overcome the inertia prompted by lack of success in gaining interviews or being offered jobs; and, finally, that they should not 'give up' too early.

Careers advisers were the next respondent group to be examined, and this was begun by asking them about students' capacities to judge themselves.

**STUDENT SELF ASSESSMENT - CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS**

<u>CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 8</u>				
Do most students applying for graduate posts properly assess their own abilities?				
<u>RESPONSES</u>				
<u>YES</u>	<u>NO</u>	<u>DON'T KNOW</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	
5	32	5	42	
If 'No', how do they fail to do this?				

**TABLE 6:3 CAREERS ADVISERS' BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Like the one in Table 6:3, this question is a little less than neutral. Emphatically, advisers felt that students failed to assess their own abilities to an appropriate degree. Their reservations fell under four main categories.

1) Underestimating themselves and their skills

Fifteen comments reflected this; here are a few of them:

They often fail to analyse what they have gained/ contributed from their non-academic and non-subject experience.

[They] often undersell their skills and achievements. Many students in (especially) non-vocational disciplines do not know their transferable skills and qualities, and cannot see how their degree/experience is in any way useful to an employer.

[They are] too modest; immature in some cases.

In general they underestimate the value of transferable skills.

[They] underestimate the range of skills and qualities that they may have developed through their course work and their work experience.

Only when it's time to complete application forms do they realise the need to assess skills and usually think they haven't got any.

An evident shortcoming was students' failure to see how life outside their academic sphere had developed them. Perhaps the emphasis in recruitment and other literature on 'graduate' posts and opportunities had encouraged students to link employers' perceived requirements with their

studies rather than with themselves. However, even skills imparted through academic work had been overlooked by some, and students on non-vocational courses appeared more vulnerable than others. This reinforced suggestions, made by advisers in particular, about careers education becoming embedded within the syllabus, or at least being a departmental responsibility. Even many students clear on where they had obtained skills could not see their relevance in non-educational contexts. This stemmed probably more from ignorance of these contexts (i.e. workplaces) than from any lack of intelligence or perception, and buttressed the recommendations (frequently from graduate respondents as well as advisers and employers) that more students initiate their own contacts with recruiters, or attend more of their presentations. However, that others could sometimes recognise their own development better was something students' acceptance of which might have led them to consult those others more.

## 2) Failing to self-analyse

A variety of observations on and explanations of this were offered by 14 advisers:

With encouragement they are [assessing their own abilities] much better than in the past.

Many fail to attend self-assessment workshops ...

Self-assessment ... is not something most students are required to do as part of their course.

... self-assessment ... skills are not embedded in [the] university curriculum either formally or informally.



I don't think most of them know how to do this.  
Others are not prepared to spend time doing so.

Many start by looking at recruitment brochures and trying to fit themselves into the organisation's mould. They tend not to start with self-assessment.

Some ... first look at [the] skills they have without first analysing the skills required in the job.

They underestimate what they have to offer because they take their 'graduate attributes' for granted.

[They] don't reflect on the meaning of qualifications, work experience, temperament and values in terms of ... their own preferences re. career choices.

These excerpts suggest that a combination of resorting to available facilities (such as awareness workshops) and effort could put successful self-assessment within students' grasp. However, it was felt that for many students neither was likely unless their institution (usually via the relevant department or through the CAS) gave a lead, which not a few had failed to do. It was interesting that two advisers took opposing views on the best starting-point for a student intending to self-analyse. One advocated the student look at his/her own skills, the other that first recognising what employers wanted was essential. Clearly, what recruiters wanted had to be heeded, but the data from the employer questionnaire had established that they do not all seek the same aptitudes. The employer evidence, in fact, suggested that graduates could afford to self-analyse without one eye on the market, since employers varied so much in the qualities they sought (and, perhaps, even the proportions in which they wanted them). One adviser felt that students underestimated themselves by taking for granted their 'graduate attributes'. Presumably this was in itself a form of self-analysis, although perhaps some students effectively negated these by assuming every other student possessed them. This harkens back to Watts' comment (quoted in Chapter 1) about

homogeneity of the campus population, and we see here how it may not only restrict views of role-models, but also inhibit a proper appreciation of self.

3) Failing to grasp what employers want

Eight advisers mentioned this. The main comments in relation to it were:

[They] fail to consider what the employers are really looking for, and realistically matching themselves.

They do not have a clear idea of what abilities employers value ...

One thing not mentioned was the possibility (or likelihood) of raising awareness through students alternating knowledge acquisition and self-analysis, the one informing the other. This not only seems more effective, but was probably what usually happened, since awareness is rarely (if ever) gained suddenly. This bolstered the recommendation of careers advisers that students investigate careers earlier than is commonly the case. The essential idea within these quotes is that knowledge precedes self-knowledge, or self-analysis. What employers want (or even what graduates may mistakenly think they want) can form a surface against which to bounce ideas of self. Even a crude idea of employers' preferences may initiate self-analysis, and there seems little doubt that often this was what actually happened.



4) Being over-influenced by their course, or HE generally

Six advisers mentioned this. Three of them said:

[They are] used to being judged by examiners  
[and] lecturers ...

They tend to concentrate on academic skills ...

[They] are often over-influenced by what they  
have learnt on their course.

These comments illustrate the influence of HE in not only course content, but the nature of assessment, and students were urged to remember who was appraising them as well as what was being appraised. This relates to another major consideration, that students hold HE's norms in such regard that its values and expectations unduly influence some. Possibly the criteria of academic judgement, which admit only a measure of subjectivity, make it hard for students to gear their preparations and displays to judgements permitting this element much greater sway. Students saw the influence of courses as negligible, unless their previous education had limited what they selected (or thought they could select) from the range of HE courses.

Clearly, advisers saw student realism in a much dimmer light than the graduates viewed their own recent past. Age, experience and objectivity seemed likely to have played a large part in this, but so did students' apparent equation of self-awareness with knowledge of careers, organisations and entry routes and requirements. Knowledge seemed for them to have a role in promoting confidence and self-orientation. Perhaps students in general tend to use knowledge more in self-definition because as students this is something which much concerns them, and most have less experiential awareness than



older people.

Moving on from this, but staying with the same respondent group, advisers were asked about what lay within students' own power to remedy.

### **IMPROVING STUDENT REALISM - CAREERS ADVISERS' VIEWS**

#### **CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 5**

How could students help themselves to be more realistic about graduate employment in general?

Number in brackets = responses

Better use of employing organisations	(19)
Better use of information	(16)
Better use of campus careers facilities	(15)
Better use/awareness of time	(14)
More personal contacts	(14)

**TABLE 6:4 CAREERS ADVISERS' OPINIONS OF HOW STUDENTS  
COULD BECOME MORE REALISTIC ABOUT  
EMPLOYMENT**

A number of improvements were suggested, and these may best be summed up under the five sub-headings used in the table.

1) Better use/awareness of time

... by making careers research an important ongoing process from the first year onwards ...

Get more involved in what the Careers Services have to offer at an earlier stage - Easter of their final year is a bit late!

Make an attempt to meet with recruiters before interviews ... employers will often spare more time and effort than students think.

Use vacations in a more planned way.

... allot more time to understanding what it is they might be applying for and therefore why.

... by starting to read literature (general and specific) much earlier in their undergraduate careers.

... better management of time and resources - i.e. less by crisis.

The implication of many such comments, however, was that students all work at the same pace, where in fact different tempos of work or effort may prove more successful. One question is whether the awareness-encouragement of careers advisers ought to stress a single 'common sense' approach, or promote among students a sense of their individuality in formulating a suitable means to realism-building.

The importance of students acting earlier than they generally did was implicit in much of what advisers said in answer to this question. One said, for example, that Easter of their final year was too late for students to begin building awareness. However, expecting them to engage seriously in careers

research from the first year, or to use vacations in a more planned way seemed to be asking a lot of people, many of whom were not only studying but holding down a term-time job to make ends meet. Perhaps the most interesting comment was the one encouraging students to re-order their contacts with employers, such as by pre-empting the interview as an initial contact. Challenging a pre-established order or practice could, it seemed, have positive results.

2) Better use of employing organisations

The last point in the previous paragraph in one sense falls into this section, too, but there were numerous other observations:

... participate in work shadowing programmes where possible.

More appropriate work experience when this becomes available.

Employer visits which include recent graduates on the visit team.

Work experience in a range of companies.

... look carefully at the vacancies available, don't apply solely for big, well-known firms.

Be more adventurous about asking to see inside organisations.



There was no mention of one possible dilemma for students - whether to 'make their mistakes' exploring organisations of no real interest to them, or to take their chance with those employers which really interested them, for the sake of 'getting their foot in the door'. Some comments were interesting because they encouraged a more assertive approach to employers than many students might have thought prudent. However, advisers seemed to feel that by asking for the sort of contact (and thereby information) they wanted, students were more likely to learn more and perhaps find a congenial organisation. However, in advocating increased contact for work experience, and greater care and selectivity in responding to advertisements, advisers were asking for a level of commitment often difficult for people still undertaking major academic commitments.

3) Better use of campus careers facilities

Attending careers seminars and workshops.

Get involved with [their] Careers Service and related activities.

Establish links with their Careers Service and explore the range of information held/services offered, e.g. talks, workshop sessions, employer presentations, information fairs, vacation courses, milkrounds, etcetera.

... using inter-active videos.

Generally actively involving [themselves] in careers activities rather than waiting until graduation, when organised activities are fewer.

Make more sophisticated use of library and Careers Service facilities.

One of the advisers' recommendations was for students to attend events which currently some didn't. The range of this provision suggests that there was at least one format to suit each individual's appetites, and that awareness of these alone might be enough to kick-start many students' own initiative. It would have been interesting to know how far Services relied on their facilities selling themselves (students only being told of their existence) and how far resistance had to be overcome through some form(s) of promotion. 'Links' with Services were also mentioned several times, suggesting that really successful investigation came not from isolated endeavours, but consultation and enquiry. As might have been expected, advisers felt Services had a part to play in students' analysis of their prospects, as well as in finding information. The encouragement to use facilities in a more sophisticated way, however, suggested that some people were not getting the most out of these. (This may have referred to using a given facility nearer its capacity, or employing facilities in a more appropriate combination, whereby some enhance others.) There was no elaboration on this, but it would have been interesting to know whether it had brought to mind such as students' inability to ask employers the right sort of questions, their failure to resort to the full range of CAS literature, or utilise the many computer software programmes commonly provided, or to be better-prepared for careers interviews.

#### 4) More personal contacts

The value of talking to people was highly prized by advisers. This was exemplified by a number of comments:

... by asking more questions [and] realising that there are more questions to ask ...

... [by] talking to people doing jobs they're interested in.

Talk to people - friends, family ...

[They should] talk to people in the jobs they covet via careers events/fairs/departmental contacts, etcetera.

Have wider fields of discussion with [their] own group/circle.

Networking.

While the emphasis was on the importance of contact with professionals, family and acquaintances were not overlooked. It was no doubt felt that some of these possessed relevant job-knowledge, but they were also seen to provide a different perspective, not just from the person consulting them, but from students (and perhaps the entire academic population) in general. However, another respondent illustrated the value of the peer group by encouraging wider-ranging discussions among students, suggesting that greater openness with those around them was a means to individuals allaying fears and formulating more realistic plans. It is worth asking why students might have been less than open with one another. It could have had to do with employment, particularly if competition for jobs in one geographical area or type of work was likely to be intense. This brings us back to the earlier observation of students operating independently in matters of career orientation, and in so doing conforming to a norm of academic life, yet thereby disadvantaging themselves.



5) Better use of information

A more sophisticated use of information was one recommendation included in the comments on campus facilities, but a number of remarks alluded to this, showing the significance in which it was held:

... wider reading - quality press, professional journals.

Read a good national newspaper.

Read careers literature very carefully.

Do far more research into a wide range of graduate career opportunities.

Analyse information in careers and make more informed decisions about career choice.

Become more skilled at information gathering/processing.

Use the unbiased AGCAS literature to discover, e.g. that production manufacturing is more interesting than it sounds and publishing is less!

Besides the general point that students should have gathered more information, the main message here was that this should have been of a better quality and that more time and effort should have gone into understanding what they had gathered. No respondent referred directly to how better analysis might have been effected, but this may have been either because the students were considered already to have the intellectual equipment for this, or that instruction in the process of analysis was available through campus-based or employer-run courses and workshops. Regarding the first possibility, some things may (ironically) not be explained to students on account of their

presumed intelligence, or it may have been thought healthy to promote self-reliance. The message these comments seemed to carry was that many students were making career decisions based on scant information, and may have been disappointed with their eventual destinations partly or wholly as a result of this.

It is only fair to point out that one adviser in the sample did not feel that students were generally unrealistic. He felt this was explained by the proportion of students doing vocational courses and working through sandwich placements, or in Summer jobs. Many students also had unemployed or underemployed friends, and were sceptical of the 'glossy brochure' presentation of graduate opportunities through their own and others' experience.

### **RAISING APPLICANTS' REALISM - EMPLOYERS' VIEWS**

It had seemed likely that recruiters would be able to offer informative comments on the same issue, so the question asked the graduates was also put to them.

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 5**

How could applicants help themselves to be more realistic about employment in general?

Figures in brackets = number of responses.

Obtain more meaningful vacation jobs	(21)
Do more research	(20)
Make more visits to industry	(6)
Attend more careers events	(5)
Talk to those a few years ahead	(4)
Attend career development workshops	(3)
Consider the consequences of work pressures	(1)
Consult their Careers Advisory Service more often	(1)
Choose degree courses more carefully	(1)

**TABLE 6:5 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW APPLICANTS  
COULD MAKE THEMSELVES MORE REALISTIC**

The first two suggestions stress quantity alone, yet qualitative analysis of what is observed or experienced is probably more important still. However, no employer states the 'how' as well as the 'what', and these suggestions may have failed to take into account students' limited financial and time resources. The suggestion to obtain more meaningful vacation jobs squares with graduates' claim that these currently influence them little in career terms. However, students may be restricted to jobs offering little insight to graduate employment, either through unavailability or because financial pressures oblige them to take work which is more lucrative if less interesting. The usefulness of talking to employees a few years ahead depends on the setting, confidentiality being a possibly critical element. It is worth considering the consequences of work pressures, but not easy to judge



by someone inexperienced in these. Moreover, many graduates in the sample said that they experienced stress, and it may be hard to find a graduate-level post free of at least the risk of this. Unfortunately, the discomfort of unemployment may be more stressful still. However, Service resource limitations may restrict students' opportunities to consult their CAS more often. Finally, how are applicants for degree courses to choose these more carefully? Employers themselves may have a part to play in informing those in post-16 education of the employment consequences of ill-informed choice of HE, since their arguments may (from a vocational standpoint) be trusted above those of educators.

### **STUDENTS' USE OF INFORMATION - EMPLOYERS' VIEWS**

Gathering and responding to information were other ways in which students critically influenced their perceptions, and it was felt valuable to gather employers' views on how successfully they fulfilled these tasks.

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE: AGREE/DISAGREE SECTION**

**(FIRST PART)**

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:

- |                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 = Agree strongly          | 4 = Disagree generally |
| 2 = Agree is generally true | 5 = Disagree strongly  |
| 3 = Not sure/Don't know     |                        |

**DO YOU THINK THAT MOST FINAL-YEAR STUDENTS:**

<u>STATEMENT</u>	<u>RESPONSE</u>					<u>TOTAL</u>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	
Gather enough careers information	3	17	14	8	1	43
Can evaluate careers information properly	0	21	11	11	0	43
Are unduly influenced by images of work	8	17	13	5	0	43
Are unduly influenced by the prevailing job-market	10	16	8	9	0	43

**TABLE 6:6 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FINAL-YEAR STUDENTS' HANDLING OF CAREER-RELEVANT INFORMATION**

It seemed reasonable to expect recruiters to know enough to hold an informed opinion about each of the issues covered here. Despite this, a significant number of respondents in each category felt unable to. Some may have interpreted the question more broadly than intended, and instead of commenting on final-year students, felt it unfair to comment on the entire body, with which no employer could be expected to be conversant.

To Statement 1, 20 employers (46 per cent) felt that final-year students gathered enough information, but 9 respondents (21 per cent) felt that they did not. The comment may be justified, particularly if applied to sources designed to provide general background (e.g. to engineering, computers, etc.). However, if it implies failure to refer enough to employer-produced material, then each recruiter might profitably examine this, since the content or presentation of its publications for graduates may hold the answer. The many Not sure/Don't know responses may have meant that many recruiters may not have regarded detailed knowledge in applicants important at the recruitment stage. However, it seemed more likely that they did not have the information needed to answer the question.

To Statement 2, 11 respondents (25 per cent ) had doubts about students' ability to evaluate careers information properly, whereas twice as many believed that they could. However, how skilled the students are in this depends partly on the sophistication of the material they are evaluating. Publications dense in information are likely to require close attention and careful thought; however, sparse details can present difficulties, too, since this may encourage analysis without enough knowledge to do this properly. No recruitment material suggests that it should be read only after preparatory activities, such as career profiling, work experience, organisational visits and careers interviews; instead, it is ready to address the reader, be he/she informed or uninformed, committed or wavering. This may not be in the best interests of applicant or recruiter.

Most respondents (25, 57 per cent) felt that final year undergraduates were unduly influenced by images of work, yet recruitment literature is itself heavy with images. It is possible that if this vehicle employs images with which students have become disenchanted elsewhere, its success in attracting



them may be reduced. It may be, however, that most readers are still attracted to, and swayed by, the portrayals of work offered in most brochures.

A slightly higher proportion still (26, 60 per cent) felt that students were unduly influenced by the prevailing job-market. (Chapter 3 even showed how this could encourage some to prolong through postgraduate study their stay in education.) However, recruitment material does little to suggest stability, often emphasising instead the face of change and the need to keep abreast of new trends and developments. Students may therefore be forgiven for thinking they must be flexible and ready to respond to what is available rather than adhering to one plan which may prove hard to realise. Much depends on the rate of turn-around in any particular occupation, which can vary between months and years.

Only a slight majority of employers thought that students applied for work suited to their capacities. No prospectus in the sample scrutinised carried any realistic check-list to encourage readers to evaluate the wisdom of applying.

By comparison, advisers didn't in the main (25, 59 per cent) think that students gathered enough information (where most recruiters thought that they did). In general, employers trusted students' abilities to evaluate information, though a large number of careers advisers (15, 35 per cent) were unsure or didn't know. The two groups had very similar feelings about the influence of images of work, but employers were a little more convinced of the influence of the prevailing job market than advisers were. Employers were also stronger in their belief that students applied for work suited to their capacities.

Despite some recruiters' reservations in Chapter 3 about its real

effectiveness, work experience offered intending applicants the chance to broaden their knowledge and strengthen their realism. However, some of what recruiters judged to be the main advantages of work experience were not mentioned in their literature. These included their beliefs that it:

- Improves understanding of the organisational cultures and objectives
- Raises appreciation of the pace and pressures of work
- Offers knowledge of management styles
- Illustrates how knowledge and skills are used
- Shows what is expected of employees.

Recruiters therefore saw work experience as very significant educationally; However, graduate entrants said that it had been gained primarily for economic reasons, and most had not viewed it as a means to becoming more employment-literate. This did not mean that work experience could not act in this way, but the beneficial impact may have been stronger if most students saw its instructive potential.

### **APPLICANTS' SELF-APPRAISAL - EMPLOYERS' VIEWS**

In Chapter 3, some employment features about which graduates had seemed unrealistic had suggested shortcomings in how they viewed themselves and their capacities. The difference between entrants' perceptions of their own realism, and recruiters' views regarding applicants' appraisal of their own abilities, was worth noting. Graduates' perceptions of their own assessment of their abilities when they were applying for posts has already been given in Table 6:1. The following Table offers the employers' views on this issue.

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 8**

Do most applicants for graduate posts properly appraise their own abilities?

**RESPONSES**

<b><u>YES</u></b>	<b><u>NO</u></b>	<b><u>DON'T KNOW</u></b>	<b><u>TOTAL</u></b>
12	25	6	43

**TABLE 6:7 EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SELF-  
APPRAISAL OF APPLICANTS FOR GRADUATE POSTS**

A large majority (34, 79 per cent) of graduate entrants thought that, as applicants, they had been realistic about their own abilities. The many employers who had thought that most applicants did not appraise their own abilities properly cited several principal reasons:

- They underestimate the importance of non-academic personal qualities.
- They inadequately research job/organisation/work pressures.
- They fail to link study/work experience to careers.
- They fail to properly assess and advertise their real abilities.

Greater effort on the part of students may be the answer to some of these perceived shortcomings. However, such as understanding personal qualities, linking work experience to careers, and learning to advertise already-recognised abilities seemed to require the help of others. The



recruitment literature did not address these issues, and any occurrence in recruitment process may have come a stage too late. It seemed that employers might have lost good applicants who had not thought enough about what they had to offer, or who lacked the insight to translate a useful and enjoyable work experience into something likely to impress a recruiter.

### **DESIRABLE APPLICANT CHARACTERISTICS - A COMPARISON**

There was a discrepancy between what applicants said they had tried to convey to recruiters by way of personal qualities, and what recruiters themselves claimed to be looking for in this regard.

**EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 6 and GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE, Item 6**

<b><u>What Applicants tried to Convey</u></b> (Number = responses)	<b><u>What Employers were Looking For</u></b>
Interest/enthusiasm (22)	Communication skills (25)
Communication skills (14)	Interest/enthusiasm (21)
Confidence (11)	Intellectual/academic ability (14)
Intellectual/academic ability (10)	Team spiritedness (9)
Ability to work in team or alone (10)	Knowledge/experience (8)
Experience (10)	Strategic thinking (7)
Competence (9)	Leadership/management skills (6)
Ambition (9)	Relevant training/study (6)
Knowledge (7)	Flexibility/adaptability (5)
Adaptability (7)	Maturity (5)
Willingness to train/learn (6)	Business awareness (5)
Personality(6)	Decisiveness (4)
Industry (5)	Realism (4)
Sense of humour (3)	Initiative (4)
Organisational skills (3)	Personable/presentable (3)
Active outside work (3)	Practicality (3)
Reliable (3)	Personality (3)

**TABLE 6:8 PERSONAL QUALITIES APPLICANTS SAID THEY TRIED TO CONVEY TO RECRUITERS, AND THE QUALITIES RECRUITERS SAID THEY WERE LOOKING FOR**

There were notable similarities between the two lists. The correlation near the top was particularly close, the four features employers said they were looking for most being among the five which applicants had most tried to convey. Graduates' views on the importance of personality reflected a higher regard for it than recruiters had. It was the same regarding a sense of humour, which no employer mentioned. Conversely, however, no graduate mentioned initiative, nor presentability, both of which were mentioned by a few recruiters. There were close correlations between the lists in regard to the numbers in each group thinking adaptability and willingness to train were important. No graduate mentioned leadership skills, business awareness or maturity; on the other hand, neither competence nor ambition were mentioned by recruiters, though graduates rated each quite highly. It is worth considering that some graduates (as applicants) may have been trying to convey certain things because these helped paint what they saw as an accurate self-portrait, regardless of whether this was received favourably. Their reasoning may have been that it was better to do this in order to reduce the risk of mismatch between themselves and any organisation accepting them. It must also be recognised that the terminology employed by respondents in identifying qualities may have resulted in some features being called different things; however, wherever possible, responses deemed to mean the same have been bracketed together for statistical purposes.

Intelligence/academic ability, good personal skills, enthusiasm, and occupational focus were all mentioned by at least 2 (sometimes 3 or 4) respondents in the interview group. This is a reflection of the significance accorded them by the Graduate Questionnaire respondents. The exception in feature ratings was organisational skills, lowly rated by questionnaire respondents, highly by interviewees, and, if we are to adjudge leadership/management skills as roughly the same thing, quite highly by



employers, too.

The overall correlation suggests that applicants were consulting reputable information sources, thereby contributing to their own realism. However, the fact of graduates mentioning a number of things which recruiters did not, invites the question of why they thought these qualities important, and what the sources of these beliefs were. Possibly some respondents had been led to think these features significant through broad beliefs about employment in general, or they may have been trying solely by thinking to fill perceived gaps in the recruitment literature they had read. Just thinking may have made them more likely to go astray than if they had sought additional hard information. However, the lack of precision of some of the terms used in prospectuses may have discouraged this.

## SUMMARY

There was substantial evidence that applicants for graduate posts were in the main realistic about the qualities recruiters were looking for. This was true not only of academic skills, but of personal characteristics, too, and there was a strong correlation between the characteristics graduates said they, as applicants, had tried to convey, and those which employers claimed to be seeking. There were no major inconsistencies here, though a few characteristics mentioned by graduates appeared to have been overlooked or were not considered important by recruiters, and vice-versa. Graduates appeared to rate personality features (e.g. sense of humour and ambition) more highly than recruiters, while the recruiters appeared in turn to be seeking qualities more directly related to employment and management responsibilities, such as relevant training/study, decisiveness and initiative.

The question posed as the title of the present chapter asked how far graduate recruits contributed to their own realism, or lack of it. Graduates in the survey felt they had appraised their own abilities well, but only a minority of employers thought this about applicants in general, and even fewer careers advisers held to this opinion. One graduate felt that knowing what recruiters wanted had made self-analysis more difficult - a case of one kind of awareness interfering with another. Advisers' views on this subject stemmed mainly from their belief that students underestimated themselves and their skills, failed to self-analyse, did not grasp what employers wanted, and were over-influenced either by their courses or by HE generally. Recruiters in the main agreed with advisers about students' assessment of their skills, but also felt they could have done more to advertise these. However, they also felt they underestimated non-academic personal qualities, failed to research employment and work pressures, and did not link their own experiences to careers.



Most graduates thought that students could have done more to raise their knowledge and understanding of graduate employment. They saw this as being best done through arranging visits to, and inviting speakers from, industry, investigating wider job opportunities, using their CAS, obtaining relevant vacation work experience, attending careers events, and talking to graduates. Careers advisers agreed with the graduates, particularly in regard to both using information facilities and employers. They also felt that a better use/awareness of time was important, particularly in terms of initiating careers activities before their final year. A number of the employers' suggestions related more to students/graduates not having an inflated idea of their own worth, and not expecting rapid career progression. However, cautions were given about accepting too readily what recruiters told them, and there was encouragement (again, from employers themselves) to scratch below the surface.

A slight majority of careers advisers felt that graduates did not gather enough careers information, were unduly influenced by the prevailing job market, and images of work. Less than a third thought they were able properly to evaluate careers information, and just under half felt they applied for work suited to their capacities. Recruiters held a more positive view of students' information gathering, and half thought that they evaluated this material properly. Just over half also felt they applied for work suited to their capacities. However, the recruiters did agree with the careers advisers that students were unduly influenced by work images, and the job market at the time.

What had at first seemed graduate inertia often turned out to have been difficulty in breaking habits imposed or at least encouraged by HE. This included working individually rather than collectively in researching and in exploring possible recruiters. Students failing to obtain work experience had sometimes striven for this, but been turned down repeatedly by recruiters unable to help.



The extent of some respondents' lack of realism had become evident to them only gradually, as their jobs had unfolded, making it possible that a canvass of the same graduates at a later date would have occasioned a higher proportion with doubts of how realistic they had been as students. Some graduates who admitted to lacking realism had been able to extract themselves from unhappy situations, but not all respondents may have had the initiative and personality (to say nothing of the luck) which had permitted this. Several respondent spoke of former fellow-students in work situations which they felt made little call on their abilities.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

The study has endeavoured to achieve three things. One has been an exploration of the nature of realism through features considered to be tokens of it. Another has been an estimation by the presence or absence of these tokens, of how far graduates in the study had had realistic anticipations of work. The third has been to examine perceptions of the responsibility for this among recruiters of graduates, Higher Education Careers Advisers and their Services, and graduates themselves.

These achievements have not been without difficulty. Realism is an elusive term, not least because we can never be certain of the prompt to an individual's action. Perhaps it is never strictly true to say of anyone that he/she possesses realism, only that his or her behaviour is consistent with a realistic outlook. However, with this reservation, but for the sake of simplicity, the terms 'realism' and 'realistic' will continue to be used in this chapter.

The study was conducted within certain resource limitations, and largely on this account has been undertaken on a scale too small to render data or conclusions completely reliable on quantitative grounds. However, compensation for this has been found in the range of realism-related issues explored, the indicative patterns to emerge in the survey responses, and the validation of findings through using three respondent groups. Qualitative data was provided by means of the graduate interviews, which permitted more

detailed probing of graduates' career explorations and the seeming appropriateness of the decisions they had made. Qualitative material was provided also by the analysis of graduate recruitment prospectuses which acted as a major source of 'factual' information to would-be applicants, but was also influential impressionistically. The study is therefore one founded on a workable rather than a large sample, but whose range of data-sources and the two qualitative elements just mentioned offer alternative strengths.

The study has therefore been illuminatory rather than offering specific, reliable conclusions. However, given the scant attention devoted to graduate realism as a research issue, it has gone some way to fill a gap. From the data gathered and arguments presented, it is hoped and believed that the study might act as a springboard from which narrower-ranging qualitative studies or broader-based quantitative ones might arise, and in that capacity fulfil a useful function.

The study began with an overview of the literature relating to the issue of graduate realism, and from this three theoretical positions were instanced as possible explanations (in whole or part) for any lack of realism detected through the research exercises. A function of this final chapter will be to draw together the so far largely separate threads of theory and investigation/data in an attempt to see how far the findings support or fail to support each of the three theories posited in Chapter 1. It will also offer a summary of the theories as a possible explanation of graduate realism or the lack of it, will relate findings to the literature, and, finally, will look ahead to the potential which the topic of the thesis offers for further research. The first task, however, is to summarise the findings relating to each respondent group.



## OVERVIEW

### a) Summary of Findings Relating to Each Respondent Group

#### i) Graduates

Questionnaire respondents' anticipations had in general been borne out in regard to seven specified features of employment. Over the span of these features, only 15 per cent on average felt that something was not as they had anticipated, but between 20 and 30 per cent (depending on the feature) felt their expectations had been only partly met. Anticipations seemed most accurate about personal capacity for the job, and the nature of contact with colleagues, while the lowest expectation fulfilment related to autonomy. It was not clear how far graduates had 'got it right' about the first two of these features, and how far the features themselves were 'low risk'. It may have been that being equal to the job owed more to the selection process or modest work demands than to personal qualities of respondents. Similarly, contact with colleagues may have been unproblematic because those colleagues allowed newcomers to initiate or prolong contact as they saw fit (though clearly work requirements would have been an important factor in whether discretion was possible).

That the lowest fulfilment related to autonomy suggested that entrants had received misleading clues about the scope for this in a typical graduate-level job, recruiters' likely regard for their abilities, or even the need for the discretionary element in work, generally. Graduate interviewees had better foreseen the nature and level of discretion than their questionnaire counterparts, something which might readily have been explained by the higher proportion of them having earlier tested the kind of work they entered.

However, this would probably have led to higher all-round awareness, yet interviewees appeared less realistic than the questionnaire group in anticipating how they would spend their working time or their promotion prospects. This suggested that greater experience had not always led to better awareness.

Very nearly all graduate questionnaire respondents had had work experience, and marginally over half had felt this helpful in assessing recruiting organisations. This reflected the feelings of graduate interviewees, all of whom had had work experience. Given the general level of realism among graduates (as instanced above), it had seemed an activity very helpful in making assessments. However, mistaken premises may have formed in the minds of some students through work experience, since there were three work features about which respondents had been less realistic than the rest. There seemed a particular risk of this when the work experience was unrelated to the graduate-entry job.

In the selection processes they went through, graduates had tried to communicate certain personal characteristics. These proved remarkably similar to the ones which recruiters said they were looking for, and there was close correlation in the order of considered importance, at least among the six most favoured. Communication skills and interest/enthusiasm were high on both lists. However, the fact that graduates tried to convey these features left doubt as to which aspects of these rather general features they sought to convey, not to mention which they succeeded to.

The large majority of graduate questionnaire respondents felt they had properly assessed their career interests. Interviewees had felt this, too, though not quite as emphatically. Few of either group, however, made specific



reference to careers educational processes. It was also apparent that some graduates who had been happy with their self-assessment had found their work environment less than congenial, because the work was not to their taste. What they proved happy in eventually sometimes turned out to be a job in the same field, but entailing activities different in some significant way(s) to what they had started in. This showed the possibility of being sure and yet mistaken. A similarly high proportion of the graduate questionnaire group (though, again, fewer of the interviewees), felt they had properly assessed their own abilities, and this seemed borne out by the evidence available.

Both sets of graduates felt strongly that students in general could have done more to raise their understanding of graduate employment. However, activities considered useful in this respect in some cases seemed better undertaken collectively than by individuals, something at odds with HE's encouragement to students to see themselves as individuals in a competitive rather than a co-operative relationship. Nevertheless, sound co-operative or individual action seemed likely to have raised knowledge. What was less clear was whether students had thereby facilitated their thinking and decision-making related to career choice.

Both graduate groups had experienced physical, intellectual and emotional stress at work. This was more pronounced among the interviewees, for whom physical stress was the most problematic, by contrast with the questionnaire group, for whom it was the least. The different types of stress often were not unrelated, with intellectual demands (such as studying for exams) making physical ones (such as prolonged effort resulting in tiredness) or emotional ones (such as evenings consumed by study adversely affecting social life). Some of the stresses mentioned might have been explained in terms of an individual's capacity or disposition, but other kinds seemed likely



to affect anyone subject to the activities from which these seemed to derive.

Overall, a large majority of graduate questionnaire and interviewee respondents felt they had already assessed their own abilities when they began to apply for graduate posts, and nearly as many felt they had properly assessed their career interests. In these senses they considered themselves realistic. Most of those who did not attributed this to not having sufficiently investigated things about which information had been available (e.g. possible career paths), to a limited personal perspective (such as attributing importance only to qualities synonymous with academic life), or having been unduly influenced by an 'internal' agent (such as their course content) or an 'external' one, such as the prevailing job market. In some cases, it was felt that realism could have been raised through awareness exercises which resources did not appear to have permitted (e.g. mock selection interviews).

An even larger majority of both graduate groups felt that students in general could have done more to raise their knowledge and understanding of graduate employment. All suggested activities or resources were readily available (such as attending careers events or reading more), or were seen as the reward for initiative (e.g. work experience placements). Perhaps the most constructively critical remarks were to the effect that many students, while not neglecting resources, failed to use them as well as they might. The implication was that many students could with relatively little effort become more realistic.

ii) Employers

Among employers, it was widely believed that graduate recruitment literature was strong in conveying aspects of the work environment, training and promotion prospects, and the corporate ethos. However, only a slight majority considered it effectively communicated constituent job tasks. The modest degree to which the objective was held to have been achieved may have been related to most recruiters having produced recruitment literature to specifications devised by themselves alone. Under a third of employers in the sample consulted any outside agency before producing their graduate recruitment literature. A possible hazard for those which did not was producing material based on outdated ideas of suitability and unrefreshed by objective criticism. There were various suggestions of how organisations might better promote realism through their literature. These included detailed profiling of recent recruits, details of stressful work elements, and, where appropriate, for students to self-select out of the selection process. The first two ideas seemed constructive, but the third seemed risky since it would not guarantee the elimination of poor candidates, but might lead to good but modest ones looking elsewhere.

The large majority of employers thought that their selection process made graduates more realistic, and many may have postponed serious communication about their organisations until they had made at least initial selections. However, because applicants seemed likely at that stage to be concerned primarily with conveying about themselves the things most likely to please, it may have been a poor time to expect them to take on board fresh material.

Most employers in the sample felt that applicants for graduate posts



were realistic in regard to their organisation as a whole. However, only modest majorities considered them realistic about aspects of the work environment and about training and promotion, while only just over a third of them thought applicants realistic about the constituent tasks of the job in question. Every employer but one suggested ways in which applicants could be more realistic about employment in general. Among their more prominent suggestions were that students find more meaningful vacation jobs, do more research, make more visits to industry, and attend more careers events. Only one advocated consulting CAS. Much of this advice assumes, of course, the co-operation of recruiters.

Fewer than a third of employers thought applicants properly appraised their own abilities. Among the majority who thought they failed to, the main reasons cited were underestimation of the importance of non-academic personal qualities, inadequate research, failing to link work or study to careers, and failing to advertise their abilities even when they knew them. The last three perceived shortcomings could be laid at graduates' door, but the first relates partly to how well recruiters made known what they wanted. They, too, stood to lose if good graduates were not attracted to them.

A large majority of the recruiters who felt they knew enough to offer an opinion felt CAS could do more to raise student awareness. However, that nearly a third said they did not know suggested that ignorance of what CAS do was quite widespread. Building more and better links with employers was advocated, as was communicating more accurately to students what employers were looking for. Employers seemed to think still less of academic staff's contribution, only 2 out of 20 (10 per cent) saying they felt that staff adequately promoted realism.



iii) Careers Advisers

Most CAS appeared to have fairly tight financial restrictions, and a large majority of advisers felt that extra resources would have helped them promote realism among students. In some institutions the preference would have been for extra staff, particularly at times of the year when many students were seeking advice specific to their situation. Elsewhere, resources for students to better help themselves would have been preferred, particularly where this would have freed staff to contact employers and perhaps other outside agents, something difficult or impossible when interview demands confined them to campus.

A strongly-felt and widespread belief among advisers was that academic staff at their institution failed adequately to promote realism among students. According to advisers, sometimes this was considered the result of inactivity, but often through erroneous information being passed on or misleading impressions given. Some departments and faculties were depicted as conscientious, but often these were in any case populated by students taking vocational courses or ones encouraging or responding to particular career leanings (e.g. science and technology). The fact that not all departments had equal need or desire for CAS assistance seemed to have contributed to the marginalisation which some advisers felt was their Service's lot.

Advisers' experience varied considerably in quantity and in nature. Exactly half of the sample had previously been employed in education alone; of the other half, 8 (19 per cent) had experience of industry/commerce and 13 (31 per cent) had experience of both. Nearly a third of advisers had less than 3 years' experience in that capacity, 16 per cent had 3-5 years, 52 per cent 5

years or more, with slightly over half of these with more than 10. It was not clear whether having no work history outside an educational context actually undermined the credibility of advisers, or their self-belief. Given that even most advisers having industrial/commercial experience would still give advice on careers of which they had no personal experience, the quality of advice need not have been affected. However, there remained the possibility that students in general preferred to talk to someone with non-educational work experience, and may even have assumed this was true of any adviser they saw. Certainly, it is not standard practice for an adviser to reveal his/her professional history to a client, though there will be times when this arises if pertinent to the discussion in hand.

Most careers advisers felt that most students they interviewed did not have realistic anticipations of graduate employment. They felt this not only about organisations generally, but in regard to aspects of the work environment, training and promotion, and particularly constituent tasks of the job. Very few thought that students applying for graduate posts properly assessed their own abilities. They mainly felt that they underestimated themselves and their skills, failed to self-analyse, did not grasp what employers wanted, and were over-influenced either by their course, or HE generally. Almost every one made several suggestions of how students could be more realistic about graduate employment generally. Essentially, they advocated better use of time, employing organisations, campus careers facilities, information, and to make more personal contacts.



b) **Summary of Comparative Analysis of the Respondent Groups**

Though the large majority of graduates in both the questionnaire and interview groups felt they had had their anticipations of employment wholly or partly borne out, recruiters of graduates were much less certain about their realism, particularly regarding constituent job tasks. It was about this aspect which careers advisers were most doubtful, too, but their views were negative overall, with only a minority on each of several points feeling that graduates had been realistic. While not overlooking employers' reservations, it may have been that advisers' lower opinions stemmed from their having seen most students before employers did, and that many students' awareness was raised in the interim. It may be argued that the recruiters were in a better position to judge realism, since they occupied the environment against which it was measured. Conversely, as influencers of applicants' fortunes, they were in a weaker position than advisers to assess certain realism-related issues, especially where the key to understanding lay in open discussion with students.

A high proportion of the employers believed their selection process made applicants more realistic, and almost as many careers advisers argued with this. However, graduates were less emphatic. Slightly over half of the questionnaire group felt that this was generally true in relation to the organisations themselves, but less than a quarter felt this about employment in general. These perceptions were reinforced by the graduate interviewee group. Different interpretations suggested themselves: recruiters may have been intent to convey information about themselves only, and regarded applicants as already confirmed in their occupational decisions; however, they may have done this to discourage applicants from further speculation. As has already been suggested, it may have been that applicants took in only part



of the information employers conveyed, because making a favourable impression was their chief objective. However, another possibility was that information offered was being taken in, but subsequently not used to advantage, the result being applicants with a narrower perspective.

Employers thought that their recruitment literature was strong in conveying aspects of their work environment, but fewer than half of careers advisers thought this, and fewer than a third of questionnaire graduates (only 1 of the 10 graduate interviewees). While it was hardly surprising to find the employer group most enthusiastic about recruitment literature, respondents were, it should be remembered, asked to comment only on their own organisation's material, not recruitment literature as a whole. The quality of any single publication may have seemed stronger in isolation than when one among many. Personal investment aside, this could partly explain both employers' enthusiasm for their own product, and some of the lack of enthusiasm among graduates and careers advisers.

Nearly all employers and careers advisers felt that work experience had helped applicants to assess recruiting organisations realistically. However, only just over half of the graduates in each group had felt this. The difference in feeling here may be explained either by employers and advisers having been able to see connections between work experience and employment which students/graduates could not, or by the first two groups overestimating the value of work experience. Any work may have produced its own impressions and involvements distinct from its educative usefulness, particularly where the motives prompting it (e.g. financial ones) were not geared primarily to raising awareness. It did appear to be true that the graduates best anticipating work were those who had obtained work experience related to their graduate-entry job.

There was close correspondence among the views of employers, careers advisers and graduates themselves about how students could become more realistic. Much of the agreement was over how students could use a variety of resources and activities, and there was widely-shared opinion about the most profitable ones. One thing highlighted was the difference in how students might have acted constructively in unison (such as by arranging group visits to recruiting organisations), and how they usually acted in isolation, a trait traceable to the ethic of unassisted effort underpinning British HE.

As already mentioned, there was a close correlation among the respondent groups about what characteristics employers were looking for in graduates. The parallels were particularly close between graduates and employers, with five of the top six listed by employers being similarly prioritised by graduates. (Communication skills, interest/enthusiasm, intellectual/academic ability, team spiritedness, knowledge/experience.) However, there was some discrepancy about what it was considered graduates were looking for in employers.

The large majority of graduates thought they had properly assessed their own abilities when they began to apply for graduate posts. However, less than a third of employers thought this, and very few careers advisers. It should be remembered that the graduate respondents had been appointed to graduate posts, and were therefore probably among the more aware of their year(s), while advisers and recruiters were asked to comment on, respectively, all students and applicants they saw. Success in the job race, though, did not guarantee the fulfilment of assessed abilities, or even that the scope and depth of those abilities had not been underestimated. More than one graduate interviewee suggested that recognised abilities were given their



due, though some graduates had discovered theirs only through having had a chance to try work different to the kind for which they had originally applied.

There was some lack of correlation between the information sources graduates said they had found useful, and how effectively advisers in general thought students had used the available facilities. This was true of general careers literature and databases rather than of recruitment material.

Graduates felt CAS promoted their understanding of jobs and knowledge of particular employers. Only just over half, however, felt Services helped students gain a better grasp of their own abilities and potential. Employers thought Services could better have promoted realism among students (though a third said they didn't know), while advisers themselves felt emphatically that extra resources would have helped them do this more effectively. There was little doubt that raising students' self-awareness was, compared to providing information alone, a much more difficult and resource-intensive exercise for Services. The realism-acquisition process may have been handicapped by uncertainty about responsibility. It seemed less likely that recruiters would attempt to raise student awareness if they believed CAS to be already doing this. However, had Services advertised this as beyond their remit or resources, employers may well in their own interests have been disposed to sustain provision either by additionally resourcing Services or offering appropriate activities themselves. It would have been understandable, however, had Services been reluctant to take on all that was asked of them, or to sub-contract an essentially educative exercise to employers.

Many Services were not helped by the reported limited contribution of their academic staff. Two-thirds of the graduates did not consider their



teaching staff had helped raise their awareness of particular occupations or employment in general. Only two employers felt that academic staff achieved this, but over half the respondents said they didn't know. Advisers were much of the same opinion, though nearly a quarter expressed ignorance on the subject. Variation in HE staff contribution seemed strongest down departmental or faculty lines, those whose courses were directly or broadly vocational being most likely to have forged best links with recruiters or have staff members making employment-related input.

Less than a third of recruiters thought graduates found work stressful in any of three categories - physical, intellectual or emotional. Advisers felt this in roughly the same degree about physical and intellectual factors, but considered the emotional element less significant. However, a quarter to a third of questionnaire sample graduates said they had experienced stress, and interestingly, they mentioned emotional stresses most often. The incidence of stress as reported by graduate interviewees was higher still.

Triangulation, which embraced opinion from graduates, employers and careers advisers, tended to show agreement on certain things. Principally, these were the ways in which students might most profitably aim to become more realistic; that they could do more to raise their knowledge and understanding of graduate employment in the first place; the characteristics employers were looking for in graduates; that graduate recruitment literature was not strong in depicting constituent job tasks; that teaching staff in HE did little to raise awareness of particular occupations or of employment generally, and that stress, while it existed, was not widely experienced among graduate entrants.

However, the process also highlighted areas of disagreement. These

were principally whether most students had realistic anticipations of graduate employment; whether the recruitment process made applicants more realistic; whether work experience helped students assess recruiting organisations, whether students had properly assessed their abilities when they began to apply for graduate posts, and whether CAS had sufficiently promoted realism among students. Possible reasons for these differences have been suggested above.

## HOW FAR THE FINDINGS SUPPORT THEORY A

In Chapter 1 (page 30), Theory A was stated as follows:

There is an influential discrepancy between the kinds or degrees of awareness which higher education promotes, and what needs to be known to make informed decisions about employment and to avoid being surprised by work.

Even allowing for the limiting intrinsic elements in HE identified by Watts (1977) in the same chapter, the survey bears out Theory A quite strongly. The reasons are to be found in the perceived shortcomings of the two main centres of endeavour, CAS and academic faculties or departments.

Many advisers felt that their Services could have better promoted student awareness, but were inhibited in their attempts partly by limited resources and partly by their role being poorly understood by other players in the game. Ironically, the first problem compounded the second, since most advisory staff were too busy to evangelise within academic departments. Advisers seemed to see their Services' role as largely to provide adequate facilities and the means to students' using them effectively. More interview opportunities were advocated, but differences in staffing levels meant that these varied greatly with the institution. The seeming solution of groupwork within departments was hampered by the need to devise programmes suited to or adaptable to different academic subjects or departments, and the need to negotiate implementation. This educational approach to awareness-raising would also have entailed training, monitoring and supporting academic staff involved in its delivery. Increased contact with employers was often advocated, but given the links already built by individual departments with specific recruiters, there seemed likely to be problems in democratising the



resulting benefits to good effect while avoiding friction with departments now possibly less than pleased at having to share what had previously been theirs alone.

While surprise in a first graduate post seemed inevitable, there was evidence that difficulties mentioned were related to a proportion of students/graduate entrants being less well-equipped than they might have been. This came partly from employers, a majority of whom felt that HE CAS could have better promoted realism among students. Better links with recruiters, communicating better to students what they were looking for, and trying to reach a larger proportion of the undergraduate population were at the heart of employer-suggested improvements. However, questionnaire graduate respondents felt that imparting knowledge of particular employers was something CAS did very well, but that they did less to help them gain a grasp of their own ability and potential.

However, the extent to which academic staff were considered to promote realism was very low. Only 7 advisers (16 per cent), 2 employers (5 per cent) and 14 graduates (33 per cent) thought they had done this. Among the first two groups, there was evidence of ignorance of what academic staff contributed. However, the personal account and perhaps sequence of events in coming to terms with employment were perceived to be missing because few staff communicated their own experiences. Course schedules were seen to leave insufficient slack for even purposeful diversions of this sort. Most academics/departments were said to have given little help in arranging work placements likely to raise awareness. Many students, left to their own devices, were said to have chosen such as vacation jobs largely on their availability or for economic reasons, rather than for their realism-boosting potential. The alleged lack of enthusiasm for or participation in career

awareness-building among academics seemed (in the minds of graduates and advisers) to stem from a perception of the academic role as subject-centred, and carrying no responsibility to encourage students to use educational qualifications in a way either consistent with their courses, or commensurate with their abilities.

There is one major factor inhibiting any conclusions about the role of academic staff, namely that they were not consulted. No direct evidence could therefore be advanced either to confirm or refute the claims of the other respondent groups. However, this does not diminish the value of the latter's contributions, since these provided a better understanding of how graduate realism may have been influenced.

Theory A may be the most strongly supported of the three theories, in that alleged shortcomings in how HE promotes realism (through departmental policy and activity as well as what CAS do) were mentioned more often and elaborated or discussed more emphatically than either of the others. Academic departments, however, attracted much more criticism than Services, since their inactivity was interpreted mainly in terms of lethargy or shortsightedness, rather than lack of the resources to fulfil desired ends (the perceived position of most CAS). The particular hazard of the academic departments' attitude, according to the three groups, lay less in what they failed to provide (in terms of information, realism-building exercises, etc.) than in the false sense of security they encouraged and by which their students were in danger of neglecting to educate themselves about work-related matters. It was possible that an HE institution could help a student to make informed decisions about employment, yet for him/her still to be surprised by work. However, as has been said earlier, surprise is hard to avoid altogether, but the knowledge to make informed decisions would be likely to eliminate



surprises on all but a minor scale.

### **HOW FAR THE FINDINGS SUPPORT THEORY B**

On Page 30 of Chapter 1, Theory B was stated as follows:

**Recruiters mislead applicants and potential applicants about the nature of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs.**

Many employers in the survey felt they played a major role in raising awareness in applicants, and saw their selection process as significant in this. However, when recruitment literature was taken into account, and its success or otherwise in conveying specific work features gauged, employers were much more reserved. The irony here was that if recruitment prospectuses (which for many, if not most, interested students had formed their first impression of a recruiting organisation and what it might offer) had misled, then many potential applicants may not have put themselves forward, however realistic the selection process might have made them. Careers advisers had grave reservations about aspects of recruitment literature, less than a third of them believing it strong in conveying constituent job tasks, something also true of just over a third of the employer sample. Theory B may be interpreted as though the likely effect of its being true would be to draw applicants into jobs or kinds of work unsuited to them. The converse, however, that recruiters might thereby lose the interest of potentially good applicants must also be recognised.



Just over half the graduate questionnaire group had been disappointed by some work feature they had not anticipated. This tied in with the same group's observations on their employers' selection processes, which indicated that just over three-quarters had been made at least partly more realistic about the organisation itself, whilst just over half felt this about employment in general. To isolate significant rises in realism by removing the 'partly' responses, however, leaves just over half the respondents feeling they had gained this, and about employment in general, just over a fifth.

In fairness to employers, there was no evidence that they viewed raising realism as a function either of their recruitment literature or their selection process, other than in relation to their own organisation. Certainly none made any claim beyond this. This is important in showing that recruiters were not claiming representativeness for a complete industry or type of occupation. This may diminish any suspicion that if they did mislead applicants, this was in any any sense conspiratorial. However, this is not to deny that some students or graduates may have interpreted specific information or impressions as more broadly applicable than they were advertised.

Close examination of a range of graduate prospectuses drew attention to the subtlety of their content, both written and pictorial. Ironically, one employer lament had been that graduates were unduly influenced by images of work, despite the part such literature played in perpetuating and refining those images. Nor was this a question of the inclusion or exaggeration of features only, but of playing down or entirely omitting others. Stress was a case in point, and something of which both graduate questionnaire respondents and interviewees were very conscious, despite which it remained an issue no prospectus addressed, even those depicting occupations reputed for their

taxing nature.

This was an instance of material possibly misleading not because employers aimed for this, but through failure to address an issue whose inclusion might have influenced applicant decisions. This could be seen as a negligent omission; however, it may have been a genuine oversight arising from prospectus-writers being so accustomed to the work's stress-producing features as not to think of mentioning them. A little less innocently, a still further interpretation might be hesitation to raise an issue addressed by no other recruiter, and by doing so render it contentious.

The proportion of recruiters in the sample who declared themselves open to student enquirers offered familiarisation programmes, appeared to attend careers events, and were forthcoming with suggestions for better student-employer contacts, indicated the reverse of any will to deceive. That many perceived a need for graduates to better appraise their own abilities, and for CAS to better promote realism among students, and declared that academic staff did not adequately promote realism, all suggested that they were keen to see a more realistic student population.

Theory B is probably less convincing in explaining realism/unrealism than either of the others, since recruiters' investment in creating a positive impression on applicants would surely sound a note of caution for all but the most gullible. However, the success or otherwise of employer messages depended to no small degree on how far students had developed their own protection in the form of accurate information from independent sources. (The importance of HE as a potentially major one is evident.) It was not clear from the study whether realism within the relevant group would be more affected by misleading input received while applicants or while potential



applicants. The first may be disillusioned by information discovered to be false, but this may be more likely in relation to a specific organisation, and contrasting pictures/experiences of other organisations may provide a balance. Conversely, potential applicants (probably younger students) may also experience disappointment at inaccuracies, but, lacking balancing experience/knowledge, be more deeply and negatively affected. One result can be attraction to inappropriate postgraduate study, which many students admit to using chiefly as a way to postpone career decisions. Students are also at risk through misreading the purpose of recruitment literature. They often appear to perceive and use it as an introduction to occupations rather than to organisations offering those occupations, risking a slanted view of the occupation from the start. Minimising such error seems most likely through a careers education programme providing clear guidance on the functions of particular facilities. This reminds us of the difficulty and perhaps unfairness of attributing realism/lack of realism to any one source, and of trying to explain it by any one of the three theories advanced.

### **HOW FAR THE FINDINGS SUPPORT THEORY C**

On page 30 of Chapter 1, Theory C states that:

Students insufficiently exploit the resources through which realism might be achieved, but even those who do use them to good effect cannot compensate for personal shortcomings such as limited self-concept or inherent difficulties in the process of career choice.

Among the inherent difficulties, Watts (1977), tells about the



homogeneity of the campus population and its older members (i.e. the staff) offering students only a narrow picture of the jobs they could enter or the people they could become. However, recent changes in the typical HE experience have begun to change this. For instance, most students now work during term-time as well as vacations, allowing them contact with a wider range of employers and occupations. Also, while not all academic departments assist with work experience, the increased involvement of many has given a large number of students placements in organisations they aspire to enter. The survey indicated that nearly all graduate respondents had had work experience as students, and some had continued in the same organisations after graduating. However, it was also evident that many students were, for economic or other reasons, gaining vacation and other work which by their own admission had not been illuminating in a larger career sense.

However, this did not prevent students contacting organisations on their own initiative. That many failed to do this (according to advisers and recruiters) may have been explained by an inherent problem, namely that with such emphasis in HE having been accorded the academic side, career considerations were not made, or were poorly formulated. The other factor is that with the ethic of HE based on individual assessment, collective effort is alien to students, resulting in their rarely working together for purposes of gathering or sharing information.

The perceptions of careers advisers showed that often students did not use appropriately or even resort to campus careers facilities. This was felt particularly true about when they used them, with the final year considered by advisers too late a start. Relatedly, however, advisers and employers felt students generally did not recognise their own abilities, and even when they

did, often failed to advertise these properly. They were usually less able to recognise non-academic abilities rather than ones their study had highlighted. Generally, students underplayed their abilities in the application process.

A very large majority of careers advisers and recruiters thought that work experience helped applicants to assess employing organisations realistically. However, only just over half the graduate questionnaire respondents and graduate interviewees said they had felt this. It is possible that the first two groups had a rosy view of the value of work experience in this context, but it is also possible that some students were gaining significantly less from it than they might have, or had failed to recognise the benefits it had brought them.

Careers advisers and employers both felt emphatically that academic staff did not adequately promote realism among students. Slightly over two-thirds of the graduate questionnaire respondents and nearly two-thirds of interviewees felt this, too, but the figure suggested that many may not have encouraged academic staff to be more helpful. Younger members of staff, in particular, might have proved a good resource for students, having themselves been through the career decision-making and job hunting processes relatively recently.

Careers advisers felt that, with the exception of academic staff, students used campus resources fairly well, though computer use received a lower rating than might have been expected. As Theory C points out, this suggested that even with good information it was hard to compensate for shortcomings such as limited self-concept. This was strongly hinted at when the opinions of graduate entrants about how well they had assessed their own abilities were placed against the beliefs of careers advisers and employers on



the same subject. More than three-quarters of graduate questionnaire respondents and interviewees felt they had done this properly, though less than 12 per cent of advisers, and 30 per cent of employers, agreed.

Regarding Theory C, the study's evidence indicated that while many students appeared not to use resources to best effect, neither personal shortcomings nor inherent difficulties in the process of career choice seemed insurmountable barriers to the goal of realism. The evidence suggested that earnest investigation could undermine, and, if not overcome, at least satisfactorily compensate for these. Neglect of any particular facility need not have prejudiced awareness, but a good many students appeared to have neglected certain facilities without having compensated through others. Computer aids seemed the most obviously avoided, despite their appropriateness for such as matching personal abilities to job requirements, or comparing a number of jobs or occupations. If self-concept is limited even after conscientious use of good facilities, this need not mean that effective decision-making is not possible. It may even be argued that a more limited self-concept makes sifting large quantities of information easier, since these can then be evaluated against a single rather than a complex measure.



## SUMMARY OF THE THREE THEORIES AS AN EXPLANATION OF GRADUATE REALISM OR THE LACK OF IT

The evidence put forward by graduates in particular has shown that even after having made apparently thorough investigations of the occupations and organisations in question, some graduates who had entered work in which they appeared content and so far successful, had still experienced surprises. The nature of these (pleasant as well as less agreeable) was such that it is hard to see how they could have been avoided by better preparation, being (as they often were) to do with the specifics of a situation rather than the generalities which may be said to constitute awareness at this stage. It would appear that HE need offer no worse a preparation than any other means for this level of understanding.

However, in regard to making informed decisions, this seems less true, since what needs to be known is less easily attainable. In essence, student realism combines relevant knowledge and self-awareness. HE may seem well-suited to providing both, knowledge being its stock-in-trade, and self-awareness something which either its courses promote or which CAS encourage. Despite this, obstacles remain. One is the limited resourcing frequently allotted CAS, which often prevent them offering the nature or number of awareness-raising facilities they would like to, both in material (e.g. information resource) and activity (e.g. workshops) form. Inherent factors constitute another obstacle within HE, such as the homogeneity of its population, which insufficiently duplicates the world beyond the campus significantly to aid adjustment to that world. A third inhibitor is the limited involvement (and, by a number of accounts, interest) of many academic staff in raising the awareness of their students in employment matters, much of which appears to derive from a belief in their own function as primarily, if not

exclusively, academic. Finally, an experiential content seems important to understanding what employment is, yet, with the exception of the sandwich placements available only through a minority of courses, HE is ill-placed to offer this. Opinions (drawn from all the respondent groups) about the level of awareness of HE students suggest that this is among many below the level of 'what needs to be known', and that this can be linked to the features cited above.

Theory A may at first seem only a plausible explanation of lack of realism among students. However, because students who recognise the significance of its content may use this as a prompt to their own investigations beyond campus influences and provision, it appears to have the potential to explain certain kinds or levels of realism, too.

'Mislead' is the term most salient in Theory B, suggesting that any failings to inform applicants for graduate employment may not be wholly unintentional. It is important to stress however, that the study identified no 'conspiracy' among recruiters, though shortcomings perceived in the messages employers conveyed were sufficient to suggest that these could detract from, rather than enhance, understanding of employment in general and the reality of particular jobs.

However, the Theory does not wholly explain any applicant's misunderstanding of employment in general. This is because students were unlikely to have looked seriously at particular employing organisations until well into their degree courses, by which time they were likely to have used careers resources offered on campus, and obtained some form of work experience. This is not to deny that any impression of employment gained thereby might not be overlaid, though the few graduates' claims that the



recruitment process had made them more realistic about employment in general did not strengthen the case for this. There was a stronger argument that applicants and would-be applicants might be influenced by the depiction of particular jobs, partly because they might only come to this information after committing themselves to a particular field of work, and because recruitment material was likely to be more detailed than what they found in independent sources. However, more detailed information might lead to more meticulous follow-up, with, for example, students at selection interviews asking more pertinent questions. All in all, it does not seem that Theory B can stand alone as an explanation either of realism or the lack of it. Other influences are likely to have had an effect, while the impact of information can be gauged only against the preparedness of the individual student.

The attractiveness of Theory C as an explanation is that it starts with students, through whom all influences or potential influences must be filtered. Opinion suggested that many students did not exploit the available resources as well as they might have, since some had appeared relatively neglected (notably academic staff and computer databases). How well self-concept was developed depended partly on how much credence was accorded graduates' accounts of their self-appraisal, since these were mainly at odds with employers' and careers advisers' impressions. Inherent difficulties in the process of career choice included such as the range from which choice had to be made, limited time in which to make career-significant decisions, and shortage of the experiential knowledge desirable for comparison purposes.

Perhaps the flaw in Theory C was that the evidence did not suggest that limited self-concept or inherent difficulties were necessary limiters to career choice. While some graduates had been surprised by specific things, had found the demands of their jobs stressful, or had just found a general lack of



correspondence between expectations and experience, others whose self-concepts seemed no more refined, seemed generally unsurprised and content in their choice of specific occupations.

That students insufficiently exploit the resources through which realism might be achieved might by itself have explained lack of realism, but their exploiting resources, overcoming personal shortcomings and inherent difficulties need not still have resulted in lack of realism, unless the rather strict argument that there is always scope to become more realistic, is applied. It may even be argued that apparent limiters to awareness act to promote successful career choice, since they prompt the acquisition of experience necessary to realism.

## THE STUDY'S CONTRIBUTION

The study has been necessarily exploratory, since it examines a little-covered topic in a way not previously undertaken. In evaluating this study of graduate realism, part of its contribution has been to show the value of triangulation, since differences in the data collected and analysed have strongly suggested that the perspective of no single respondent group (or even of most members of it) can independently be relied on as a reflection of how things are. In the same context, the study has suggested the value of collecting data in different ways from two similar respondent groups, in this case graduates consulted by questionnaire and a smaller group who were interviewed. This afforded the opportunity to explore in some detail opinions which questionnaire responses had suggested were widely-held. As far as has been ascertainable, neither triangulation nor using a second group of similar respondents to better understand data collected through the first has previously been resorted to in studies of this subject.

While focusing on graduate employers and careers advisers, the study has not been content to present as collected the data from each. The study has analysed the responses of graduates by gender, educational sector and study discipline; those of employers by field of endeavour; and those of careers advisers by type of institution and nature and amount of experience. Again, this does not seem to have been done before in examining this topic, and has suggested some avenues for further, more detailed research (touched on below).

Though contributing only part of the data analysed, the study of graduate recruitment prospectuses, featured in Chapter 4, provided a more substantial coverage of, and insight into, this employer facility than appears to

have been done elsewhere. It has done so in a way which shows not only the significance of this material, but how pictorial, as well as written messages, were conveyed, and the subtlety of design and/or effect of these.

In a research context, the study has unearthed data and arrived at conclusions, some of which support earlier studies mentioned in Chapter 1, and some of which do not.

In the study by DEVLIN and PETERSON (1994), the authors took two sample groups, one from the USA and one from New Zealand, each sample being composed of three sub-groups, one of business students, one of business recruiters, and one of HE academic staff. Using a questionnaire, the authors obtained, from each member of each sub-group, a ranking for a range of 13 job-related values, as these were perceived important to students. In the USA sample, academics considered salary the most important, though students placed it only eighth. The former also gave work location and fringe benefits much higher significance, and training much lower, than did students. The authors concluded that despite their close campus contact, academics did not gauge student preferences very accurately. They found a closer correlation between the recruiters' evaluation and the students'. In contrast, the authors found academics in the New Zealand sample much more accurate in gauging their students' values. An explanation Devlin and Peterson advanced for this was that New Zealand academics, in contrast to their American counterparts, saw students valuing career growth and achievement to a high degree. More intense student/academic contact was another possible contributing factor. While HE academic staff were not sampled in the present study, the reservations about their knowledge and role in regard to student realism expressed by the three respondent groups reflected the essence of the study discussed. The lack of knowledge among British academics reported in the



present study was shown by the American sample of the Devlin and Peterson study not to be unusual. However, the knowledge apparent among New Zealand academics illustrated that the opposite was possible, and therefore that laments about British shortcomings in this regard may be justified. The present study firmly establishes a widely-perceived lack of contribution by academics to the career realism of their students.

SMITH et al. (1989) also employed a questionnaire to obtain information from over 350 students who had graduated in either business studies or law during the previous 5 years. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a number of skills (general rather than specialised) typically mentioned by employers in a recruitment context. These general skills were divided into problem solving, communication, and working in groups, with specific skills identified within each of these three groups. The findings confirmed the regard in which graduates held the skills employers considered important, though the study also showed that the particular profile of these skills varied among different sectors of employment. The authors found no evidence of under-utilisation of these skills in the jobs obtained by graduates in the sample. However, they drew attention to the question of what is understood by the terminology used to define desired skills, and cite HIRSCH and BEVAN (1988), who pose the question

... if we ask the question 'is there a shared language for management skills?', the answer seems to be 'yes' at the level of expression, but 'no' at the level of meaning.

(p.45)

Smith *et al.*'s study goes further than the present one in associating different skill ranges with different occupational fields, and is more questioning about the meaning of skill terms. The broader scope of the present study prevented this, though the skills recruiters said they wanted in applicants were largely

confirmed by the graduates in the sample. However, the present study did give some indication of under-utilisation of skills, though sometimes this reflected respondents' self-image rather than their not using knowledge or aptitudes firmly associated with degree course content, for instance.

In their study of anticipations of employment, HATCHER and CROOK (1988) used questionnaire data from 253 graduates in employment to investigate overmet and undermet expectations. The study found some of the overmet expectations resulted in positive feelings, some negative ones, while undermet expectations could, alike, produce varied response. This finding was reflected in the present study. Of the overmet negative features, several were especially prevalent, being experienced by almost or just over half the respondent group. These were: being more tired after work than expected, having more work to do, and working longer hours. The most salient positive overmet expectations were that colleagues helped more and were friendlier than anticipated, supervisors were interested in newcomers' welfare, and the respondents had been invested with more authority. Regarding positive undermet expectations, over 70 per cent of respondents felt that their supervisor was less hostile than expected, that they did not feel inferior to their co-workers, they were not as confused as expected about how to do their job, nor criticised for their work as they thought they would be. They were also surprised that the work atmosphere was not more serious, that the organisation did not expect them to do things they couldn't, and that mistakes were not regarded as a serious matter.

Of the negative undermet expectations, over half the respondents felt their instructions on how to accomplish work tasks were less than adequate, they had less free time after work than they had expected, their pay and training were both lower than expected, as was the usefulness of things they



had learned at university. The authors concluded that their study was consistent with earlier research showing that many students do a poor job of gathering relevant information during a job search. They felt applicants were least realistic about information concerning those aspects of jobs most associated with the intention to leave - namely pay, supervision and colleagues. The present study goes beyond that of Hatcher and Crook, since in addition to identifying the nature and degree of surprise among graduate entrants in regard to features of employment, it explores these within an academic as well as an occupational context, and attempts to find explanations for anticipations and experiences, rather than being content just to identify them.

GORDON (1983) received from 58 graduate recruiters completed questionnaires covering their satisfaction or otherwise with their new graduate recruits. The employers saw advantages in recruiting graduates, citing the communication skills of arts and social science graduates, and the relevant knowledge of pure science and, particularly, applied science specialists. However, they also saw disadvantages to employing graduates, the two criticisms most frequently levelled at newcomers across all subject disciplines being their lack of industrial/commercial experience and their unrealistic expectations of career advancement. Gordon sees possible explanations for these findings lying in what he regards as the paucity of careers advice and counselling received by undergraduates, and in the shortcomings of recruitment literature. He also feels such deficiencies (and others) to have arisen partly through a failure of industry and education to liaise. The present study shows that there is still reason to retain some of Gordon's misgivings, most notably the lack of recruiter/HE liaison and some of the shortcomings of graduate recruitment literature. However, most employers in the present study did not seem to feel entrants lacked experience of work



settings, though many still felt they held unrealistic expectations of career advancement.

BACON *et al.* (1979) also employed questionnaires, this time to test the opinions of employers about the social and intellectual qualities from two types of institution - the ('established') university, and the polytechnic (now 'new' university). The organisations canvassed nearly all had over 1,000 employees (all but 7 per cent), and 20 per cent had over 50,000. 86 per cent had experience of recruiting graduates from both types of institution. A high proportion (83 per cent) thought that universities produced better graduates, both intellectually and academically. It appeared that employers were looking for slightly different personality traits in students from each type of institution, the university students being expected to display motivation (64 per cent), leadership (46 per cent), and adaptability (40 per cent), while polytechnic students were examined for adaptability (49 per cent), motivation (39 per cent) and understanding of industry (19 per cent). The authors concluded that ('established') university students were more often seen as potential higher management, whereas polytechnic ('new' university) students were seen as filling posts at a lower level. The acknowledged closer understanding of industry among the polytechnic students was not seen to compensate for the above perceptions, in terms of their career options. While a minority of the graduate sample (both questionnaire respondents and interviewees) were from 'new' universities in the current study, this did not confirm a perpetuation of the employer preferences expressed in the Bacon study. In fact, the present study showed that over a range of graduate occupations, there appeared no preference for graduates of 'established' universities. Moreover, the nature of some employers' preferred graduate characteristics suggested that the course content of many 'new' university courses might foster these better than their 'established' counterparts. At the

least, though, the study contributes by showing that any preferences among employers are much less apparent, and that more subtle measures than were previously taken would not be needed to identify any such preference or prejudice.

DREW SMITH (1990) offers analysis of a study commissioned by the (then) Manpower Services Commission, which examined various features of British education and training and discovered what were considered significant shortcomings. The focus was not on graduate recruiters exclusively, but some of the findings suggest some widespread features which appeared in the interest of neither recruiters nor recruited. The survey identified 52 per cent of employees as receiving no training at all. The great bulk of training (80 per cent) was in-house using employers' own facilities (presumably including trainers). Those most likely to receive training were young, new recruits to the higher-skilled occupations, and already holding good qualifications. This seemed to place graduate entrants in a good position; however, the study also found that 70 per cent of employers did not have a training plan, 80 per cent did not set training targets, and 97 per cent did not undertake any cost-benefit analysis of their training activities. The present study shows the importance of training in the eyes of graduating students, while its high profile in the prospectus range confirmed it as something recruiters recognised as important and seen as important by potential applicants. Most entrants appeared pleased at the quality of training they received, but the study offered no evidence to confirm or rebut Drew Smith's findings on training analysis by employers.

In a study of 251 students on recreation and leisure studies degree courses, SHARMA et al. (1995) tried to detect connections or lack of them between career perceptions and nature and/or quantity of work experience.



About 40 per cent of the respondent group were on courses which entailed significant work experience, while the rest were not. However, because the amounts of relevant work experience obtained by both during their degree courses were roughly the same, the authors considered that the quantity of such experience prior to entering HE may have been an important factor in career expectations. The investigation showed that this appeared to play an important formative role, particularly in the decision of whether or not to choose an essentially vocational course which included work experience, or a course which was essentially educational. More significant, perhaps, was the authors' conclusion that only when students worked in jobs related to their career goals were they likely to acquire information or develop skills which result in career development. It was also considered that students working in unsatisfying jobs were not likely to be motivated to acquire the new skills or knowledge necessary for growth. In the present study, graduate respondents were more reserved than employers or advisers in their estimates of the value of work experience. Among those for whom this had been in something unrelated to their occupational aspirations, little value was attached to the activity as a means of raising awareness. Moreover, whatever recruiters thought of the value of work experience generally, it was occupation-specific awareness that they appeared to be looking for in their selection process, and this was the tendency of their advice to students rather than mere encouragement to gain a taste of any sort of work. The study therefore confirmed the significance of occupation-specific work experience, in terms of both awareness and credibility.

One initiative designed to raise student capabilities with a view to successful transition to work is the Student Capability Scheme described by TAYLOR (1987), and run at the University of Salford. This entailed a member of academic staff being detailed to a group of science and engineering



students in an advisory capacity as they undertook tasks designed to link their subject of study with the world of work (e.g. through the relevant applications of such as physics or engineering knowledge to business contexts). Significantly, perhaps, the scheme contributed marks equivalent to exams for academic purposes, and appeared to be working successfully, as did the university's programme of sandwich courses, and its endeavours to improve students' communication skills through guidance practice on such as delivering talks.

Another initiative described by HUMBLE (1989) was the Teaching Company Scheme, devised to attract high-quality graduates and use them to best effect. HEIs and recruiting organisations liaise to ensure that good teaching complements good on-the-job experience to result in not only graduates more capable of acquiring and handling responsibility, but in academic staff whose understanding of work and its relation to HE is enhanced by their organisational contact. The present study confirmed the significance of the initiatives described by Taylor and by Humble by its attention to the importance and potential role of HEIs' academic staff in raising student awareness, in the eyes of both graduates and recruiters. In showing how academic staff might become deeply involved in work-related activities helpful to their students' career decision-making, these studies in turn highlighted the lack of involvement of many academics in the experience of the bulk of respondents in the present study. Where academic departments had become involved in such activities, however, (though rarely if ever in ways as organised as either scheme described) the benefits accruing confirmed the thrust of the Taylor and Humble contributions.

The present study has highlighted the significance of information in the process of realism-building, and two studies in the research literature are

worth mentioning in this context. One is that of PAUL and ALBERTA (1989), who, in their preliminaries to developing a computerised careers information resource, scrutinised the pattern of careers information-seeking in the careers libraries of two HEIs. The authors found that while student users were often not as diligent in their searches as they might have been, excellent resources were frequently hard to find owing to the content arrangement of careers publications. BACHHUBER (1988) identified few attempts among graduate recruiters to address the issue of person/job fit, and found the totally positive view of their organisation usually presented by recruiters as responsible for the 'reality shock' which appears often to lead to dissatisfaction and employee turnover. Even factual information Bachhuber regards as often too general to be useful. The present study confirmed the work of Paul and Alberta, and contributed in identifying a much wider range of ways in which students did not appear to be getting the best out of facilities designed to promote awareness. The study also added to the Bachhuber findings by showing in much more detail how messages might be conveyed within recruitment material, and how image had the potential to distract from written, and possibly factual, information. Specifically, it confirmed this author's findings in that job characteristics, so relevant to person/job fit, were perceived as a weakness in the literature by all the respondent groups.

It is worth including in this section three authors, mention of whose work was made first in Chapter 1. The first is EXWORTHY (1990), who reports graduates viewing industry as offering only opportunities in research and development. PEARSON (1990) identifies 1 in 4 graduates as underemployed in jobs which match neither their skills nor aspirations. Finally, RABAN (1981) regards careers education in schools as superior to what is offered in HE, and sees this as a result partly of the timetables of most HEIs not accommodating suitable careers programmes, and partly of a system



which allows graduates a wide choice of occupation unrelated to their subjects of study. These authors offer informed opinion rather than empirical evidence. In regard to their work, the present study first challenges the view of Exworthy, with no evident views among the graduate sample, advisers or recruiters, of students/graduates seeing industry in this limited way. Graduate respondents working in research and development (notably in the engineering field) appeared (often through work experience) to have few illusions about their industry. Pearson's significant level of underemployment did not emerge from the present study's data, though he speaks of graduates in general, where the present study deals only with graduate recruits. In its contrast to the opinions of these two authors, the study contributes by showing that misconceptions of industry and graduate underemployment are to all appearances much rarer than some seven years ago. However, in largely confirming the views of Raban, the study also shows that while progress has been made in some respects, this is not universally true of careers education in the HE sector. The study contributes by identifying shortcomings in provision and how these have the potential to affect student realism.

In global terms, the thesis broadly supports certain ideas or investigations, and offers less support for others. It buttresses, for instance, the work of Raban, who sees HEIs as not doing enough to raise student awareness, and of Watts, who sees some inherent features of HE as obstructive to realism. However, the study also recognises such as the conclusions of Keen and Higgins regarding the ignorance of students on the verge of entry to HE, and accepts that any lack of realism among these students is not necessarily on account of deficiencies within HEIs.

The study also confirms the work of Smith *et al.* and of Devlin and Peterson, in upholding the importance of precise terminology in understanding



realism-related issues. This is particularly true where policy or action is based wholly or largely on what other individuals or organisations do or say, yet many of the terms used in recruitment, guidance and education-related exercises lack such exactness, a factor often prejudicial to understanding. Relatedly, the study confirms the importance of information, and its impartial presentation, as well as the timing of its consumption, elements prominent in the work of Bachhuber.

The study also finds support for the broadly rational view of career investigation, as encapsulated in the premise expressed by Parsons, that realism is acquired through gaining awareness of self, gathering knowledge of jobs and employment in general, and combining or matching the two. It does not, however, identify any specific means or combination of methods as more successful than any other. The effectiveness of these appeared to no small extent dependent on the individual resorting to them.

Equally, the thesis' findings were in opposition to certain things. There appeared little support for the view of Reutersward that vocational training should remain separate from mainstream academic education. Many graduates in the study appeared to have chosen their courses for vocational reasons, and neither recruiters nor careers advisers appeared to take issue with this decision. The knowledge of workplaces imparted by the placements constituting part of many undergraduate courses may have explained the relative rarity of the employer criticisms (identified by Gordon) of students lacking industrial/commercial experience. The study showed, however, that career-oriented work experience appeared to promote better awareness than work bearing no relation to it.

The view of Wilder, that HE has a responsibility to ensure that its

graduates find satisfactory destinations, was not reflected in the opinions of any of the respondent groups, or in the apparent working philosophies of either advisory staff or academics. That it was not seen as a responsibility did not mean that individual members of staff were not doing all they could to achieve this end. Overall, it would be more accurate to say that staff committed to raising awareness had a view of this being instrumental to graduates finding their own satisfactory destinations.

Finally, the study did not support the view of Baumgardner, which posits that a systematic preparation for career decision-making cannot be made. Contrary to this, the evidence of the study was that there was an (often close) correlation between apparent career awareness-raising activities and the occupations in which individuals appeared to have settled successfully and happily.

## THE THESIS TOPIC'S POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study has attempted to tread an undeviating path, and not divert into the attractive sub-topics strewn along the way. There seem several avenues open for exploration, some relating to method, others to content. Regarding the first, wider samples could be taken, offering a check on whether perceived trends were confirmed by a larger body. A variation on this would be to focus on a single respondent group, obtaining more detail on each of the issues covered. However, a more interesting approach might be to explore inviting issues highlighted by the present study, a number of which suggest themselves.

One is the success (actual or potential) of recent or forthcoming initiatives. A recent one is the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative (1988-1996), funded by the Department for Education and Employment, and designed to stimulate and support HE/employer links (BUTCHER, 1997). A group of employers with experience of the benefits of forming partnerships with HEIs formed a national association called 'Employers for Higher Education', which in part continues these links. It identifies and disseminates good practice in active participation between employers and HE, contributes to policy debates and runs events to assist employers who want to form or develop ties with HE. Its philosophies and the issues it sees as important seem worth examining. Another forthcoming initiative is the Graduate Employability Test, developed over two years by a consortium of educationalists and industrialists, and soon to be available nationally. It is intended to provide a national benchmark to give employers 'clear and accurate information about a graduate's employability' (DFE, 1997). This will include material additional to degree and curriculum vitae details, and is intended to cover such as computer literacy, business awareness, personality



profile, leadership potential, teamwork potential, and other things considered relevant and ascertainable. Graduates', recruiters' and careers advisers' reactions to the test after an initial period of operation seem worth investigating.

Others derive from the data and conclusions of the study itself. One possibility is to examine the strategy of self-promotion to students and graduates of a number of recruiters. This might usefully focus not just on literature (such as prospectuses), but on the content and style of promotional talks and videos, and in parts of the individual selection process, such as interviews. A possible obstacle to a study of this sort is that some of the data or conclusions from them might not flatter recruiters, and only make applicants the more wary of them. Possibly linked to such a study, or perhaps standing alone, might be a focus on how students/graduates feel their awareness raised by the recruitment process itself. The present study's data indicated its value in terms of organisational knowledge, but showed it was considered to contribute little to understanding of employment in general. It would be interesting to see whether closer observation and questioning confirmed this or not.

A study based on the activities of a CAS (or small cluster of them) might look at how it promotes student realism through a range of facilities and inputs. One of its functions might be to see whether students (the 'customers') and advisory staff (the 'suppliers') concur or differ in how they perceive the function of specific career facilities or activities, as it would seem that any disharmony in this regard might adversely affect awareness-raising. It might also offer the chance to see whether the recommendations students receive of how to become more aware are likely to vary with the adviser, and may therefore be subject to chance. Another possibility for a Service-based study

is an in-depth look at one means of awareness-raising, or vehicle for this. The potential for such an exercise was illustrated by the second part of Chapter 4, which looked at graduate recruitment prospectuses. Occupational literature, computer careers programmes, planned work experience, careers educational programmes and advisory interviews might be other worthy subjects.

Finally, a study which could (but need not) be longitudinal, might compare the careers information and activities available to a group of sixth form or further education college students, with the career decisiveness at a given point during their HE. This might help to determine how far campus careers offerings play a part in decision-making, or even whether good or bad career awareness experiences pre-HE influence how far students engage in these once at University or the equivalent. A direct investigation of the contribution of academic departments to student realism is another possibility.

## **APPENDICES**

**Letter to Recruiting Organisations, Soliciting Graduate Response**

**Graduate Questionnaire**

**Employer Questionnaire**

**Letter Soliciting the Help of Careers Advisers**

**Careers Adviser Questionnaire**

**Employer Questionnaire Respondents**

**H.E. Institutions from whose Careers Advisers Completed  
Questionnaires were returned.**

**Recruiters from which Completed Graduate Questionnaires were  
received**

**Organisations whose Graduate Prospectuses were Analysed in  
Chapter 4**

**Illustrations from Graduate Prospectuses chosen to Emphasise  
Observations made in Chapter 4**



19, Birkdale Green,  
Alwoodley,  
LEEDS LS17 7SP.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to request your co-operation in an academic study I am undertaking as a Part-Time Postgraduate student of the Department of Educational Studies at the University of York.

The project is an investigation of how realistic British graduates are in their anticipations of their first graduate posts. I think that this is an issue worth investigating because:

- 1) There is evidence to suggest that many undergraduates have a mistaken picture of employment, which may lead them to select careers and jobs on false premises.
- 2) A high proportion of graduates leave their first employer within five years. This merits examination to see whether remedies are desirable or possible.
- 3) A better understanding of graduate realism could have positive implications for students' career exploration, the work of Careers Advisory Services, and the recruitment practices of graduate employers.

I shall be pleased if you will ask each of two graduate employees (preferably one male, one female) if he/she would be willing to complete one of the enclosed questionnaires. Each graduate should be:

- a) Aged under 25
- b) Have joined your organisation after 1st January, 1992
- c) Be in his/her first graduate post.

If happy to complete the questionnaire, each graduate should do so and return it to me as soon as possible in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope. I must emphasize that all information volunteered will be treated in the strictest confidence, being used only by me for the purposes of the study.

If you have any questions about the project, I shall be pleased to try to answer them. Feel free to contact me during working hours on 0924 296658.

If for any reason you feel unable to participate, I shall be pleased if you will let me know soon, as I can then contact other organisations.

Thank you in anticipation,

Paul Greer.

## GRADUATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions as best you can. Be assured that all information and opinions volunteered will be treated in the strictest confidence, and used only for the purposes of the study. Please return the completed Questionnaire in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope to:

Paul Greer,  
19, Birkdale Green,  
Alwoodley,  
LEEDS,  
LS17 7SP.

QUESTION 1

Have your anticipations of graduate employment been borne out by your first post in regard to:

PLEASE TICK AS APPROPRIATE

	YES	PARTLY	NO
a) The scope of your responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) How you spend your working time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) The nature of your contact with colleagues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Your own capacity for the job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Promotion prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Your level of autonomy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



QUESTION 2

Is there any feature of your work which you did not anticipate but have found:

- |    |                         |                                 |                                |
|----|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a) | Particularly satisfying | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
|----|-------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|

Please say what:

- |    |                            |                                 |                                |
|----|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| b) | Particularly disappointing | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
|----|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|

Please say what

QUESTION 3

Do you think your employer's selection process made you more realistic about:

- |    |  |                          |                          |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
|    | c  | YES                      | PARTLY                   | NO                       |
| a) | The organisation itself<br>(Please say what) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) | Employment in general<br>(Please say what)   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

QUESTION 4

Do you think that the graduate recruitment literature you read during your search for employment was strong in conveying:

	YES	NO
a) Job descriptions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) The work environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Further training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Career paths	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) The corporate philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there any ways in which you feel such literature might be altered to raise awareness among readers?

QUESTION 5

Had you at any time had any work experience (paid or unpaid) before beginning your first graduate post?

YES

NO

Please say what this was.

Did your H.E. institution help organise any of your work experience?

YES

NO

Do you feel that work experience helped you to assess recruiting organisations?

YES

NO

If so, in what ways?



QUESTION 6

In application forms or at job interviews, which four personal characteristics did you most frequently try to convey to recruiters?

1)

2)

3)

4)

QUESTION 7

When applying for your first graduate post, which four characteristics were you most looking for in a potential employer?

1)

2)

3)

4)

QUESTION 8

When you began to apply for graduate posts, do you think you had already properly assessed:

- |    |                       |                                 |                                |
|----|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a) | Your own abilities    | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) | Your career interests | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |

If 'NO' to either a) or b), please say in what respects.

QUESTION 9

Do you think that your H.E. Institution's Careers Advisory Service adequately promoted among students:

- |    |   |                                 |                                |
|----|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a) | Understanding of jobs                           | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| b) | Knowledge of particular employers               | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| c) | A grasp of their own abilities<br>and potential | YES<br><input type="checkbox"/> | NO<br><input type="checkbox"/> |

If 'NO', to any of the above, please say in what respect(s) there was notable deficiency.

QUESTION 10

Did teaching staff at your H.E. Institution help raise your awareness of particular occupations or employment generally?

YES

NO

If 'YES', please say how.

If 'NO', what more do you think they could have done?

QUESTION 11

Do you think that Higher Education students could do more to raise their knowledge and understanding of graduate employment?

YES

NO

If 'YES', please say how.



QUESTION 12

Please grade (using the 1-5 scale explained below) the value of following campus aids in raising your own knowledge and understanding of employment?

(Scale: 1 = Very Helpful; 2 = Helpful; 3 = Of Some Help  
4 = Of Little Help; 5 = Of No Help)

PLEASE RING AS APPROPRIATE

a)	Recruitment Literature (Prospectuses, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
b)	General Careers Literature (Leaflets, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
c)	Computer Data base	1	2	3	4	5
d)	Careers Questionnaire (e.g. Gradscope)	1	2	3	4	5
e)	Careers Interviews	1	2	3	4	5
f)	Talks or presentations	1	2	3	4	5
g)	Awareness-raising workshops (e.g. on interviews)	1	2	3	4	5
h)	Careers Fairs (or similar)	1	2	3	4	5

QUESTION 13

Did you at any stage of your undergraduate course consider doing postgraduate study?

YES

NO

If 'YES', was this because:

a) You considered it important to our career progress?

b) You had a particular interest in your academic subject?

(Please tick as appropriate)

Were you encouraged to consider doing postgraduate study by:

Academic staff

Careers Advisers

Friends or Family

QUESTION 13 (continued)

Did you investigate possible postgraduate courses or research fields?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'YES', did you find information and advice sources on this adequate?

YES	NO
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'NO', in what respects was provision deficient?

QUESTION 14

Have you found work stressful in any of the following respects?

a) Physically	YES	NO
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please say how.

b) Intellectually	YES	NO
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please say how.

c) Emotionally	YES	NO
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please say how.



ABOUT YOURSELF

- a) MALE  FEMALE   
 (Please tick as appropriate)

b) Your age

c) Your Degree Title

d) Your Degree Subject(s)

e) Your Class of Degree (1st; 2(i), etc)  1st.  2(i)  2(ii)

f) Did you graduate from: (please tick as appropriate)

An 'Established' University

A 'New' University (Polytechnic)

A College of H.E.

g) Please give:

(i) Your Father's occupation

(ii) Your Mother's occupation

h) Please give your Job-title and place of work

QUESTION 1

Do you think that most applicants you interview for graduate posts are realistic in their anticipations of employment?

		<u>PLEASE TICK</u>		
		YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a)	In your organisation as a whole	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b)	Regarding aspects of the work environment (including pay and conditions)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c)	Regarding constituent tasks of the job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d)	Regarding training and promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

QUESTION 2

Do you think that the selection process (from application form onwards) makes applicants more realistic?

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'YES', please say which parts, and how.

QUESTION 3

Do you think that your graduate recruitment literature is strong in conveying:

		YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a)	Constituent job tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b)	Aspects of the work environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c)	Training and promotion prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d)	Corporate ethos	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How might your literature be altered to increase realism?

QUESTION 4

Do you think that work experience helps applicants to assess your organisation realistically?

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'YES', please say in what respects.

If 'NO', please say why not.

QUESTION 5

How could applicants help themselves to be more realistic about employment in general?

QUESTION 6

Which four characteristics do you particularly favour among applicants for graduate posts? (Not necessarily in order).

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)



QUESTION 7

Which four things which your organisation offers to you think most attract applicants for your graduate posts?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)

QUESTION 8

Do most applicants for graduate posts properly appraise their own abilities?

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'NO', how do they fail to do this?

QUESTION 9

a) Given the necessary resources, could Higher Education Careers Advisory Services better promote realism among students?

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'YES', what more could they do?

QUESTION 9 continued

b) Do academic staff adequately promote realism among students?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'NO', what more could they do?

QUESTION 10

Is it your impression that, after a few months at work, graduate recruits have become more realistic?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'YES', please say in which respects particularly.

if 'NO', please say in which respects.

QUESTION 11

Do you consult any outside agency (such as H.E. institutions) before producing your graduate recruitment literature?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'YES', please say what sort.

How is this consultation helpful?

QUESTION 12  
AGREE/DISAGREE SECTION

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:

- |                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 = Agree strongly          | 4 = Disagree generally |
| 2 = Agree is generally true | 5 = Disagree strongly  |
| 3 = Not Sure/Don't Know     |                        |

A) DO YOU THINK THAT MOST FINAL YEAR UNDERGRADUATES:

Please enter 1-5  
as appropriate

- |   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| 1) Gather enough careers information                  | <input type="text"/> |
| 2) Can evaluate careers information properly          | <input type="text"/> |
| 3) Are unduly influenced by images of work            | <input type="text"/> |
| 4) Are unduly influenced by the prevailing job-market | <input type="text"/> |
| 5) Apply for work suited to their capacities.         | <input type="text"/> |

B) DO YOU THINK THAT MOST RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS:

- |   |                      |
|---|----------------------|
| 1) Are satisfied with their level of autonomy       | <input type="text"/> |
| 2) Are satisfied with the training they receive     | <input type="text"/> |
| 3) Have difficulty adjusting to working with others | <input type="text"/> |
| 4) Have difficulty learning work methods            | <input type="text"/> |

- |                        |                   |                      |                |                      |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| 5) Find work stressful | a) Physically     | <input type="text"/> | b) Emotionally | <input type="text"/> |
|                        | c) Intellectually | <input type="text"/> |                |                      |



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1) In which employment sector is your organisation?

Public

Private

2) How many people does it employ?

1 - 100

100 - 500

500 - 1,000

1,000 - 3,000

3,000 - 10,000

Over 10,000

3) What is your organisation's main function?

Business/Finance

Information

Retail/Distribution

Technical/Scientific

Artistic/Creative

Health/Caring

Administration

Hotel/Catering

Legal

Engineering/Construction

Other

If 'Other', please say what.

LETTER SOLICITING THE HELP OF CAREERS ADVISERS

19 Birkdale Green,  
Alwoodley,  
LEEDS.  
LS17 6SP.

Dear Sir,

I am writing to request your co-operation in a research project I am undertaking through the Department of Educational Studies at the University of York.

The project is an investigation of how realistically British students anticipate their first graduate-level employment. I believe that this issue is worth investigating, because of its potential to improve policy and practice:

- 1) Many students may have a mistaken picture of work, leading them to select careers and jobs on false premises.
- 2) A high proportion of graduates leave their first employer within five years. This study may help identify the reasons, and whether remedies are desirable or possible.
- 3) The study's evidence might encourage funding agencies, such as Central or Local Government, to redistribute resources more constructively.

I hope that you would like to participate in the project. If so, I shall be pleased if you will complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope. All information or opinions offered will be treated completely confidentially, and used only for the purposes of the study.

If you have any questions about the project, I shall be pleased to try to answer them. Feel free to contact me during working hours on (0924) 296658.

If for any reason you feel unable to participate, it will help if you let me know as soon as possible, as I can then contact other organisations.

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully,

Paul Greer.

GRADUATE RECRUITMENT

CAREERS ADVISER QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete as much of this Questionnaire as you can, and return it completed to:

Paul Greer  
19, Birkdale Green,  
Alwoodley,  
Leeds  
LS17 7SP

in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope.

All answers will be treated confidentially.



QUESTION 1

Do you think that most students you interview have realistic anticipations of graduate employment?

		<u>Please Tick</u>		
		YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a)	In Organisations generally	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b)	Regarding aspects of the work environment (including pay and conditions)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c)	Regarding constituent tasks of the job(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d)	Regarding training and promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

QUESTION 2

Do you think that the selection process for jobs (from application form onwards) makes students more realistic?

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If 'YES', please say which parts, and how.

QUESTION 3

Do you think that graduate recruitment literature is strong in conveying:

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a) Constituent job tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Aspects of the work environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Training and promotion prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Corporate ethos	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

How might literature be altered to increase realism?

QUESTION 4

Do you think that work experience helps applicants to assess recruiting organisations realistically?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'YES', please say in what respects.

If 'NO', please say why not.

QUESTION 5

How could students help themselves to be more realistic about graduate employment in general?

QUESTION 6

Which four characteristics do you think graduate recruiters favour among applicants for posts? (Not necessarily in order)

1)

2)

3)

4)

QUESTION 7

Which four things offered by graduate recruiters do you think appeal most to applicants?

1)

2)

3)

4)

QUESTION 8

Do most students applying for graduate posts properly assess their own abilities?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'NO', how do they fail to do this?

QUESTION 9

a) Given the necessary resources, could your service better promote realism among students?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'YES', what more could they do?



QUESTION 9 (continued)

- b) Do you think academic staff at your institution adequately promote realism among students?

YES

NO

DON'T,  
KNOW

If 'NO', please say in which respects.

QUESTION 10

From the feedback you receive from alumni and graduate recruiters, is it your impression that after a few months at work, graduate recruits are more realistic?

YES

NO

DON'T  
KNOW

If 'YES', please say in which respects particularly.

If 'NO', please say in which respects.

QUESTION 11

Does general (i.e. non-recruitment) careers material adequately represent the following in the occupations it covers?

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a) Range of jobs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Job tasks and objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Professional ethos	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Sources of satisfaction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Promotion prospects	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Material rewards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

QUESTION 12

Do students use each of the following On-Campus Careers Information sources well?

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
a) Recruitment Literature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) General careers literature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Computer database	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Careers Information staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Careers Advisors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Academic staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

QUESTION 13

Do most students realistically assess:

a) Their prospects of doing postgraduate study:

YES                      NO                      DON'T  
KNOW

--	--	--

b) The occupational value of doing it:

YES                      NO                      DON'T  
KNOW

--	--	--

Please elaborate if you wish:



QUESTION 14  
AGREE/DISAGREE SECTION

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements. The scale is:

- 1 = Agree strongly
- 2 = Agree is generally true
- 3 = Not sure/Don't know
- 4 = Disagree generally
- 5 = Disagree strongly

A) DO YOU THINK THAT MOST FINAL YEAR UNDERGRADUATES:

Please enter 1 - 5 as appropriate

- 1) Gather enough careers information
- 2) Can evaluate careers information properly
- 3) Are unduly influenced by images of work
- 4) Are unduly influenced by the prevailing job-market
- 5) Apply for work suited to their capacities

B) DO YOU THINK THAT MOST RECENT GRADUATE ENTRANTS:

- 1) Are satisfied with their level of autonomy
- 2) Are satisfied with the training they receive
- 3) Have difficulty adjusting to working with others
- 4) Have difficulty learning work methods
- 5) Find work stressful
  - a) Physically
  - b) Emotionally
  - c) Intellectually

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In this final section, I shall be pleased if you will offer a little information about yourself.

- 1) What is your Job Title?
- 2) Which Student Groups/Departments/Faculties do you deal with?
- 3) How long have you been a Careers Advisor in Higher Education?

Less than 3 years

3 - 5 years

5 - 10 years

Over 10 years

- 4) Were you previously employed

In Education

In Industry/Commerce

BOTH

(Please tick both boxes if appropriate)

## EMPLOYER QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS

BBC  
Binder Hamlyn  
British Gas  
The Burton Group  
Cargill U.K. Ltd.  
Clarks Shoes Ltd.  
Computing Devices  
Debenhams PLC  
Dixons Stores Group  
Esso Group of Companies  
Ferranti International  
Ford Motor Company Ltd.  
Hilton International  
Hobsons Publishing PLC  
Jaguar Cars Ltd.  
John Laing PLC  
Lucas Industries PLC  
McDonald's Restaurants Ltd.  
Mercury Communications Ltd.  
Ministry of Defence (Navy)  
Nationwide Anglia Building Society  
Natwest  
Norwich Union  
Pall Europe Group of Companies  
Pirelli General PLC  
Plessey Company PLC  
Police  
The Post Office  
Powergen  
Quaker Oats Ltd.  
Rank, Hovis, McDougall PLC  
Raychem Ltd.  
Royal Air Force  
J. Sainsbury PLC  
Schlumberger Industries & Technologies  
Taylor Woodrow Construction Ltd.  
Tennent Caledonian Breweries Ltd.  
Thames Water  
Thorn EMI  
Trafalgar House Group PLC  
Vickers Shipbuilding & Engineering Ltd.  
W. H. Smith Ltd.  
Weir Pumps Ltd.



H.E. INSTITUTIONS FROM WHOSE CAREERS ADVISERS  
COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRES WERE RETURNED

'ESTABLISHED' UNIVERSITIES

Aberdeen  
Aston  
Birmingham  
Bristol  
Dundee  
Durham  
Edinburgh  
Exeter  
Glasgow  
Keele  
Kent  
Liverpool  
London  
Manchester  
Reading  
Salford

COLLEGES OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION

Anglia H.E. College  
Bath College of H.E.  
Bretton Hall College  
Canterbury Christ Church College  
of H.E.  
Cheltenham and Gloucester College  
of H.E.  
Edge Hill College of H.E.  
King Alfred's College, Winchester  
Luton College of H.E.  
Nene College  
Trinity College, Carmarthen  
West Glamorgan Institute of H.E.  
West London Institute of H.E.  
West Sussex Institute of H.E.

'NEW' UNIVERSITIES

Anglia  
Brighton  
Central England  
Coventry  
De Montford  
Glamorgan  
Liverpool John Moores  
Middlesex  
Northumbria at Newcastle  
Nottingham Trent  
Plymouth  
Portsmouth  
South Bank

RECRUITERS FROM WHICH COMPLETED GRADUATE  
QUESTIONNAIRES WERE RECEIVED

Allen and Overy  
The Army  
Arthur Andersen  
ASW Holdings PLC  
W. S. Atkins  
Bank of Scotland  
Barclays Bank  
BIS Group  
British Sugar PLC  
C and A  
Coopers and Lybrand  
Cortaulds PLC  
Data Connection  
Easams Ltd.  
East Midlands Electricity PLC  
Gillette U.K. Ltd.  
K3 Group Ltd.  
London Underground Ltd.  
M. W. Kellogg Ltd.  
L. G. Mouchel Ltd.  
NFC PLC  
The Probation Service  
Redland Roof Tiles Ltd.  
Reuters Ltd.  
Shipley Blackburn  
Sony

ORGANISATIONS WHOSE GRADUATE PROSPECTUSES  
WERE ANALYSED IN CHAPTER 4

The Army  
Barclays Bank PLC  
The Boots Company  
British Airways  
C and A  
Cameron Markby Hewitt  
The Civil Service  
Department of Education and Science  
Du Pont (U.K.) Ltd.  
Eagle Star  
Fisons  
Glaxo Group Research Ltd.  
ICL  
KPMG Peat Marwick McLintock  
Marks and Spencer  
Mercury Communications  
Mowlem Group  
National Westminster Bank  
Norwich Union Group  
Pfizer Ltd.  
The Police Service  
Price Waterhouse  
Rank Xerox Ltd.  
Rolls-Royce PLC  
Royal Air Force  
Sainsbury's  
Shell  
Stoy Hayward  
United Biscuits  
Warwick International Ltd.



**ILLUSTRATIONS FROM GRADUATE PROSPECTUSES**  
**CHOSEN TO EMPHASISE OBSERVATIONS MADE**  
**IN CHAPTER 4**

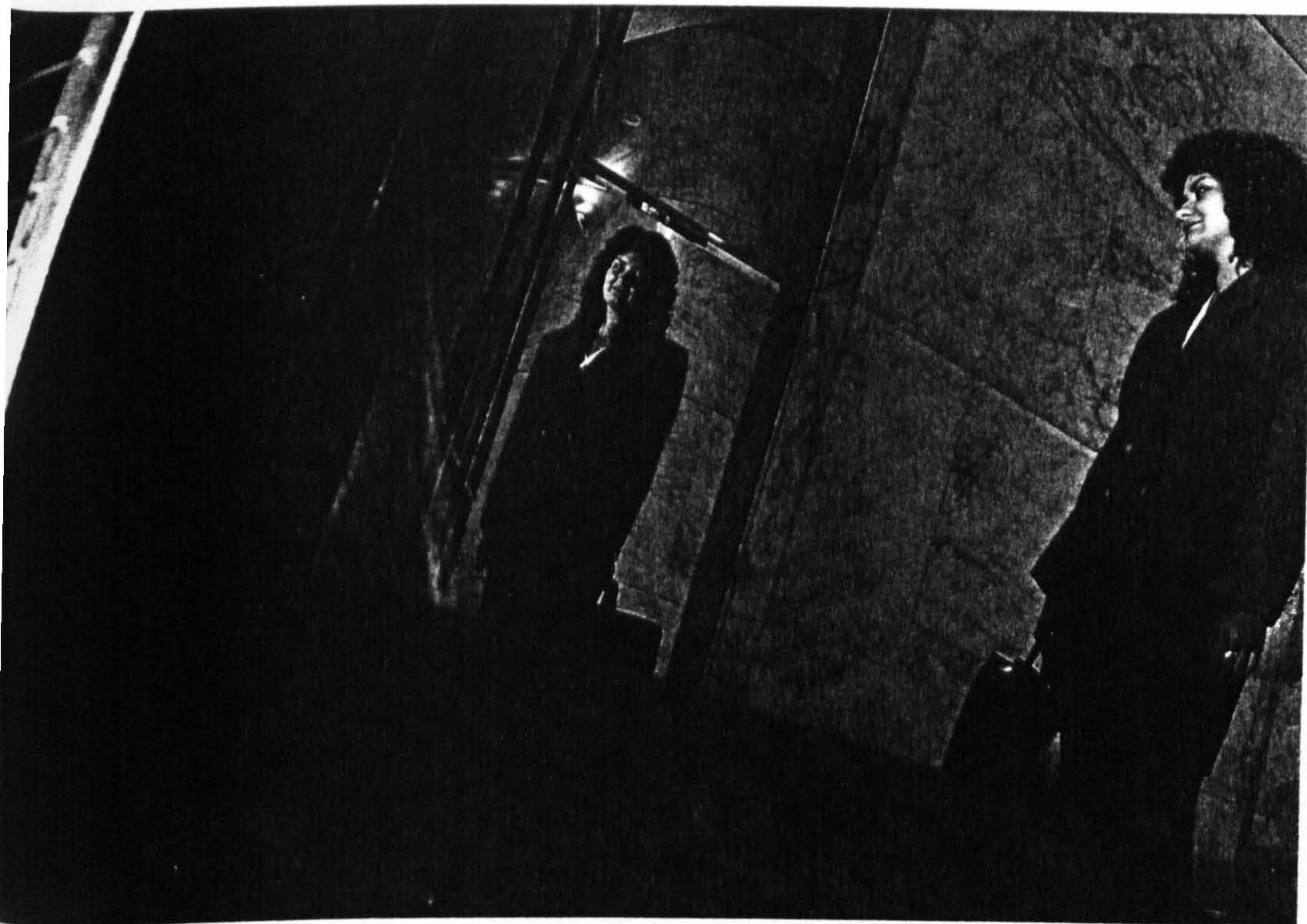
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AVAILABLE**

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quality**



## PERSONAL IMPACT

Anna Lucas joined NatWest Insurance Services on Scheme C in 1990. She'd already worked in retailing, and although she discovered it wasn't for her, it helped her clarify what she did want from her career.



*"The whole basis on which I made the decision to enter retailing was wrong. I was looking for customer contact and I just didn't realise the extent — or the quality — of customer relationships in banking."*

Spring 1989

**Receive job offers from NatWest and a major retailer: accept the retailer.**

Spring 1990

**Visit NatWest to discuss career change.**

September 1990

**Start work at NWIS Motor Division in Bristol.**

January 1991

**Move to Renewals and Adjustments.**

April 1991

**A week's attachment to Accounts, followed by a move to Claims Handling.**

*"The UK's always been a centre of excellence for insurance, and with the Single European Market, insurance is ready to take off. Confidence in the industry is high, and that reflects the profits it makes. Although it's an invisible earner, it's a significant factor in the British economy."*

*"I suppose I felt a bit sheepish, admitting I'd made a mistake, but the Graduate Recruitment people couldn't have been more helpful. The thing they were most concerned about was whether I was really sure this time round. So after my chat in London, I went down to Bristol to meet the people there. It gave me the chance to see for myself what it would be like."*

*"The atmosphere is electric, very charged. There's the thrill you get from tackling a problem and actually solving it. The phones are going the whole time, people are always asking you questions, you never know what might come up. If you're looking for peace and quiet, don't even consider it."*



Is development an exciting place to work?

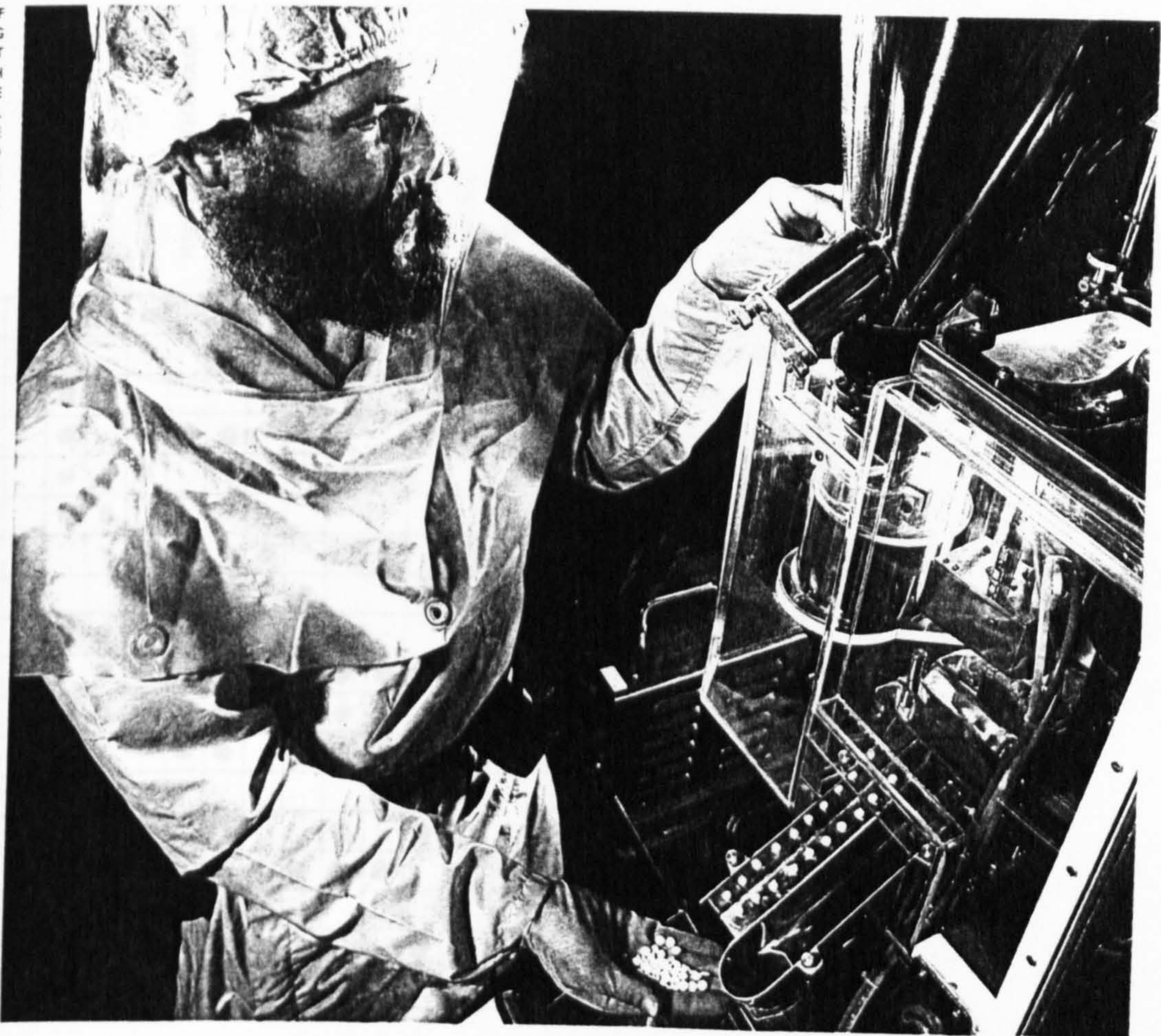
RELEVANT  
DISCIPLINES

## DEVELOPMENT

*Drug development encompasses all those activities which are needed to convert potential new drugs into safe, effective, acceptable medicines.*

*Stringent safety studies in animals, cell and tissue cultures take place long before the drug is administered to people - first to volunteers and later to patients. Drug*

MANUFACTURE OF CLINICAL SUPPLIES USING A HIGH SPEED TABLET PRESS WITH COMPACTION FORCE MONITOR. PHYSICAL PARAMETERS ARE CLOSELY MONITORED DURING MANUFACTURE TO ENSURE THE BEST POSSIBLE PRODUCT QUALITY.



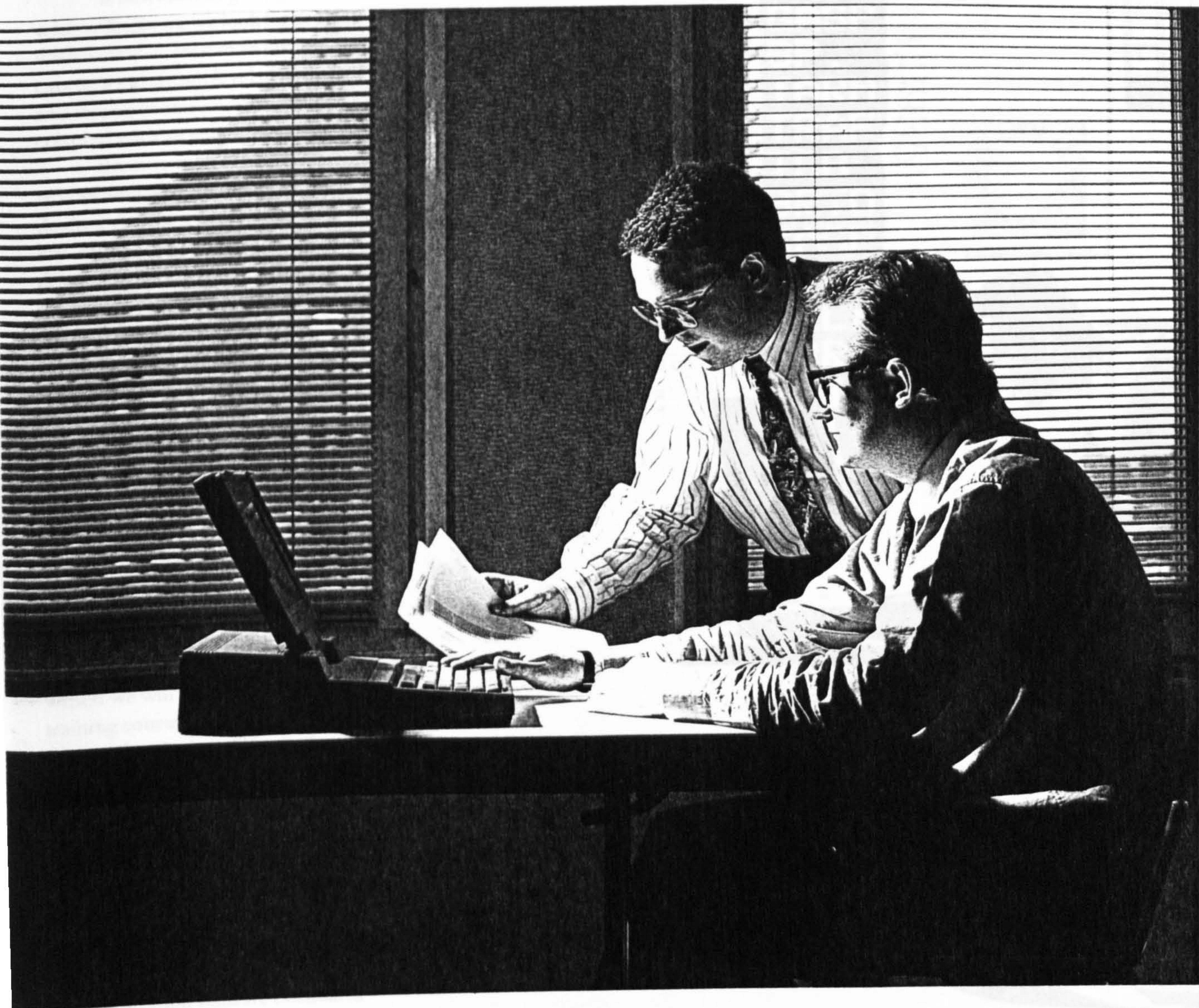


# RELEVANT DISCIPLINES

*This is a brief guide to the work areas for your degree discipline. However, we can be flexible; if you feel that your aspirations would best be met in a different area, we are happy to discuss alternatives.*

Degree Disciplines	APPLIED BIOLOGY	BACTERIOLOGY	BIOCHEMISTRY	CELL BIOLOGY	CHEMISTRY	FERMENTATION TECHNOLOGY	GENETICS	MATHEMATICAL SUBJECTS	MICROBIOLOGY	PHARMACOLOGY	PHARMACY	PHYSIOLOGY	VIROLOGY	ZOOLOGY	OTHER SPECIALISED SUBJECTS	Work Areas
					●											ANALYTICAL CHEMISTRY
	●	●	●						●			●				ANTI-INFECTIVE CHEMOTHERAPY
			●							●		●				BIOCHEMISTRY
			●		●	●	●		●							BIOTECHNOLOGY/GENETICS
	●		●		●					●						BIOCHEMICAL PHARMACOLOGY
			●	●											●	CELL BIOLOGY/ONCOLOGY
								●								COMPUTING (INFORMATION SYSTEMS)
							●		●						●	HISTOPATHOLOGY
			●	●											●	IMMUNOBIOLOGY
	●		●	●	●				●	●	●			●		INFORMATION SERVICES
	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	MEDICAL DIVISION/MEDICAL STATISTICS
		●	●			●	●		●							MICROBIAL BIOCHEMISTRY
											●					PHARMACEUTICAL RESEARCH
			●						●			●				PHARMACOLOGY
			●	●	●		●		●	●	●					REGULATORY AFFAIRS/PLANNING
					●											SYNTHETIC ORGANIC CHEMISTRY
	●											●		●	●	TOXICOLOGY
		●					●						●			VIROLOGY/VIRAL BIOCHEMISTRY





any business  
... fundamental aspect of  
... knowledge and professional  
... qualifications and there is no fixed  
... minimum salary.  
... An agreed goal, you should be  
... ready to become an Investment Analyst  
... Fund Manager after a further 2-3 years  
... and a Fund Manager after two years  
... after that.  
... It's hard work, but professionally  
... and financially rewarding a small  
... team of investment specialists which is  
... among the best in the business offers  
... exceptional rates.



## Investment Analysts

When choosing the graduates who will join us, we look for people with a clear interest in an investment career, a significant level of numeracy and strong communicative skills coupled with an enquiring mind.

Because each of Eagle Star Investment Management's main dealing desks requires specialist knowledge, we do not offer a general development programme. Instead, training is conducted by Fund Managers and is oriented as much toward filling a specific requirement as it is to developing tomorrow's fund managers.

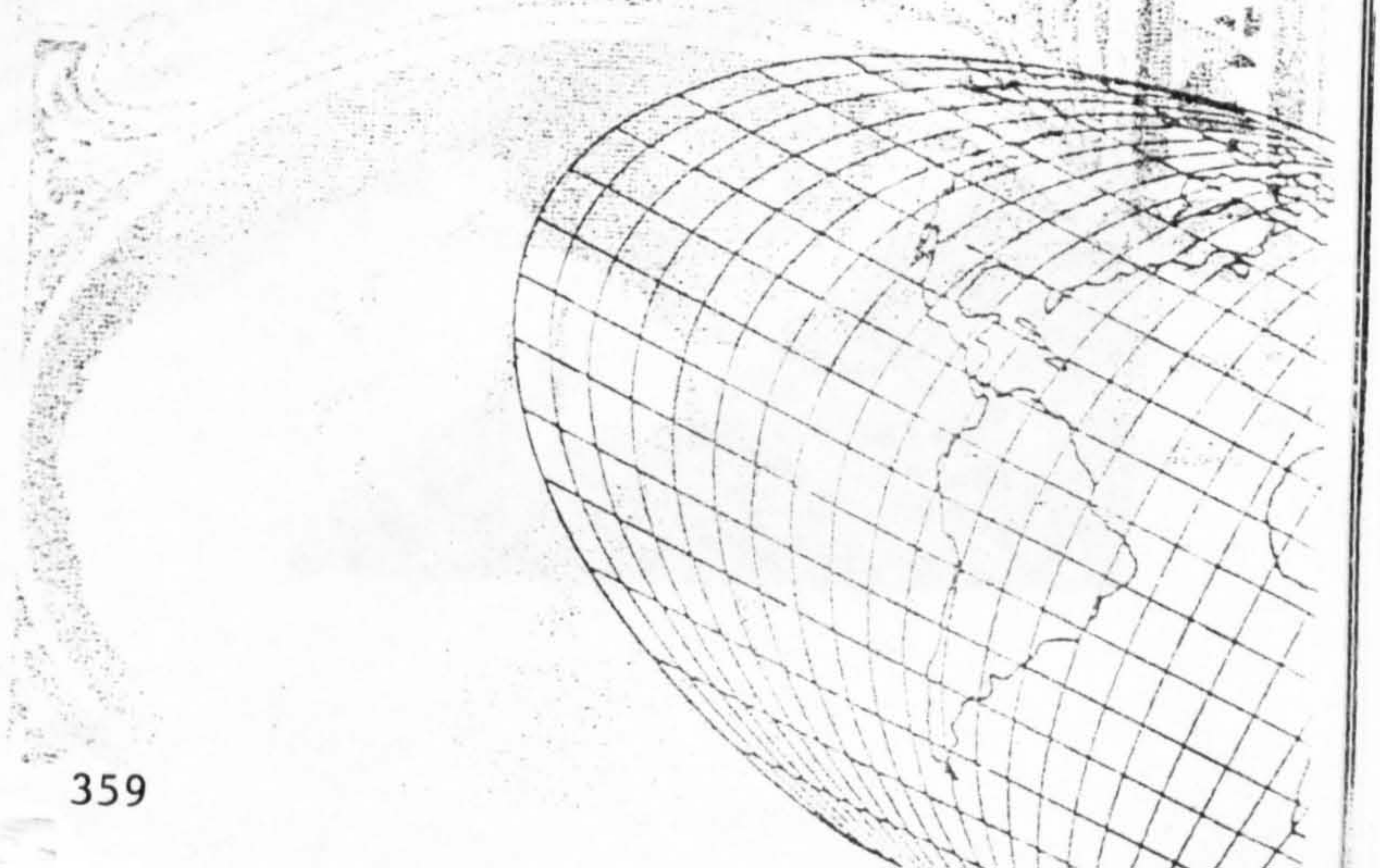
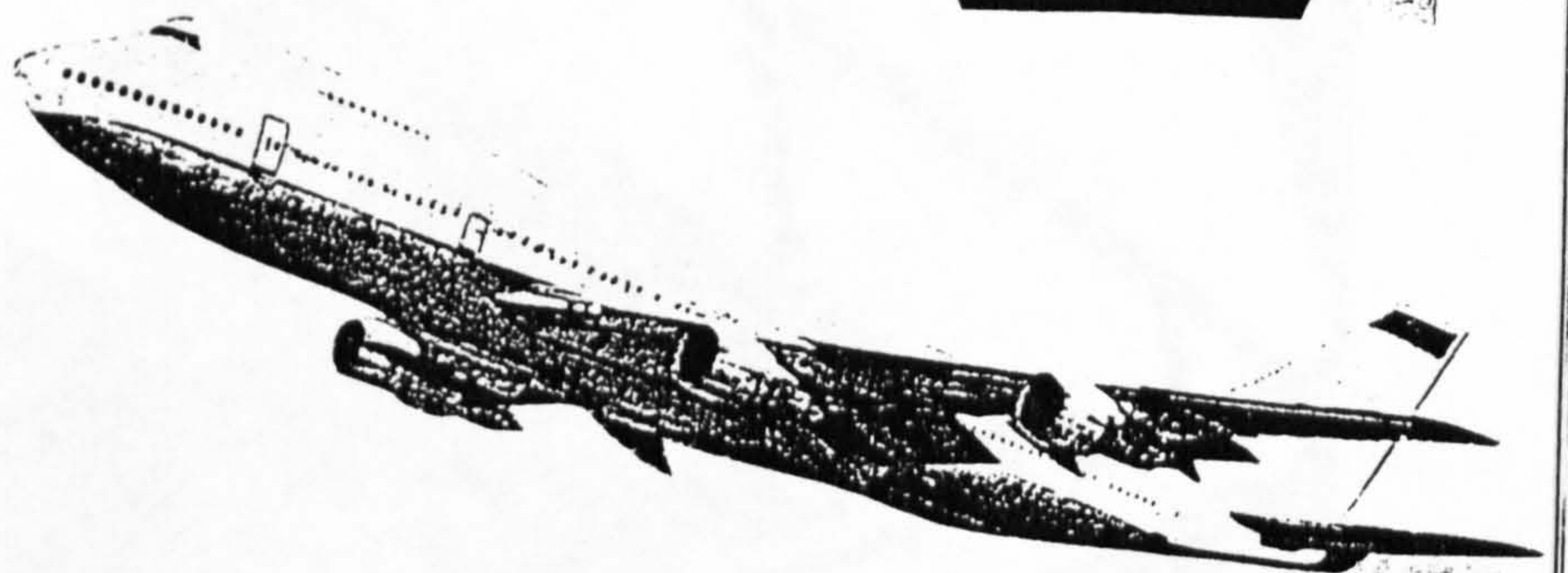
You'll join us as a graduate trainee, essentially the eyes and ears of the Fund Manager handling your training. During the course of your training you will have the opportunity to learn a little about the various support functions. You will also be required to study for the Society of Investment Analyst examinations, for which we will make an external training course available.

After that, you'll begin the vital job of gathering the detailed knowledge of companies and their markets without which sound decisions involving many millions of pounds cannot be made. You'll then have to communicate your findings either orally or in report form to those making the investment decisions. Good communication skills are essential in our business.

It takes several years of dedication to acquire the necessary knowledge and professional qualifications, and there is no fixed promotion ladder.

As a general guide, you should be ready to become an Investment Analyst after about two years, an Assistant Fund Manager after a further 2-3 years and a Fund Manager some two years after that.

It's hard work, but professionally and financially, membership of a small team of investment specialists which is among the best in the business offers exceptional rewards.



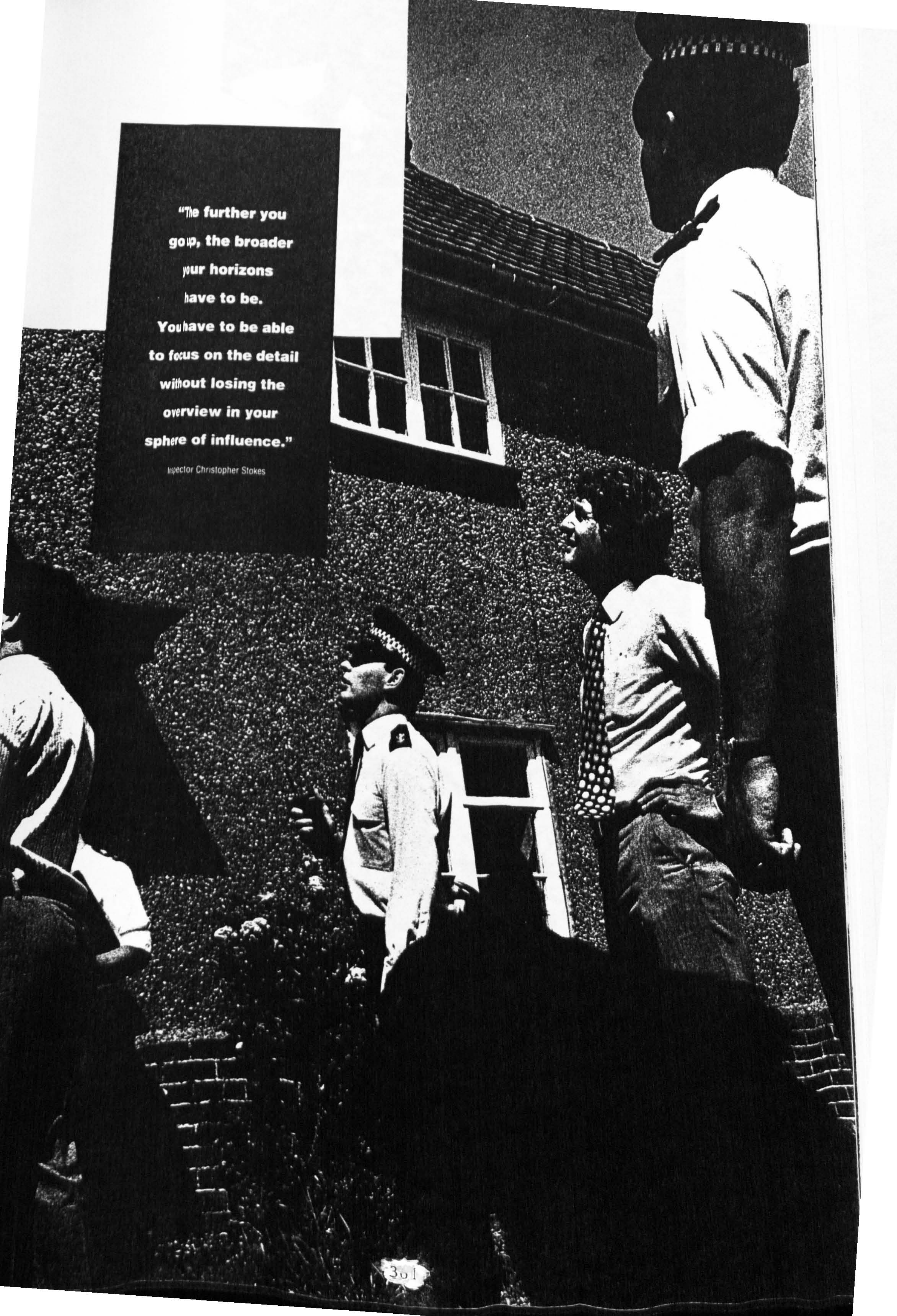






**"The further you  
go up, the broader  
your horizons  
have to be.  
You have to be able  
to focus on the detail  
without losing the  
overview in your  
sphere of influence."**

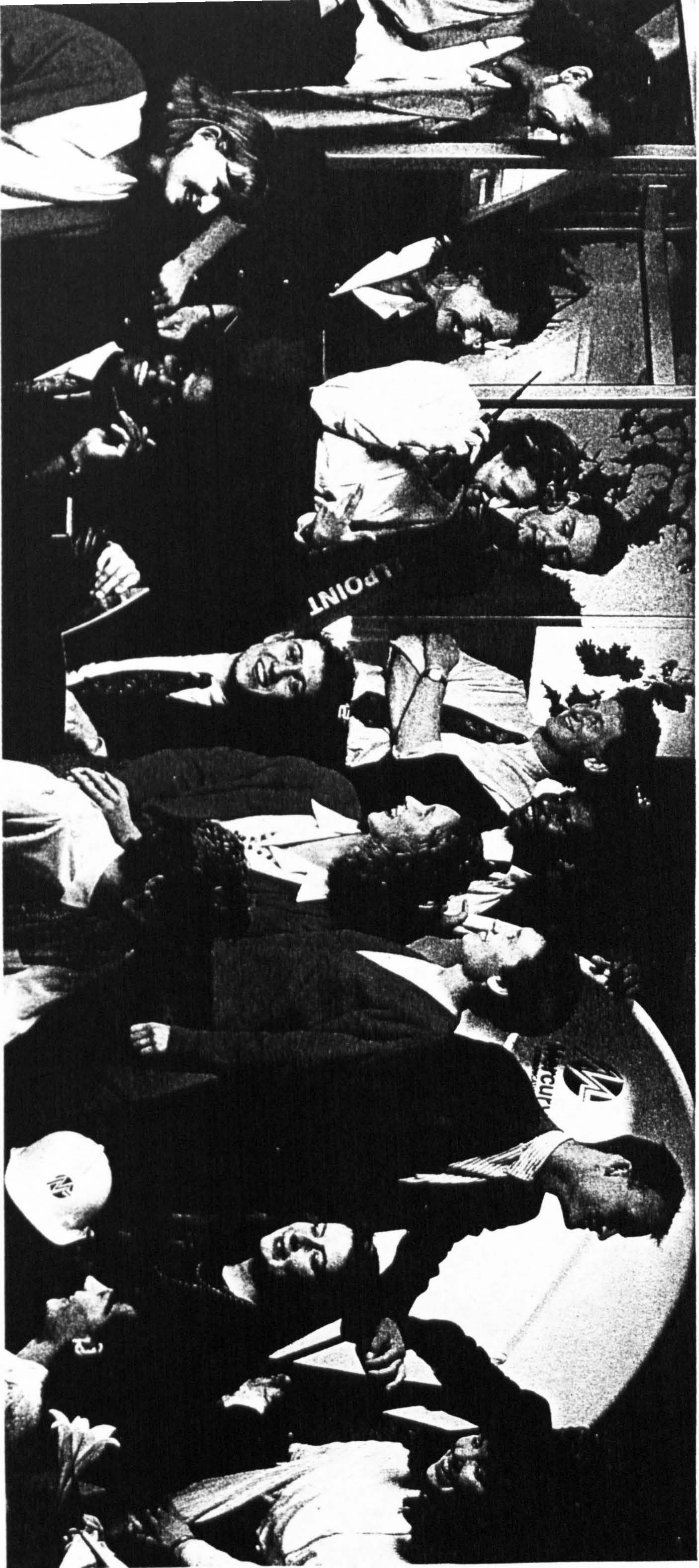
*Inspector Christopher Stokes*





*the business of communication*

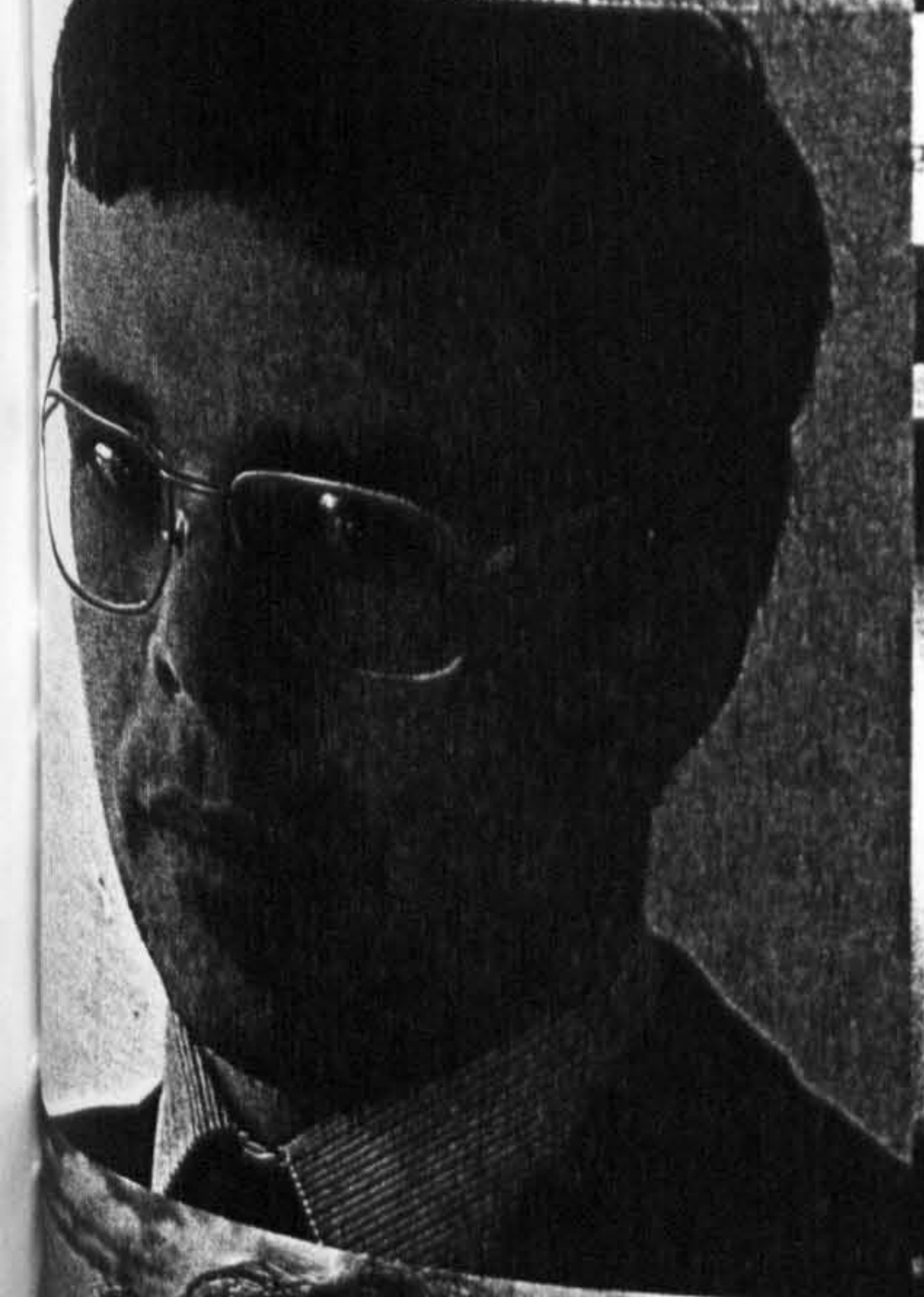
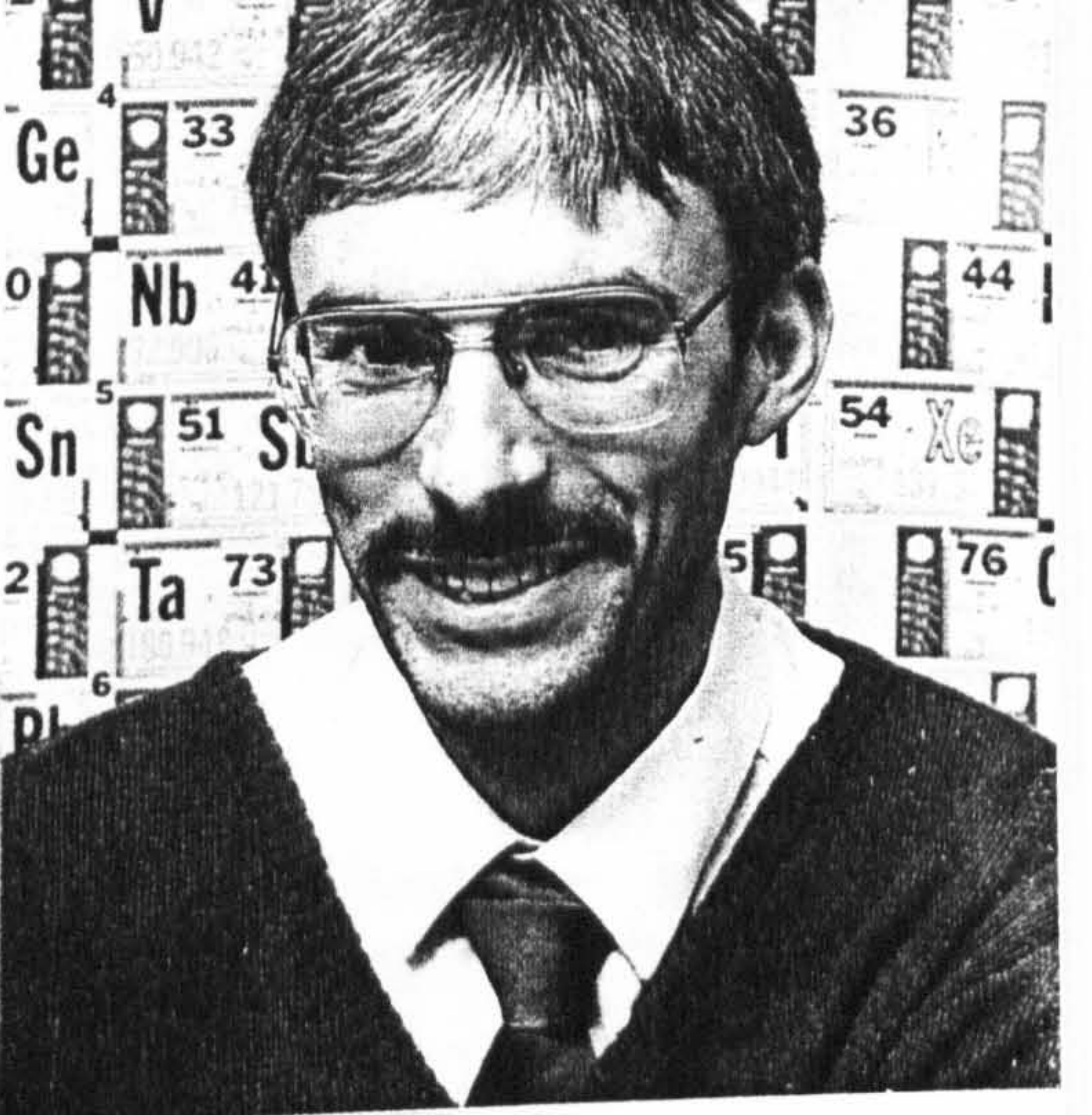
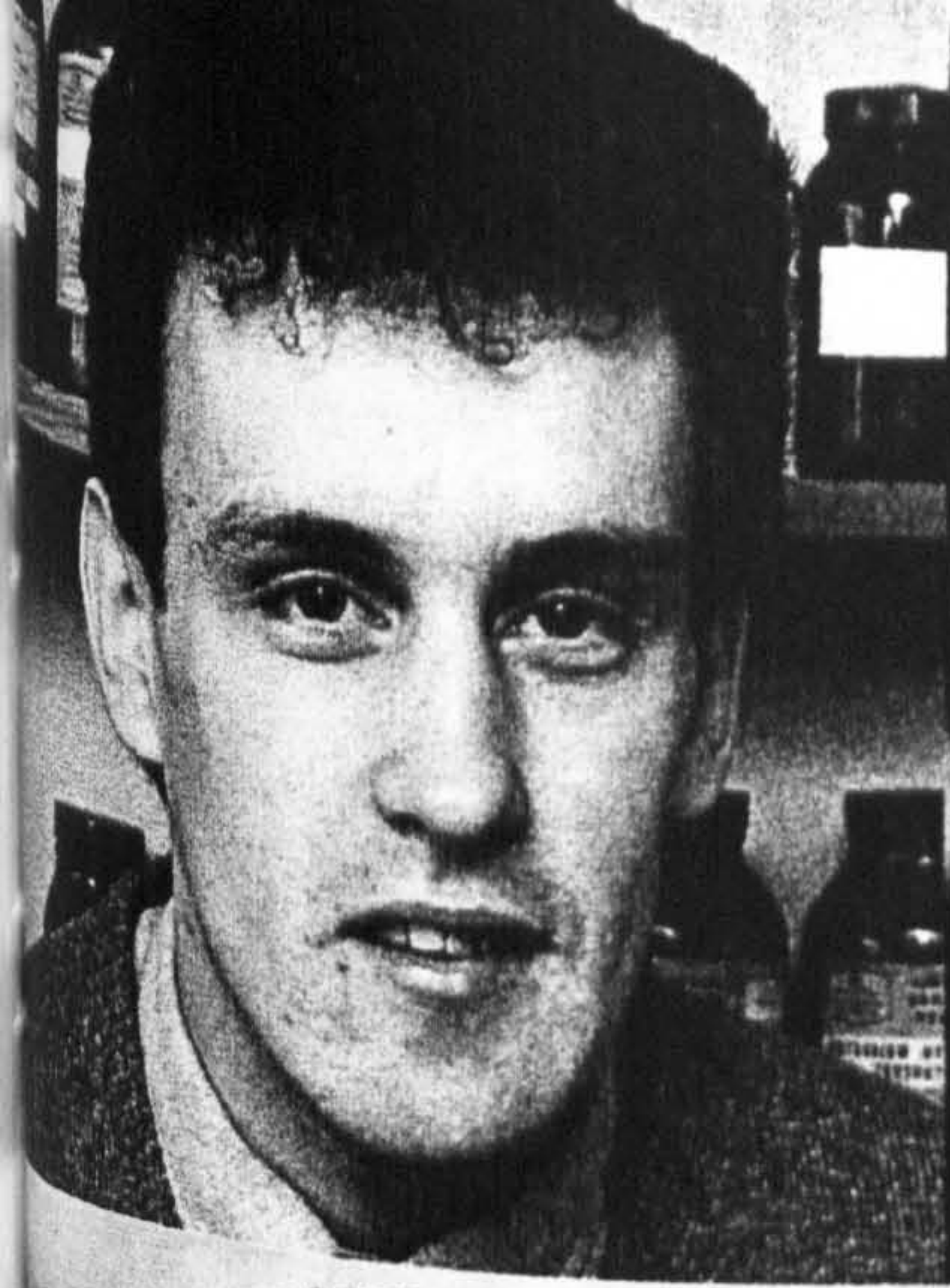
GRADUATE CAREERS













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