

Education for All?

Further Education, Social Inclusion and Widening Access

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1 Introduction: Context, Aims and Objectives

1.1 Introduction

'Education For All?' was a one-year project funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), and now by the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department of the Scottish Executive, to look at factors which influence participation and non-participation in a range of Further Education (FE) provision in Scotland. In particular, emphasis was placed on identifying innovative courses which were 'aimed at introducing or re-engaging people, including those at risk of social exclusion, with education, training and lifelong learning' (SOEID, 1998). This project recognises the important role FE has to play in promoting social inclusion through lifelong learning, education and training. Although funded by the Scottish Office with a focus on FE in Scotland this study combined researchers from both Scotland (Glasgow Caledonian University) and England (University of Warwick).

1.2 Lifelong learning and social inclusion

The context of the study is the growing emphasis which has been placed on widening access to education and training in educational policy in recent years. This emphasis on widening access has been a feature of educational policy over the past fifteen years, and can be seen in earlier initiatives, such as the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) (SED, 1987). However the recent emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning (LL) has also led to the recognition of the importance of the 'learning divide' which must be tackled if social divisions are not to become deeper within the 'knowledge economy' (Fryer, 1997). This has led to the recognition of policies designed to ensure that groups who are in most danger of social exclusion are enabled to participate in education and training and through this to improve their position within the labour market and escape from problems of poverty and social deprivation.

A growing emphasis on lifelong learning and social inclusion has been a major theme of educational policy, not just in the UK, but in many other countries throughout the world (EC, 1995; Walters, 1997; DfEE, 1998; Scottish Office, 1998a). These agendas have emerged in response to fundamental changes in economy and society as traditional labour-intensive jobs have declined with the rise of the information society, technology and globalised capitalism (Castells, 1996).

Lifelong learning is associated with the need to upgrade and re-skill people to meet the needs of a changing economy within a post-industrial society:

Creating a culture of lifetime learning is crucial to sustaining and maintaining our international competitiveness...The skill levels of the workforce are vital to our national competitiveness. Rapid technological and organisational change mean that, however good initial education is, it must be continuously reinforced by further learning throughout working life. (Department for Education and Employment, 1995: 3, 4)

This theme has been emphasised in the recent major policy documents on LL. Thus the DfEE Green Paper on LL refers to the fundamental change which is taking place in society, and the need for a response through education and training:

We are in a new age - the age of information and global competition...The types of jobs we do have changed, as have the industries in which we work and the skills they need.... We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination. (DfEE, 1998: 9)

Opportunity Scotland (Scottish Office 1998a), a Green Paper on Lifelong Learning issued by the Scottish Office in September 1998 outlines the need to move Scotland towards becoming a Learning Society. Particular emphasis is placed on increasing the percentage of the workforce with qualifications at Levels 2 and 3, as it is at these levels that Scotland is deemed to perform badly when compared to international competitors and other parts of the UK.

However, the promotion of lifelong learning has been against a background of evidence of widening social inequalities in society whereby the gap between those who have skills and those who do not has increased as the knowledge 'haves' continue to gain most from participation in education (Fryer, 1997). This problem has also been recognised in the EC White Paper on Education and Training (EC, 1995), and more recently by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Training (1999) which explored the gap between the 'knowledge haves' and 'have-nots'. The individual possession of skills and knowledge has become essential if social exclusion and marginalisation are to be avoided in a knowledge society (Castells, 1996). This raises issues of power and social inequality, as those who are socially excluded from education and society are also the disadvantaged and often powerless groups. Education and learning has the potential to 'change people's lives, even transform them' (Fryer, 1997: 24) and give them an economic and political voice through participation in the labour market and democratisation in their lives through citizenship. However, a crucial question is to explore the processes through which this can most effectively be achieved.

This has led to a growing recognition that policies to promote social inclusion must be a central element in the lifelong learning agenda (EC, 1995; Fryer, 1997; Scottish Office, 1999a). The social inclusion strategy has been developed alongside the lifelong learning agenda. It is part of a wider agenda which is designed to achieve a 'vision', in which all citizens, whatever his or her social or economic background, have opportunities to participate as fully as possible in society, and enjoy a high quality of life. While it is clear that to achieve this a wide-ranging programme of action is needed encompassing childcare, housing, employment, health and crime, it has been recognised that education and LL have a central place in this agenda (Scottish Office, 1999a). Within the social inclusion discourse a number of elements can be identified. First, there is the need to promote social equity. However, this is also closely linked to the need to promote greater equality in opportunities to participate in the labour market:

The Government also believes that lifelong learning has a major contribution to make in promoting social inclusion. Opportunities to learn through vocational training or Further Education in general can improve the skills and employability of those seeking work, while less formal community education can provide the first steps into wider opportunities to participate in work and learning. (Scottish Office, 1999a)

The social inclusion strategy is being implemented through a number of measures which have been put in place by the Scottish Executive. It has established a Social Inclusion Unit, the Scottish Social Inclusion Network and a number of Strategy Action Teams. Each of these teams focuses on a key area of social inclusion policy including

excluded young people; the building of inclusive communities; and the impact of local anti-poverty action. The training and education needs of the 16-18 age group, and proposed responses, have also been outlined in the recent *Opportunities and Choices* Consultation Paper (Scottish Office, 1999c). The document sets out two goals: to raise the levels of skills in the workforce, and to help young people achieve their full potential. In some cases achievement of the latter goal can prevent young people from falling into the trap of social exclusion through low attainment, unemployment and subsequent disaffection (p2). The Beattie Report *Implementing Inclusiveness Realising Potential* (Scottish Executive 1999a) also focused on young people who, because of physical or learning disabilities, problems with mental health and well-being, or through alienation and disaffection may 'slip out' of society. The provision of education and training for this group was a key feature of the report, with FE having a significant role to play.

However, a number of researchers have argued that there is a danger that the concept of social inclusion can direct us away from the central problem of the underlying structural inequalities:

Social inclusion, like social exclusion, is becoming a politically attractive concept...it diverts attention away from the possible need for radical change and encourages compliance with the status quo. (Barry, 1998:5)

Preece (1999) has also argued that the driving force behind current social inclusion thinking is 'an attempt to 'normalise' the unemployed and disaffected'. Social inclusion may be viewed as an effort to include those on the margins into the very societal structures and inequalities which contribute to the very problem under investigation. This may involve little critique of the fundamental systems and structures (such as racism, gender inequality, poverty) which result in exclusion in the first place. These are criticisms which must be borne in mind when considering the strategies which are being pursued to tackle the problems of inequalities in educational achievement.

In a similar way, Coffield (1999) has encouraged us to look critically at the concept of lifelong learning, and argues that lifelong learning can be viewed as a form of social control. It can result in an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to equip oneself throughout life with the appropriate skills needed for employment, and ignore wider structural barriers which promote inequality. In this context, not taking the opportunity to train can be interpreted as a lack of commitment on the part of the individual. Focusing on lifelong learning may ignore the 'sharpening polarisation' in income and wealth in society. The danger becomes that a divide is increased between valuable (those who participate in lifelong learning) and invaluable people (Castells in Coffield 1999).

The critical analysis of lifelong learning and social inclusion encourages us to consider carefully the structural issues which must be considered if the goals of widening access to lifelong learning, and overcoming social exclusion are to be effectively addressed. It appears then that the central issue with regard to LL and social inclusion is the one of ensuring that the gap between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor is not increased. There is concern that if knowledge is the new form of capital, which brings economic advantage, what are the consequences for those with few skills and limited capacity for learning? There is concern that improvements in overall participation have led to a widening gap between the educational 'haves' and the educational 'have-nots' (House of Commons, 1999).

1.3 The role of Further Education

Recent developments have seen an increasing recognition of the key role of FE in widening access to education and training. This has been associated with wider changes in the role and function of FE within the post-compulsory sector over the last ten years.

This has led to a rise in status of FE provision, resulting from changes in the economy and society, and in educational policy (Gallacher and Thompson, 1999). Within the present political climate FE colleges are now clearly viewed as key institutions in widening access, and promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning in the context of economic and societal changes. The potential role of the colleges in providing opportunities for lifelong learning and implementing the social inclusion strategy has been outlined in a number of key reports and policy documents. The Kennedy Report, while focussing on FE in England, has had a UK-wide impact. This suggests that 'FE is the key to widening participation' (Kennedy, 1997: 28). It also refers to the 'progression opportunities' required by a 'self-perpetuating learning society', and the 'imaginative public and private partnerships' which 'have the potential to break through existing barriers and deliver the widening of participation' which FE can encourage (Kennedy, 1997: 28).

The Fryer Report advocates the need to establish a culture of LL, and recognises the role of FE colleges in achieving this goal:

If LLL is to become a reality, FE will lie at its heart. (Fryer, 1997: 73)

In this respect, the wide links FE colleges have already established with their local communities is recognised as being of importance:

This gives them [FE colleges] a unique opportunity to play a key role in local learning and partnerships, bringing their knowledge and provision with others. To do this effectively they need to review their own contact with local communities noting areas of under-representation from particular localities, groups or potential learners and adopting policy priorities to reach out to them. (Fryer, 1997: 13.13: 74)

The contribution of FE to LL is also recognised in the Green Papers published in 1998. The DfEE Green Paper (The Learning Age) states that 'FE colleges will play a key role in educating both young people and adults.' (DfEE 1998, Section 4.11), and goes on to '... agree that FE will be at the centre of widening participation...' (DfEE 1998, Section 4.16). A similar recognition of the role of the FE colleges can be found in the Scottish Green Paper which refers to them playing 'a pivotal role in Scotland's educational system, and to providing flexible access to post school education for a wide range of adults' (Scottish Office, 1998d: 19).

The contribution of FE to a 'learning society' has also been recognised in recent national reports on higher education. In the Dearing Report on 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' it is recommended that much of the expansion of higher education should be at what is referred to as 'sub-degree level' (Dearing, 1997: 100, Recommendation 1). Similarly in the Garrick Report the importance of the links between colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs) to the development of HE is recognised, and it is recommended that 'colleges and HEIs should actively collaborate to enhance and publicise access and articulation routes into degree programmes for students at further education colleges' (Garrick, 1997: 49, Section 4.62 and Recommendation 7).

This theme is also taken up in the University for Industry (Ufi) proposals in which the focus is on providing increased opportunities for people to gain access to education and training through creating new types of partnership (Ufi, 1998).

More recently the key contribution of the FE sector to widening access and promoting LL has been developed in the Strategic Framework for Further Education (Scottish Office, 1999d). This document states that 'FE colleges offer by far the most popular route into LLL'. It also refers to a 'Vision for Further Education':

Scotland's FE sector in the new millennium should form an accessible network of colleges, local learning centres, support agencies and flexible outreach arrangements, enabling people from every sector of the community to pursue lifelong learning for both vocational and personal development. (Scottish Office, 1999b)

There has also been particular recognition of the actual and potential contribution of FE to providing education and training opportunities for young people in the Scottish Office's Consultative Paper on Post School Provision for 16-18 year olds (Scottish Office, 1999c). This paper is designed to help develop a strategy for post-school education and training for young people and within this the role of the FE sector is clearly recognised. The Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC), the umbrella 'voice' of FE colleges in Scotland, argues that colleges are at the forefront of both local and national measures to combat both economic and social exclusion.

This emphasis can also be seen in the policy documents on social inclusion which have recently been produced by the government. They emphasise the need to 'widen participation in and demand for lifelong learning', and we have indicated above that within this FE is again identified as a key contributor (Scottish Office, 1999a).

As a result of social and economic changes and policy developments, significant change has taken place in the colleges during the 1980s and '90s and many colleges are now providing a range of learning opportunities for a wide cross-section of people in the communities in which they are based (Gallacher and Thompson, 1999; Gallacher *et al*, 1997; Raab and Davidson, 1999). The colleges have also moved from being a relatively neglected and undervalued sector to being one which has been given a key role in the lifelong learning and social inclusion agendas. The extent of the commitment to FE is shown by the investment of over £100m additional funding to the FE sector over the next three years to support an extra 40,000 student places (Scottish Office, 1999b).

1.4 Study context

Social and economic changes, together with the greater prominence now given to the FE sector, therefore, created the overall context for this research. The central questions that need to be considered are: the extent to which recent initiatives, particularly within further education colleges, have contributed to overcoming the 'learning divide'; to identify more clearly the factors which discourage participation in education and training; and to overcome the problems of social exclusion from both education and the labour market.

At present, there is relatively little in the way of systematic research into issues associated with participation in FE. The general problems of low rates of participation among certain social groups have been investigated in a number of research studies.

Munn and MacDonald's (1988) study, for example, shows that people in lower socio-economic groups, and those with lower levels of initial education are less likely to participate in post-compulsory education. They also suggest that negative experiences of schooling may result in negative attitudes towards education with doubts about its relevance and usefulness. McGivney (1993: 15) argues that 'irrespective of location and educational setting, certain groups and sections of the community tend not to engage in any form of educational activity after leaving school – older adults, less well educated people in lower social, economic and occupational strata; women with dependant children; ethnic minority people; and people living in rural areas'. Cross (1981) provides a typology of barriers which impede participation which are identified as situational, institutional and dispositional. Others, such as McGivney (1993), argue that such typologies may oversimplify what is a very complex picture and there is a growing consensus that barriers result from the combination and interaction of diverse factors, rather than one or two obstacles which would be relatively easy to overcome. As such the processes and complexities which underpin the transition from non-participant to participant have to be understood both in terms of structural barriers and the factors which enable people to overcome these barriers.

It can also be argued that an approach such as the one outlined by Cross is based on a voluntaristic, 'adult education' model of participation, in which participation is viewed as clearly desirable, and the divisions between participants and non-participants is clear-cut. In practice it would appear that the situation which we now have within FE is more complex. FE does already have many participants from socially and economically deprived groups (Gallacher *et al*, 1997; Raab and Davidson, 1999). However, in some cases these may not be willing recruits, but may be reluctant participants, because of a lack of suitable alternatives (Biggart and Furlong, 1996). The implementation of the New Deal may be increasing the numbers of FE students in this category. An implication of these developments is that FE will have to deal with an increasing number of poorly motivated and potentially disruptive students. There is also evidence of complex patterns of participation and non-participation, with people moving between these positions, depending not just on their educational experiences, but also other aspects of their life history.

The key task for this research project is, therefore, to examine those aspects of social structure and social process which not only facilitate participation, but ensure that this participation is fruitful in enabling students to progress with 'learning careers' which will help overcome the problems associated with the 'learning divide'. It is the 'unpacking' of these complexities that is the prime focus of this study.

1.5 Aims and objectives of the research project

Within this context the project aimed specifically to identify practices which help to overcome barriers to participation as well as those which inhibit participation for three different groups of respondents: new entrants (people new to FE), non-participants (people not participating in FE) and early entrants (people who completed an initial course of study in 1997).

The key objectives in relation to new and early entrants were to find out:

- The relationship between age, gender, socio-economic background and participation
- The barriers entrants have overcome to engage in learning
- What their perceptions and expectations of college provision are

- What/Which features of college practice affected their decision to participate and progress in FE

The early entrant's sample has allowed us to investigate further:

- The extent of progression to further study or the labour market and the factors associated with progression or withdrawal

The views of non-participants were included to investigate:

- What factors have acted as a deterrent to participation and what might motivate participation
- What features of college practice and provision would make a difference in overcoming barriers to learning

2 Patterns of Participation in FE

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will consider the patterns of participation in FE, and the extent to which the colleges are providing opportunities for education and training which will widen access to lifelong learning (LL) and promote social inclusion.

A brief overview of the changes in the period since 1985 is provided in Table 1. In considering these figures it is clear first of all that there has been a considerable growth in the FE sector over this period. The total number of students participating has increased by over 100%, although given that so many of these are part-time students, some of whom are enrolled on very short courses, the overall total of students enrolled is only a very limited indicator of the extent of growth in this sector. It can also be seen that the area in which there has been the most steady, and in some ways the biggest growth, has been in full-time higher education courses. These figures represent a growth of about 300% over this period. This has been mainly in HNC/D programmes, although there has been some limited growth of degree programmes. Although part-time HN programmes were traditionally an important form of provision, providing opportunities for those in employment to gain qualifications, the early '90s saw a major change in that colleges were encouraged into rapid expansion of their full-time higher education programmes. At this time growth of part-time HN programmes was limited, reflecting the new markets in which colleges were operating. However, as a result of capping of full-time numbers and the encouragement by Government of growth in part-time provision, numbers of part-time students have increased considerably in recent years, and over the period from 1985/86 – 1997/98 they have increased by around 70%.

Table 1 - Students enrolled in FE colleges by level and mode

	1985-86	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98
FE									
F/T	30,374	27,500	25,000	25,900	28,900	30,220	30,709	33,799	35,750
P/T	114,817	199,600	204,400	179,100	163,100	157,512	194,130	235,279	249,215
HE									
F/T	6,996	9,431	12,374	15,192	20,342	24,233	25,328	27,999	29,783
P/T	23,029	23,722	25,028	27,670	26,879	30,725	35,390	38,130	39,326
Total	175,216	260,253	266,802	247,862	239,221	242,690	285,557	335,207	354,046

Source: SOEID 1999 and SFEFC 2000 (note these figures exclude students registered on non-vocational courses)

By contrast the numbers of students enrolled on further education courses have been subject to very significant fluctuation in recent years, particularly with respect to part-time students. This area is clearly an important area in terms of widening access to education, yet students numbers in this category declined significantly in the earlier years of the '90s, and it is only in the period since 1995 that these numbers have risen

again. Furthermore there is also evidence that many of these courses are of short duration, and do not lead to any recognised qualification (over 82,000 students in 1997-98). It would therefore appear that this is an area where provision is often of a short-term nature, and subject to rapid and frequent change. However overall in 1997-98 students registered on vocational FE level courses accounted for 69% of all students in the colleges, while higher education students accounted for 17% of students, with the remaining 14% being made up of non vocational FE students. It can also be seen that the overwhelming majority (87%) of vocational FE students were attending part-time, whereas only 57% of HE students were attending part-time. However even this figure of 58% is high when compared with the 7% of undergraduates in HEIs who were attending part-time (SOEID, 1999).

While the numbers of students participating have been increasing at a rapid rate, and the range of provision in many colleges has become more extensive, we must also consider the patterns of participation among different social groups, and the extent to which there is evidence of widening access. Kennedy has expressed concern that expanding FE has not necessarily widened access, and the introduction of a more market and business oriented ethos in FE has resulted in an emphasis on initiatives which will increase income rather than widen access (Kennedy, 1997). Fryer (1997) refers to a 'learning divide', which must be overcome if we are to tackle educational inequalities rather than reproduce them. Munn and McDonald's study of participation in education and training in Scotland provided earlier evidence of this learning divide (Munn and McDonald, 1988), while the recent Strategic Framework for Further Education also shows that participation is not evenly spread across the population. Certain groups, whether defined socially, occupationally or geographically, are much better represented than others (Scottish Office, 1999b). It is important then to consider what evidence there is of participation among students from different social groups at present. We will later consider the research into factors associated with participation and non-participation.

2.2 Age and sex

FE colleges attract an increasingly wide age range. Table 2 shows that 40% of all students are now over 30 years of age, a figure which has been growing over recent years. It is also of interest to note the differences in the age profile of the male and female student groups. The much higher percentage of female students who are over 30 would appear to reflect a greater interest among female returners in using this route to enable them to re-enter education and gain new qualifications. In 1996-97 46,158 female students over 30 were participating in FE colleges, whereas there were only 29,643 male students in the same age group. The factors which influence participation among females and males is an issue which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Table 2 - Students registered in further education colleges by sex and age: 1996-97 (numbers and percentages)

	Male	Female	Total
Under 18	21,130 (24%)	17,465 (17%)	20%
18-21	18,767 (21%)	15,647 (15%)	18%
22-30	18,358 (21%)	24,145 (23%)	22%
over 30	29,643 (34%)	46,158 (45%)	40%

Source: Adapted from Raab and Davidson, 1999

The importance of FE colleges as a means of encouraging higher participation rates among younger students who have left school with limited qualifications has been emphasised in the recent Scottish Office Consultation Paper (Scottish Office, 1999c). However, as can be seen from Table 3, there still remains about 13% of the 16-18 age group who are not participating in formal post school education or a Skillseekers programme. It can also be seen that while there has been a 50% increase in participation rates in full-time FE over the period 1986-1996, participation rates in part-time FE have declined, and the rate of increase is considerably lower than that achieved in higher education.

Table 3 - Participation in Education and Training by 16-18 year olds in Scotland (% of total 16-18 population)

	1986-87	1996-97
School	25	38
Full-time FE	6	9
Part-time FE	16	13
Full-time HE	7	14
Part-time HE	1	1
Skillseekers	N/A	11
Total	55	86

Source: adapted from Scottish Office, 1999c

Further light is also shed on the patterns of participation by Table 4. From this it can be seen that participation in full-time FE level courses is much more common among young people under the age of 18, and particularly for young men of this age group, than among any of the other age groups. However there is evidence from other research that some young people do not choose positively to enter post-compulsory education, preferring the option of employment. In this sense they are 'discouraged workers' (Biggart and Furlong, 1996, Raffe and Wilms, 1989). The implications for FE (and schools) is that they can be faced with 'disaffected' and poorly motivated students. The implementation of the New Deal is adding to this sector of FE students. The Warwick study found evidence of young people choosing FE negatively as an alternative to unemployment or staying on at school. College staff were also aware that the numbers of unmotivated young people in FE had increased in recent years. As Cieslik points out, 'They held contradictory and uncertain views on the place of education in their lives' (1998: 253). The extent to which participation in FE for young people is something which reflects choice, or reflects the lack of other options, and coercion through financial incentives will be explored in Chapter 6.

Among the older students part-time FE level provision seems to be a much more important form of provision. Participation in courses which do not lead to any recognised qualification is also much more common among the older age group. These figures point to the quite different ways in which the FE colleges are being used by different age groups, and by men and women within these age groups.

Table 4 - Students registered in further education colleges by age and mode and level of study (%) (male and female): 1996-97

	Under 18	18-21	22-30	30+	all ages
Male students					
FE - full-time	40	17	11	5	17
FE - part-time	42	31	35	47	40
HE - full-time	8	28	16	7	14
HE - part-time	2	18	22	20	16
No recognised qualification	7	5	10	16	10
Distance learning	1	1	5	5	3
Females students					
FE - full-time	37	18	10	7	14
FE - part-time	37	26	42	52	43
HE - full-time	13	37	14	7	14
HE - part-time	2	10	19	14	12
No recognised qualification	8	6	12	15	12
Distance learning	1	3	5	4	4

Source: Adapted from Raab and Davidson, 1999

2.3 Area of residence

The location of FE colleges close to the communities in which people live, and often in or near areas of social deprivation makes them accessible to people who are the target groups for the social inclusion strategies. Evidence from Raab & Davidson (1999) indicates that FE colleges are well situated to provide easy access to residents from the most socially deprived areas (measured on the basis of the Carstairs Deprivation Index). In these areas 77% of the population lived within walking distance of a college compared with 41% of the whole Scottish population. This study also shows high rates of participation in non-advanced (FE level) full-time courses among residents in deprived areas, even when they are not located very close to a college. When these patterns of participation are considered in relation to the high levels of participation in full-time non advanced courses among 16-18 year olds which we have referred to above, this may point to an important role for the colleges in providing full-time education for young people from deprived areas. However, as we have indicated above, there is a need to examine the reasons for, and outcomes of this participation. By contrast, participation in part-time non-advanced courses seems to be much more closely related to proximity to the college, and there is almost no gradient by deprivation category.

When participation in advanced courses (HE level) is considered, the picture is somewhat different. With regard to full-time courses the standardised participation ratios (SPRs) seem to be relatively little affected by accessibility, but the spread across deprivation categories is relatively even, with some evidence of increased participation in categories 2, 3 & 4 (less deprived). By contrast, participation in part-time advanced courses is more affected by accessibility, and there is a higher participation rate in more affluent areas.

Overall then these data on the location of colleges and area participation rates presents a very interesting picture. It would appear that in terms of their location FE colleges are well situated to meet the educational needs of people who live in the most deprived areas, and are in danger of social exclusion. This accessibility is further reinforced by the outreach provision which many colleges have developed. However the data on participation do not indicate that this is resulting in higher levels of participation in part-time non-advanced courses for those from the more deprived areas. The role of these part-time non-advanced courses, and particularly community based provision, in encouraging 'new entrants' to participate in further education will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

2.4 Educational background

An important objective in widening access and promoting social inclusion is to attract students who have had limited success in the educational system, and to give them further opportunities to acquire additional qualifications. One useful initial indicator of success in this respect is to examine the educational qualifications of students at the time of entry to FE. To do this we have, with co-operation from the SOEID statistics section, reworked the data on educational qualifications already held which is gathered through FES2. We have created a new variable in which students are defined as 'qualified' or 'unqualified'. 'Unqualified' students are ones who have no Highers or A levels, and less than 5 O/Standard Grade or National Certificate modules. In 1996-97 79% of all students on FE (non-advanced) courses were unqualified when measured in this way.

2.5 Unemployed and low income groups

People who are unemployed or under-employed are important target groups with respect to the social inclusion agenda. Table 5 gives the percentages of students on FE level courses who were recorded as registered unemployed or not working. The relatively high figure of 24% among the students aged 25 and over is some indicator of success in attracting students from these categories.

Table 5 - Students who are registered unemployed or not working but not registered unemployed by age group (percentage of all FE level students)

	under 18	18-20	21-24	25 and over
Registered unemployed and other not working	6	11	20	24

A further indication of participation among groups who suffer labour market and income disadvantage is provided by the numbers of students who receive fee waivers because of their low income and reliance on benefit. In 1996-97, 31% of all part-time FE level students received fee waivers. This figure must be treated with some caution, since it is not a direct indicator of low income, but depends on the procedures used by colleges to allocate students to different groups. Nevertheless it does provide some indication of the extent to which these groups are represented within the colleges.

2.6 Minority ethnic groups

Overall about 2% of the FE level student population come from minority ethnic groups, with the largest numbers coming from the Pakistani, Chinese and Indian populations. National data have shown that overall many minority ethnic groups are now very well represented in the educational system. We must consider if there is still evidence of under representation from certain sections within the minority ethnic groups, e.g. women over 30, and if so, whether these problems recognised and addressed.

2.7 Summary

One of the main aims of the lifelong learning and social inclusion agendas is to widen participation in post-compulsory education. With reference to FE, this chapter shows that the overall number of students in this sector has risen and is continuing to rise, and that the range of course provision has increased. The data do show, however, that growth in student numbers has not been even throughout all sections of society. The data show that people from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to participate in any form of post-compulsory education than those of higher social classes. More adults, particularly women, are participating on a part-time basis, although full-time participation is still mostly by young people. There are indications of some success in attracting unemployed people aged over 25, but in the context of widening access there is still much work to be done to facilitate participation amongst all sections of society.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the study sample and methods of data collection used. The research project was divided into several phases. The study was mainly a qualitative exploration of the issues, using focus group and life history interviews, although details of age, gender and educational history were collected by a structured questionnaire. The time-scale of one year was tight in terms of the nature of the methods used and the data that needed to be collected to address the research questions.

3.2 Methodology

The study involved four main groups of respondents; new entrants (people starting in FE); non-participants (people who had not participated in FE); early entrants (people who completed a course of study in 1997) and college staff (both teaching staff and managers). The sample was drawn from four different colleges in Scotland. Selection of the colleges was made on a number of criteria which included: proportion of students on non-advanced courses; proportion of students who reside in areas of deprivation (as measured by the Carstairs Deprivation Index); the diverse geographical nature of FE provision in Scotland; the size of the total student population; the community that the college defined itself as serving; and a range of courses and programmes colleges provided which attract non-traditional learners. The four colleges chosen reflected the diversity of provision in Scotland and provided a manageable sample within the timescale and resources of the project. Details of the four colleges are given below:

College A

A west coast city college.

A medium sized college with over 7,000 students, 84% of whom are on non-advanced courses. Of the total student population 13% are non-advanced students who reside in areas classed in the lowest 15% of the Carstairs Deprivation Index.

College B

A west coast town college.

Presently the third largest college in Scotland, it enrolls 14,000-15,000 students of whom 3,600 are full-time with 1,800 of those on non-advanced programmes. 76% of all enrolled students are on non-advanced courses. Of the total student population 12% are non-advanced students who reside in areas classed in the lowest 15% of the Carstairs Deprivation Index.

College C

An east coast city college.

A large college of over 17,000 students, 82% of whom are on non-advanced courses. Of the total student population 4% are non-advanced students who reside in areas classed in the lowest 15% of the Carstairs.

College D

A rural college.

A small college of less than 5,000 students, less than 1% of whom reside in the areas classed in the lowest 15% of the Carstairs Deprivation Index. The college serves a large geographical catchment area of 35 / 40 miles with a thinly-spread population and has a number of outreach centres.

Selection of new entrant case study courses

For each of the four colleges a table was compiled detailing the range and nature of courses which key college staff, for example, client service managers, highlighted as being successful in attracting 'new entrants'. This table contained information such as student profile (age and gender), aims of the course, funding source (European Social Fund (ESF), college, business) location (campus or community) and subject area. Using this information two programmes or courses were then selected from each college for further investigation. This selection enabled us to include a range of target groups such as adult returners (men and women); young people; and people with learning disabilities.

3.3 Details of the sample

All of the interviewees volunteered to participate in the study after the purposes and aims of the research were explained to them. Many of them hoped that their participation together with the research outcomes would help to improve policy and practice in relation to widening access.

New entrants

New entrants were drawn from the eight case study courses. In total 60 people participated in focus group interviews and 41 in life history interviews. There was some overlap between those who participated in both the focus group and the life history interviews. Of the 41, 51% are male and 49% female, age range 15-69 years (mean 30.359). Many of the new entrants left school at an early age (mean 15.850 years). At the time of the study around one third (36.5%) of the new entrants had no formal qualifications.

Non-participants

Non-participants for this study were recruited in each of the four geographical locations as the four colleges. Non-participants were recruited using two main strategies:

- 'Snowballing' from new entrants. That is, contacting non-participant friends and family members of the new entrants;
- Contacting non-participants through places where people at risk of social exclusion may go, including youth projects, family centres, job centres, and mental health projects.

In total, 33 non-participants took part in a life history interview. Of the 33, 48% are male and 51% female with an age range 16-73 years (mean 33.121years). Many of the non-participants left school at the earliest opportunity and the mean age of leaving school is slightly lower than for the new entrants (mean 15.455years). At the time of the study under one half (42%) of the non-participants had no formal qualifications.

Early entrants

The intention of the research team was to contact people who had participated in courses which attracted new entrants and who had completed such courses in 1997. The rationale behind this approach was to investigate the impact of the learning experience in people's lives and to see if they had progressed to further education/training, employment or unemployment. In reality it proved difficult to engage such people in the project. The research team had to rely on the effort of college staff in contacting this sample and, despite reminder letters being sent out, the number recruited by this method was small. In addition to this approach, the research team recruited early entrants through community learning centres - asking if there were still people participating in learning who had started around 1996/97 or if the centre staff knew people who had started around that time but were no longer learning at the centre. In two areas this approach did yield some more respondents, although this did skew the sample towards people still engaged in learning. Overall the number of early entrants was smaller (n= 15). The majority were female (87%), with an age range of 20-55 years (mean 35.769 years). Many had left school at an early age (mean 15.692 years). A 2-3 year project would have ensured a wider sample of early entrants and a more detailed understanding of the issues of progression as this would have enabled the researchers to track a group from initial study through to further courses or other alternatives.

College staff

The Principal (or their representative) from each college and key college staff (e.g. community liaison officers) were interviewed once at the end of the data collection phase to investigate college views on and responses to the social inclusion and lifelong learning agendas.

3.4 Methods of data collection

As the emphasis of the research was on qualitative evidence we drew on existing quantitative data wherever possible. This included statistical data about learners by age, gender, ethnicity, prior qualifications, mode and programme of study collected by SOEID and another recent research project by Raab and Davidson (1999).

The core of the research process centred on the use of both focus group interviews and life history interviews with the new entrants and life history interviews with non-participants and early entrants. This qualitative approach to data collection was thought appropriate as 'interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher' (Reinharz, 1992:19). Morgan advises the use of focus groups when there is a power differential between group participants and decisions makers. He argues that when conducted in a non-threatening environment, focus groups can be useful in accessing and listening to the voices of those who have historically limited power and influence (Morgan 1993:15). This was true of many of the respondents in our study. In addition, focus groups are a useful research tool when trying to investigate and understand complex behaviours and motivations. The interactions and views of others in the group may enable participants to become more explicit about their feelings or motivations about a topic (Morgan, 1993). Kitzinger argues that focus groups work best when working with pre-existing groups, as it is with such people that one might 'naturally' discuss the topic(s) under investigation (1994:105). The focus groups in the study were all conducted with new entrants who did know each other.

In the study 10 focus group interviews took place with new entrant students. Each had between four and ten respondents and lasted an average of one hour. The majority of the group interviews were taped and fully transcribed (one group did not want to be taped). The group interviews helped us to identify a broad range of issues from a larger number of people which we were able to explore in more depth through individual life history interviews. In addition the focus groups generated interesting data in their own right.

The main form of data collection was the life history interviews which enabled the voices of participants to be heard, placing them central to the research process as they reflect upon, interpret, give meaning to and construct past events and experiences within a social context:

People live lives with meaning. Interpretative biography provides a method which looks at how subjects give subjective meaning to their life experiences. (Denzin, 1989: 14)

By looking at their past biographies such as experiences of initial schooling, family life, employment, we were able to obtain a fuller understanding of why, or why not they returned to learning in FE later in life:

The narrated life story represents the biographer's overall construction of his or her past and anticipated life...The stories that are selected by the biographer to present his life history cannot be regarded as a series of isolated experiences, laid down in chronological order...; individual experiences are always embedded in a coherent, meaningful context, a biographical construct...The present perspective determines what the subject considers biographically relevant, how she or he develops thematic and temporal links between various experiences, and how past, present, or anticipated future realities influence the personal interpretation of the meaning of life. (Rosenthal, 1993: 62, 63)

Some respondents in this study told stories of people struggling to hold their lives together on the margins of society, living on or near the poverty line, with personal crises or problems. For some education was viewed as a possible way of improving their lives in different ways. As Lea and West point out in their study of adult access students:

The people whose lives we are researching tell stories about a process at once more fundamental and humane: the struggle for meaning at times of change and fragmentation of which occupational change is but one part. (Lea and West, 1995: 172)

The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that we had common areas that we wanted to explore with each interviewee such as experiences of initial schooling, family life, and factors which had encouraged or discouraged participation and progression in FE. However, the style used in the interviews was informal. Interviewees were encouraged to talk about the aspects of their lives which they felt had been important in enabling them to return, or not, to learning in FE colleges. They clearly identified and interpreted what they perceived to be the barriers to learning in their past and present lives. All interviewees volunteered to be interviewed after the purpose of the research was explained to them. Interviews commonly lasted from 1 –2 hours. As researchers we were aware of the need for sensitivity and confidentiality in relation to participants as many talked about intimate and personal aspects of their lives. Most participants were interviewed in a place that they were familiar with and where they felt at ease such as the college, community centre, family centre or youth

centre. Permission was asked to tape interviews and most were taped and fully transcribed, although a few respondents in particular non-participants, did not want to be taped and their wishes were respected. These interviews were written up as fully as possible. All were thanked for their participation and they were keen that their voices were heard by policy makers so that the barriers to participation for non-traditional students could be broken down. In addition to the qualitative data, details of age, gender, educational qualifications and occupation were collected by structured questionnaire.

In order to obtain a fuller picture of issues relating to social inclusion/exclusion in FE, a sample of senior management, course tutors and course leaders and community officers were interviewed in each of the four institutions. These interviews covered areas such as ways that each college was responding to the social inclusion agenda, who the target groups for inclusion are, how these groups were encouraged to participate and progress in FE and the impact of Government initiatives such as New Deal.

Although the methodology is centred on case studies, representativeness was ensured by careful selection of case study courses to reflect different geographical areas of Scotland, and age and gender profiles. The rationale for using qualitative methodology is because this approach yields rich, in-depth data which quantitative approaches cannot provide.

Although individual experiences and stories were collected, common patterns of experiences and behaviour were identified amongst the respondents in our study. Individual experiences were also collective ones shaped by gender and class within similar cultural and structural contexts. In this way the particular becomes the general when looking at similar marginalised groups and learning. For Riessman:

Our ultimate goals as social scientists are to learn about substance, make theoretical claims through method, and learn about the general from the particular. Individual and biography must be the starting point of analysis.
(1993: 70)

3.5 Summary

The research timescale was very tight but a large number of interviews were achieved during a year. In total 10 focus group interviews with 60 respondents and 89 individual life history interviews were conducted throughout the lifetime of the project. A longer research time would have enabled us to follow up more new entrants and non-participants and to contact a greater number of early entrants. It would also be valuable to follow up the new entrants sample with another interview next year to find out what happens to them in terms of their learning career. Nevertheless the focus group and life history interviews yielded a wealth of data for addressing the research questions.

4 Framework for Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents a framework for analysis, that is developing concepts which will be useful in understanding and making sense of the study data. It provides an overview of background literature on participation and non-participation. Both barriers and motivations to learning have to be contextualised within the social and economic situations in which people on the margins of society live. Participation and non-participation have to be viewed as the outcomes of social processes through which structural and societal barriers may be overcome and people engage in what will be described as *learning pathways* and *learning careers*, or through social processes which reinforce non-participation and social exclusion. In this context, the role of social structures and individual agency may be helpful in understanding the processes of participation and non-participation. The voices of the participants and non-participants reveal instances of difficult life situations with some looking for ways of getting out of poverty and unemployment and participation in FE offered a possible way out of their difficulties. However, the reasons why some people choose to participate in FE and others not, despite similar life experiences, are complex. It is these complexities and subtleties that the research findings start to unravel.

4.2 Non-participation

In investigating factors which may increase understanding about non-participation among certain groups, Cross (1981) suggests a typology of barriers that may impede engagement with learning. These are: situational barriers associated with the learner's life situation at that time; dispositional barriers associated with the learner's self-perception and attitudes; and institutional barriers associated with features of the institutional provision. More recently Young (1999:73) has summarised the main impediments to learning under four main headings: informational, financial, institutional and motivational. These cover a range of factors such as lack of information about what courses are available or lack of adequate childcare, to fear of failure and lack of confidence in abilities. Moreover these may not be present in people's lives on an individual basis but may operate in clusters which can combine to impose significant barriers to learning (Young, 1999).

Such an approach is a useful starting place, but such categorisation may oversimplify the complexity and inter-linking nature of barriers that non-traditional learners face. This type of approach can also be argued to be based on a voluntaristic, 'adult education' model, in which participation is viewed as clearly desirable, and the divisions between participants and non-participants is clear-cut. In practice it would appear that the situation which we now have within FE is more complex. FE does already have many participants from socially and economically deprived groups (Gallacher *et al*, 1997; Raab and Davidson, 1999) but in some cases these may not be willing recruits, but reluctant participants who, because of a lack of suitable alternatives have found themselves in FE. In addition there is a growing consensus that barriers result from the combination and interaction of diverse factors, rather than one or two obstacles which would be relatively easy to overcome (see McGivney 1993). Participation, particularly for adults, is often not a result of a planned decision-making process but is more likely the result of a combination of different factors and circumstances.

4.3 Social structure and individual agency

In attempting to understand the processes of participation in learning it is important to look at the relationship between individuals and society. This debate centres around the ways in which social structures (such as inequality or poverty) are both created and act as constraints on individuals or groups. It is concerned with the ways in which the human capacity to act independently of structural constraints is limited, that is how much and in what ways can social structures constrain human agency. In an investigation of participation and non-participation there are structural factors which have to be considered, for example class, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic position. These factors may make the process of participation very difficult for some sections of society. Some people may be able to overcome these constraints (exercise human agency) and we are investigating the processes through which this takes place, but for others the constraints may be too strong or too numerous for them to 'break free' and engage in learning. In addition, some non-participants may use human agency to actively choose not to participate in education and there are some respondents in this study who did not want to participate. For them, FE was perceived as having little usefulness and relevance in their lives. Others, however, both wanted to engage in learning and continue to learn but were unable to do so because of life circumstances. This is a central issue in this research as it highlights the need for educational policy to be interpreted in the context of other social policies relating to the benefits system, housing and wider social welfare policies.

4.4 Learning pathways

In the context of this piece of work, 'learning pathways' refers to the processes that lie behind initial participation in FE. The use of this term is to try to help us understand why people engage in learning and understanding this in the context of their life history, both the impact of previous experiences and of their present life situation. Cross (1981) argues 'The reasons people give for their learning correspond consequently and logically to [their] life situations' (1981:91). The research team would agree with this position but would argue that, in addition, participation and non-participation have to be understood within the different economic and cultural traditions of different geographical areas of Scotland. It is the processes through which barriers are overcome or reinforced that this research will shed light on.

Reasons for returning to learning may be numerous. The goals that adults hope to achieve from learning can be both personal (such as self-development) and employment-related (Blair *et al*, 1993). More recent studies highlight the complexity of reasons as to why adults may return to learning. McGivney (1990) suggests seven reasons ranging from acquiring knowledge; professional development; helping their community; meeting new people; diversity and stimulation. Munn and McDonald's (1988) suggest that adults can have multiple reasons for returning to learning and that reasons can vary and change over time.

Participation and non-participation have to be understood in the conditions present in people's lives at different times. It may be that a particular configuration of circumstances allows for the shift between non-participant to participant and allow for the exercise of human agency. The availability of childcare combined with the chance meeting of a friend, combined with subtle shifts in dispositions or attitudes to learning (e.g. children coming home from school and asking for help with homework) may provide for a set of circumstances that allow for the move between non-participation to participation. If two of these things had happened this might not have been enough. It

is the combination of changes in both barriers and motivations (or in agency and structure) that may provide what Strauss describes as 'turning points' which force a person to take stock, to re-evaluate their life situation and may result in changes in identity (see Strauss 1997). Other research on adult returners in higher education also supports the role of critical incidents such as divorce or bereavement as motivating factors (West, 1996; Merrill, 1999).

It may be that initial participation does not result from greatly agonised decisions and Matza's concept of 'drift' may be useful in understanding the processes that lead non-traditional learners to education. The research both draws on and transforms the concept of 'drift' as employed by Matza in his interactionist study of delinquency. Although we are using the term in a different context and in a different way to Matza there are parallels and the underlying ideas are helpful:

Drift is a gradual process of movement, unperceived by the actor, in which the first stage may be accidental or unpredictable from the point of view of any theoretic frame of reference, and deflection from the delinquent path may be similarly accidental or unpredictable. (Matza, 1964: 29)

This is not to say that all people on the margins of education and society who become participants 'drift' into education, as for some it is a positive, conscious and planned decision. However, the stories that some respondents told indicated notions of drift. It must also be noted that the process of drift takes place within a framework of structural constraints which may impose significant barriers to learning.

As shown above there are motivations and goals that bring people to learning. There are, however, other factors which may facilitate this process. These factors are related to features of the institutional provision such as availability of childcare, the timing of classes, the flexibility of provision on offer (e.g. is the course full-time or part-time), financial incentives that the college may offer, and the provision of courses at community or outreach centres.

4.5 Learning careers

The framework set out above may provide a useful way to understand the complexities of the initial re-engagement of people on the margins of society with learning. Another set of questions revolves around the processes at work which may facilitate continued engagement with learning. This research wishes to contribute to theorising around the concept of a 'learning career' (see Bloomer and Hodkinson, in press) and to investigate the usefulness of such a concept with regard to the data.

Theoretical developments around the concept of 'career' began with the sociologists of the Chicago school. The Chicago school sought to move thinking about 'careers' away from rigid notions of jobs/employment and of linear upward progression [it is interesting to note that in today's world of work this understanding of career may itself not be relevant as some argue that professional linear careers are themselves fragmenting and disappearing]. As such the concept of 'career' began to be understood in a broader sense to refer to any social strand of a person's course through life (Barley, 1989).

More recently Bloomer and Hodkinson (in press) have provided a useful critique of the concept of 'career' as applied to learning; 'the learning career' which argues against the dominant positivist paradigm where learning is conceptualised as a product of input-output mechanisms to an analysis of learning as a subjective experience and a

transformatory process which cannot be separated from other life experiences. For many in our study the concept of a learning career could not be understood as a linear upward progression but much more by the analysis of careers as outlined by the Chicago school and Bloomer and Hodgkinson. In addition, Becker's work on the processes of social interaction through which people become increasingly committed to social identities and roles is useful here. This shows the importance of interaction with peers and significant others in this process of self-definition and engagement. In this study we are investigating the processes by which new entrants adapt to the role and social identity of learner, and how they become more committed, or not, to that identity.

Learning careers may be forged as people's dispositions to learning change, their attitudes to learning become more positive and dispositional barriers are slowly overcome. Linked to such changes are transformations of the person in terms of identity, personal relations and expectations of what is achievable. Changes in attitudes are bound up in complex restructuring of the person and identity. Negative feelings about the 'self' and abilities and expectations may be challenged. In terms of progression and learning careers, however, other barriers may not change in relation to dispositional changes. McGivney (1999:70) details obstacles to learner progression such as insufficient information and guidance on further learning opportunities, lack of clear progression routes, practical problems related to costs and domestic commitments. Learning is, however, only one part of an individual's life and new learners may be prevented from furthering a learning career not through lack of motivation or individual agency, but for other reasons related to their position in the socio-economic structure and structural constraints.

4.6 Summary

The research on participation and non-participation for non-traditional learners has traditionally focused on typologies of barriers and motivations. Although there is a growing consensus that such categorisation may oversimplify what is a very complex picture, there have been few attempts to unravel these complexities in terms of social processes and wider structural influences which allow for the movement from non-participant to participant. The main focus of this research is to begin this process of unravelling. In doing so it will investigate barriers and motivations to learning. We will move the debate beyond listing barriers and motivations to learning, to an understanding of the study data which begin to unravel the complexities of the social processes and social structures underlying subtle shifts between participant and non-participant.

What follows in the report are the three main data analysis chapters. These chapters, in turn, focus on the views of adult returners, young people (aged 16-19) and adults with learning difficulties. In the three chapters, the data are interpreted in light of the tentative framework set out above. Barriers and motivations to learning are highlighted, the routes and pathways to learning uncovered, and the development of learner identities and learning careers explored. In doing so the interaction between agency and structure will be investigated. To illustrate the use of this conceptual framework data, a case-study will be summarised at the end of each of the data analysis chapters.

5 Adult Returners

5.1 Introduction

Over the past ten years opportunities for adults to return to learn have increased not only in further education but also in higher education as a result of national policy to widen access to learning. In FE this has been accompanied by strategies to change and broaden its role thus also increasing its status within the post-compulsory sector. Adult returners are now becoming, in many colleges, a sizeable proportion of the student population. This study shows that it is difficult to isolate one factor which influences an individual to return to learn. Adult learners are also not a homogeneous group. Reasons for returning to learn and their subsequent experiences of learning are shaped by differences in age groups, gender, ethnicity, class and geographical location.

Data reveal that adult participation in FE is rarely the result of a carefully planned, conscious decision-making process but rather a combination of several factors interacting over a period of time. Some people may feel that they would like to return to study at some point in their lives and while some of these may remain non-participants, a critical incident, such as divorce or unemployment, may tip the balance into becoming a learner. For others, a combination of circumstances in their lives may result in a 'turning point' which enables them to move from non-participant to participant. Reasons why people participate may also change over a period of time. For example, self-development and the desire for social contact with others may be important at the start, but as confidence in their learning improves the push of improved employment and participation in the labour market may become motivating forces. The research also indicates that motivations and pathways to have to be understood within the social, economic and cultural context of people's biographies and different regional traditions of Scotland.

This chapter draws on the stories of the adult respondents in this study (new entrants, early entrants and non-participants) to promote an understanding of why adults become learners in FE, what motivates them to take the first step and what makes them stay on courses and possibly progress onto higher levels of study, as well as understanding why some people do not consider education as a possibility in their lives. We are also interested in looking at the extent to which the participants became more committed learners, developing a stronger learner identity, and engage in learning careers.

The data for this chapter comes from four focus group interviews of new entrants and a total of 59 life history interviews with new entrants, non-participants and early entrants.

5.2 Barriers to participation

Some of the adults in this study, particularly among the non-participants, lived on the margins of society experiencing poverty and social exclusion from the labour market and other social spheres. Like the adult learners in West's (1996) study they are struggling to hold together their fragmented lives. Lifelong learning offered an opportunity for self-development and social inclusion through education and potential involvement in the labour market. While some of the participants shared similar social and economic situations and life histories with the non-participants, the latter have not

taken the step to return to learn in the FE sector. For the research team this raised an interesting question of what are the barriers to participation and what shifts the balance enabling some people to transcend the boundary from non-participation to participation?

Interviewees, both participants and non-participants, identified a range of negative issues, structural, personal and institutional which either made learning a struggle or prevented them from learning completely. The life histories revealed stories of fragmented and, as one tutor expressed it, 'fragile' lives which were full of knock-backs and insecurities. In looking at their earlier lives, their experiences of school, family life and work impacted significantly upon whether or not as an adult they returned to learn.

Impact of earlier school experiences

Many of our interviewees, particularly among the non-participants, had developed negative attitudes towards schooling which made participation in formal education difficult in later life. This was associated with a number of factors.

One important element was parental and peer pressure which encouraged young people to leave school at 15 or 16 and earn a wage:

To be honest I never gave college a thought. It was never discussed in the circles I moved in. I never knew anyone that went. (new entrant, female)

A male interviewee stated that anyone who went to college in his area was considered a 'cissy'. As such, people may lack both peer and reference groups where involvement in post-compulsory education is the norm. Many stated that they left school one day and started work the next. These attitudes and experiences can be seen to be associated with the ways in which working class culture can help develop antithetical attitudes to education and middle class institutions such as schools (Willis, 1977). These factors also contributed to a fear amongst some interviewees that learning would culturally distance them from family and friends and hence their roots.

A second factor was the negative experience of schooling shared by many of our respondents, particularly the non-participants. Several of the adults reported having learning difficulties at school, and had been labelled as failures. Some were moved from one school to another. As a result many felt that they were not capable of studying. Others had experienced bullying or viewed school as a laugh. Data show that the effects of early stigmatisation and labelling may never be fully resolved. One male non-participant described how he was labelled as having 'special educational needs' at school and was put where it was 'convenient' and where he was not properly supported. 'I had been made to believe that I wasn't capable of anything the way I had been treated'. These problems resulted in a general lack of confidence about themselves and their learning abilities which may never be fully resolved:

But I think a lot of it nowadays with people of my age like myself there's a lack of confidence that holds you back, they don't feel they're good enough. (new entrant, female)

They also resulted in continuing apprehension, and even fear, about participating in formal learning environments, and a lack of confidence that the college would be responsive to their needs.

Well if I think back on it the reasons I am apprehensive to go to college or a classroom situation must be based on past fears or experiences. I don't seem to do too well in the classroom situation. (non-participant, male)

This apprehension about the colleges' responsiveness to their needs was also expressed by non-participants who reported a lack of literacy and numeracy skills, and some new entrants who lacked confidence in their writing abilities. One man, who had problems with writing, expressed the view (which partly arises from his school experiences) that the system might not be willing to meet his needs in this area, and indeed, that he thought at college he would be viewed as 'troublesome'. At the same time FE was assumed to be just like school in terms of relationships with tutors and teaching approaches, although once engaged in learning this perception changed:

You're not just sitting there and somebody's just standing up at the front dictating to you like they did in school. I thought it might be like that here [college] but it's not. (new entrant, male)

Finance

Problems associated with finance were a major barrier to participation in study for many people. This reflects a number of inter-related problems. Firstly, there is the problem of low income, often associated with unemployment, insecure employment, and single parenthood. As a result, a number of our respondents were struggling financially, living at or below the poverty line. Secondly, there are problems related to the structure of the benefits system, which works against those on benefit who may wish to study full-time. This was illustrated by two non-participants in their 20s, living in supported accommodation for people with drug problems. They had both worked hard to get places at two different colleges. At the time of interview they were awaiting decisions as to whether they could attend college and keep on the level of incapacity benefit needed to complete their drug rehabilitation programme. Both saw college as playing an important part in their process of rehabilitation but participation would depend on the outcome of their adjudication.

Although there are courses with financial incentives which may encourage non-traditional learners back to education, these initiatives have only gone a little way towards addressing these problems. Some non-participants simply stated that they could not afford to go to college or that the money they would get would not be enough for them to participate. Furthermore, knowledge of such courses which may provide incentives was not high amongst non-participants.

Childcare

For non-participant women, childcare was a major barrier to studying. This related not only to the provision of childcare but the quality of provision on offer. Some women respondents had limited or no options regarding childcare available to them. Their financial resources were very limited, and assistance from parents, or other family was not always available. Underneath this was a feeling of guilt about leaving a young child: a cultural barrier which assumes that women should look after children until at least school age. In this situation women may experience mixed, and in some ways conflicting emotions about their role:

It took me ages to get used to staying in the house...I was 24 up in high-rise flats and it is very hard to get to know people ...I got to the stage where there was nothing else that could get tidied up...and I ended up that I was just bored, really, really bored. At the same time we had hardly any money. It was just a nightmare. It was a difficult time but it was a good time because I don't regret spending that time with her [daughter]. (new entrant, female)

As a result of these constraints many women feel that participation in education is not an option which is really open to them.

Inconvenience of location

Some interviewees pointed out that they were unable to attend their local college because the course they wanted was not on offer and as a result they had to travel by bus which was both costly and time-consuming and stressful for those with families. In rural areas progression to courses at a campus from an outreach centre was difficult because of the lack of transport. Some interviewees had to stop their studies as a result of this.

Age

Many adults perceived their age as an important barrier to participation. They viewed FE as being for younger students and not for them:

It was daunting going back. Probably part of me was thinking it will be all teenagers and it wasn't. See I thought they'd all be saying 'what's that old granny doing here'...If there were older people I just assumed they would be tutors, not students. (new entrant, female)

It was clear that people's perceptions about the role and purpose of FE lags behind what is actually happening in FE today. While many colleges have changed, and view adult returners as a key target group, this has not become clear to many people within the community. Similar findings were also indicated in a study on FE and its communities (Merrill, 1999).

Others felt that being in their 40s and 50s they were too old to get a job. One woman involved in voluntary community work explains:

People keep saying why don't you go to college and do social care, social science, childcare. Somebody from social work phoned me and said put in a form for social work to work in children's homes –...She phoned me and asked me what qualifications I had – I said I hadn't any... She said I advise you to go to college. I said at 40? –but she said that didn't matter. You think you're too old to work with weans. I would come out of college with a degree, two years on, 42 and I might not get a job. That's what puts me off because I'm too old now. (non-participant, female)

Age is also perceived by her as a barrier to studying in FE as she fears that colleges are full of young people and this prevents her from going, yet at the same time she feels trapped by her situation:

I need a job. I need the money and I'm just stuck in a rut just now. It's getting hard getting out of that rut. It seems that during the last three years I've not come on in any way. (non-participant, female)

5.3 Identifying why adults return to learn

As we have already indicated, the processes through which adults become engaged in learning often involves the complex interaction of a number of factors, and cannot be seen as the result of any single factor, or a planned decision making process. Nevertheless a number of key motivating factors were identified by our participants. For the purposes of discussion the factors will initially be identified separately.

5.3.1 Key motivating factors

Self-development

An important motive which emerged was that of self-development, particularly with respect to women. Like the working-class men in this research most of the women left school at the age of 15 or 16, as cultural expectations were such that they and their parents did not see a need for education as their future was to work until they married and/or had children (Spender, 1982; Sharpe, 1976; 1994). However, time spent in the home looking after children, which none of them regretted, allowed the women to reflect upon their lives and their identity. Wanting to learn for self-development and hence change their identity to become a person rather than somebody's wife or mother were critical factors in starting courses at a college:

Well I know for me just being in the house with the wee ones – it's like you have no one to talk to – well you have them, but no adults. You could go a bit mad. It's good to get out of the house and to do things. To keep your brain active. It's not good to be stuck in the house all the time. (early entrant, female)

One woman explained how she felt about her female identity:

Well you feel that when you come here [community learning centre] you are starting to find yourself. That might sound a bit stupid. You are not a clone or somebody else – you are starting to find your own identity although it has taken me – I won't say how many years. (early entrant, female)

The isolation of being in a house with young children was a common motivating factor for wanting to do something different such as learning 'to get back into civilisation'. For the women participants, some of whom are single parents, studying is enjoyable but a struggle as they have to juggle multiple roles.

Among other interviewees the desire to learn about a subject such as computing, to be able to communicate with their children or grandchildren or to keep up with technology was an important motivating factor. Many felt that they had to learn something about computers and once they had taken the first step enjoyed it:

Until I came here I tended to dismiss computers as an irrelevance to me. Now that I am here I have changed completely. I would like to learn about the Internet and that sort of thing. You read about this, that and the next thing, and they reckon that ten years from now everybody will be shopping on the Internet and all these kind of things. So everybody must be prepared if it is going to be like that – every house will have a computer... (new entrant, male)

Improving employment prospects

The idea of improving employment prospects was important for many adult students, and particularly men. However, while many adult returners expressed the hope that

learning would lead to better employment they were also not confident that it would do so because of other factors such as age or health problems, or the recognition that achieving the appropriate level of qualifications would be difficult. Several of the older men in their 40s and 50s had experienced a series of manual jobs since leaving school at 15 or 16 with few or no qualifications and were now unemployed as a result of the decline in traditional industries. This group realised that the labour market had changed and that they need skills and qualifications if they are to get a job. In particular, computing skills were viewed as essential, as the following person explains:

I wanted to learn this [computing] so as I could get it on my CV. A lot of the jobs I went for – the application forms for Sainsbury's and B & Q when I've applied for jobs - they all have a wee bit on them 'do you have any computer skills or keyboarding skills?' ...So that's why I've done this course because in every job you go for they ask you if you can work a keyboard... (new entrant, male)

In this situation the level of qualification being sought was probably limited, at least initially. However it was hoped that by achieving some experience, and some recognised qualification, this would be sufficient to open up an area of the job market, which did not require a high level of skill, but which was currently proving difficult to penetrate.

A number of women also expressed an interest in improving their employment prospects. One woman who lived in an area where a traditional industry still dominates the local labour market (fisheries) explained her attempt to achieve a more skilled job. In her family it was traditional for women to be fish filleters: 'Mum was a filleter and her mum was a filleter and her mum's mum was a filleter'. Breaking away from traditional employment was not easy. She enrolled on an IT course as a first step:

I just could not stand any more and I went into the job centre and went looking for work but there was nothing left except for fish. I just didn't feel like I wanted to be in there. I'd just had enough of it. I just kept looking and found out about the course. (new entrant, female)

For another, the initial motivation was less clear-cut, but she felt a need to take some measures which might open more options for the future.

Well I feel it has given me more things to put on my CV for the future because nobody knows what the future is going to bring and where you are going to be in 5-10 years and I feel if I have got to go and look for another job you need the qualifications and all the offices just now are computerised and everything is on computers. (early entrant, female)

Involvement in community and voluntary organisations

A desire to be more effective in other activities, such as community and voluntary organisations was another reason which led some respondents into FE. One unemployed man opted for a beginner's computer course at a college community outreach centre to help him with his voluntary work as chair of a tenant's association:

Working with the tenant's association from 1973 onwards, I was doing letters back and forwards to different people and my spelling wasn't really good and I was a bit embarrassed about writing letters...I thought there must be a better way than that, so I got on to computers and thought that at least if the spelling is rotten the computer could check it and correct it. (new entrant, male)

He did not think that the course would enable him to get a job because it was only two hours a week, but learning did solve his main problem as he can now communicate confidently with councillors. Another learner, a retired woman at the same centre also wanted to learn about computers to help her with her voluntary work (with the church). Like others she was increasingly aware of the importance of computers in our society.

Overcoming health and related problems

A significant number of the adult returners suffered or had suffered from mental or physical health problems. Participating in education had helped them to 'come back into the community', ending their personal isolation. A divorced man in his mid-forties who had suffered from alcohol misuse and now has physical health problems stated that one of the motivations in returning to learning was not just to get employment but more importantly as a means to escape from the 'wilderness' which had dominated the past few years of his life. One woman who is confined to a wheelchair enjoys her business study course at a FE college because she feels integrated into the learning group:

I was at X for a year doing an extension course which was like a life skills type...but that, I didn't really like because it was all wheelchair people...whereas the one I'm at now even though I'm in a wheelchair I get treated as normal or as normal as anybody can get treated. So they don't see me as a person in a wheelchair, they see me as X, which is good. (new entrant, female)

Her study was made possible through free transport (taxi) as she lives some distance from the college.

5.3.2 Pathways and routes into learning

Having outlined some of the key motives which lie behind the desire to return to learning, we will now explore the processes through which people come to begin to participate in college. As we have already indicated this is often a complex, and unplanned process, and we examine here some of the factors which help facilitate involvement in the learning process.

Critical incidents

Life history research reveals the importance of critical incidents, such as divorce, bereavement or redundancy, in a person's biography which act as a turning point in a person's life. Some of the participants in this study had been thinking about doing some sort of learning, often for a few years but never got round to doing anything about it until the experience of a critical incident pushes them into learning. For example, divorce encouraged one woman to start getting involved in learning: 'I really didn't go out much when I was married so then I kind of had to force myself to start to go out'. Initially this was to take her granddaughter to a mothers' and toddlers' group. This led to contact with an adult education tutor and she explained it had a 'snowballing' effect as one course led to another at a FE outreach centre.

The following example illustrates that while a critical incident may act as the trigger there may also be other underlying factors; in this case issues to do with gender, self-development and identity. For an early entrant, now completing an HNC in computing, the death of a grandfather who she had been looking after forced her to 'get out' and do something. Once she started learning she was 'hooked' and progressed onto higher level courses. She was also the mother of a young child. She reflected:

I was so busy I didn't really think about it. My days were pretty chaotic I suppose so I just got on with it but then grandpa died and there was just this big hole in my days and I thought I have got to do something. I found the house quite isolating I suppose you would say. My husband went to work and came home but I had nothing to talk about my day. None of the other folk I knew then had babies by then. I was the first so I felt quite alone...I saw an advert in the paper for cooking classes here and I thought I'd give it a go. It said that there would be a crèche for the wee one so I thought that would be good for him too. (early entrant, female)

Involvement in informal learning

Involvement in other projects such as local family centres, tenants' groups, women's groups, community resource centres, youth projects, which often involves a considerable amount of informal contact and learning, is also important in facilitating the return to more formal learning for many adults. Such involvement increased self-confidence, extended social networks and increased knowledge about provision with regard to FE education in a local area. It may be that other such projects provide a stepping-stone to more formal learning. One new entrant, for example, through attending courses at her local family learning centre had found out about FE courses. In addition, the staff at the Centre had given her encouragement about her abilities:

It gave me a boost because somebody with a bit of intelligence had the confidence in me to go and do it [apply for college]. (new entrant, female)

The potential movement from involvement in broader community projects, to informal learning to more structured learning, and why people are, or are not, involved in this transition requires further investigation.

The role of community-based FE provision

The availability of local community-based FE provision was of great importance in enabling some respondents to make the transition from non-participant to participant. This was particularly the case for those who had left school at the earliest possible age with a negative experience of schooling. Going to a large, formal institution such as an FE campus was a daunting prospect for many of these adults, and the smaller-scale, more informal local provision was a much more welcoming environment. All were positive about their learning experiences in such an environment. It was clear that without this provision they would not have taken the first step back into learning. A small number had tried courses at a college but did not like the atmosphere. Their reasons for not wanting to go to the main campus of a college were varied, but centred on the fact that community provision is local, more flexible, more informal and friendly. Reference is also made to smaller classes, teaching aimed at adults, and the approachability of the tutors:

It's a lot more informal for a start ...you can come any time, any day, even though it's different modules on different days.... If somebody has a wee part-time job and they can't manage the morning, they can come in the afternoon. You couldn't do that up the road [the main campus]. ...They probably have set programmes for set days and that would be you. (new entrant, male)

Another common factor that facilitated participation in community locations was the belief that people at community outreach centres would be like them. In contrast, they thought that the students at the main campus would be different to them so they would feel outsiders. Underlying this is a lack of confidence in their learning ability:

I think it would be off-putting to be honest. I don't think I would have gone to a college. The fact that this was where it was kind of thing [in the community], and I knew that there were going to be people like myself – what I'm trying to say is I wouldn't go into a student class, people in their twenties, because I would feel out of place and to my mind people in their 20s will pick up things quicker...I wouldn't be happy at any college...What I am trying to say is I would never have entered a beginners course in a college because I would feel stupid. (new entrant, male)

Similarly, a female respondent indicated that community-based provision had enabled her to overcome doubts about participation associated with her age.

If I had somebody my age that I knew was going to college at the same time I would go with them tomorrow. There's a barrier there that I just don't want to go in. Just walking in the first day and people sitting there. I'm funny that way. I can walk into this place [community learning centre] and talk to everybody, even people that I don't know. It's because I'm too set in my ways. If I walked into college – I don't know anybody. I would say to myself 'I feel like a stupid wee school lassie with no friends'. My daughter says it's not like that, 'you'll meet someone'. (new entrant, female)

A woman talking about the tutors at the outreach centre explained that; 'They just treat you normally, they're friendly and you can talk to them. It's not as if they are above you or anything'. In talking about tutors at a main FE campus she declared; 'You picture them being kind of snooty and they don't really want to come here because it's not very nice. The areas and things like that'. Others referred to tutors being 'more down to earth' than on a campus and also felt that they made learning fun. In addition, participants with physical disabilities stated that bringing learning out into the community enabled them to participate in learning in centres that were already adapted for their needs.

At one of the FE outreach centres the adult returners had access to all the facilities on the main campus but, with the exception of one person, none of them took advantage of this. They identified themselves with the centre, not with the college as a whole; almost an 'us' and 'them' situation. Outreach centres were viewed as being more approachable in the sense that potential adult students were made to feel welcome from the initial contact whether by telephone or a visit to the centre. The atmosphere and discourse suits and facilitates their learning needs. Tutors at the centres were praised for their teaching style and level of support to individual learners. Most importantly the learners did not perceive any distance or barriers between themselves and the tutors. Community provision provides a non-threatening learning environment for people who lack confidence in their learning ability and are uncertain about the appropriateness of college courses for them. For example:

B [tutor] was absolutely brilliant...the way that they teach you don't feel silly. There are no comments like 'I've told you that before, you should know it by now'. No comments like that are ever made. It's very positive, everything is very positive and very encouraging. It is her way and her attitude that rubs off. (new entrant, female)

Another new entrant admitted that he finds learning difficult but with support from the centre he feels that he is progressing and now finding it interesting:

The people here are very helpful. The instructors are helpful and patient because they would have to be with me. I'm picking things up now. I'm actually quite pleased that I have picked up certain things and I've got them logged in my mind so that I can go back to them now. I found that when I first came here I had to be shown things two or three times. So now I've got to the stage where I'm actually memorising the things. I find the people very supportive. (new entrant, male)

This highlights the importance of social relationships in becoming a more committed learner.

Some of the participants had experiences of both campus and community learning. A male adult learner, who progressed to higher level courses in computing at the main campus while still continuing classes at the outreach centre, compared the two different learning environments:

I like the way it's informal, not like X [main campus]. It's an official place. It's like going into a big office, a big building. When I first went I would go to the wrong place and they would say 'you can't come down here and you can't go over there'. You think you were going to rob them or something. Because you get a wee plastic card and I do two or three hours a month and they tick it, copy it, and sometimes I forget to take my card in and they come after you, hounding you, 'you've not put your card in'. You think it is a big deal. In the library at X there's a big computer room and they have classes – there's a tutor there but he doesn't treat you like A or B – it's more like a lesson. (new entrant, male)

A younger female student (early entrant) in her 20s also felt alienated by college life:

It's quite a huge campus. I was up at the main college as well when this place closed. I went up to the college. I must admit I honestly didn't like it. I think it's so big – you go in and it's actually a class. .. In this place it's more friendly, you can actually sit and ask each other things in the class. It's a better atmosphere. (new entrant, female)

While all the adult returners located in community provision were very positive about this form of learning, the research did find evidence that there is the danger that students become too dependent on community provision, and are limited in the opportunities to develop their learning careers. This can be associated with a number of factors one of which is the danger that some outreach centres become both too 'cosy' and over-protective towards their learners and some adult learners firmly stated that they did not want to go on to further study at the campus. There may also be a problem with the variety and number of courses that community centres are able to run, and as such, people may run out of courses to do. In addition, new entrants may become over-attached to one particular tutor with whom they feel safe, and be reluctant to move to other classes. Although community provision is serving a useful function and it is clear that without this many adults would not have come back to learning, there is the possibility that the adults do not progress in their learning career. This may have other implications if learners remain at local centres, for example if places are limited, new learners may be denied access.

There is also an issue concerning the relationship between the outreach centres and their main campus. In some cases it appeared that contact or interaction between the centres and the main campus was limited, thus marginalising both the centres and the learners, although in other cases the community outreach provision was clearly well integrated into the strategy of the college.

Crèche and childcare facilities

The availability of crèche and childcare facilities was another key factor which facilitated the participation of many women in FE. Free childcare, or classes which were arranged around school hours, enabled some women to attend courses but not all colleges or programmes offered this. Many female participants described having these as 'essential' for participation. The study does show that the lack of adequate childcare facilities is one of the major barriers to participation. This non-participant woman with a two year old son explains her situation:

But they [the local nursery] have got a waiting list and all that so just say I was to start college in the August there might not be a place for [son] in the August maybe it would be October or something by the time .. and what would I do for those two months. Who would look after [son] you know what I mean. Yes childcare that is what is stopping me. (non-participant, female)

Information and encouragement

The way information about courses in FE is communicated to non-traditional learners is a critical factor in persuading such learners to participate. Getting the language, presentation and style right is crucial. Word-of-mouth from a friend or relative was frequently cited in this study as the main means of hearing about a course or a provider and supports other research (Bond and Merrill, 1999). Community newspapers were also effective in attracting people. Less common was through a college prospectus. Most stated that they would not have the confidence to walk into a college and ask about courses. As one person explained 'I wouldn't personally have picked up a college prospectus or I wouldn't have rung up asking for one to be sent' (new entrant). A small number felt that leaflets were not very effective as too many were sent through letterboxes.

This study also shows that what is important is not just knowing about provision but knowing someone who has experienced learning. The importance of positive learning experience in telling and encouraging other non-traditional learners to take the first step may be very important.

Initial contact and the way a potential student is received can be a deciding factor as to whether or not someone who is not confident actually makes it through the door. Evidence in this study shows that the community centres were better at this than the more anonymous main colleges, as the following indicates:

The girl at the time who was organising reception – she was really nice – down to earth and I said I don't know if I can do it and she says don't be silly – you are putting yourself down. She just sat and spoke to you. Come and try it. Then I would think, should I or should I not and then they had an open night and I came. (early entrant, female)

5.3.3 Developing a learning career

Many of the learners in this study, both in community learning environments and in bigger campuses, became increasingly committed to the role and social identity of learner once the hurdles of entering college had been overcome. They adapted to the process of being a learner in a new institutional environment. Becker's analysis of the processes of social interaction through which people become increasingly committed to social identities and roles is useful here, and the importance of relationships with others in developing a positive learner identity is shown. The study is interested in the

ways that new learners become increasingly committed to the role and social identity of learner.

College environment

A number of our respondents indicated that the atmosphere of the college and the relationships which they established with their tutors were important in enabling them to become more committed to their role as learners. The teaching approaches favoured by adult returners include being able to work at their own pace, small and informal classroom settings, tutors who can talk to them on their level, individual support, positive encouragement, patient tutors, and tutors who make learning enjoyable in a relaxed atmosphere.

The mere fact that X [tutor] is approachable. If you have a problem you can actually turn round and say to him I have that problem. If you are left to feel that the tutor is above you, you are not going to approach him. (early entrant, male)

Students praised the teaching staff and tutors in the four colleges both in community learning environments and in the main college campuses. The adults in the study felt that college staff were extremely supportive and encouraging. A common response was the feeling that tutors 'didn't look down on you'. Tutors were praised for their approaches to teaching and learning, and students responded that they were never made to feel stupid or incapable. It was often felt that teaching staff took a personal interest in the general well-being of students and were aware and sympathetic to personal issues in students' lives. These relationships were often key to students developing a stronger learner identity.

Peer group support

The support which students receive from their fellow students is also of considerable importance in the development of their learning careers. The strong structure of peer support is important in enabling many students to make the transition from 'uncertain learners', with an ambivalent attitude towards their role as a student, to people who are fully engaged with the learning process, and see this as a key aspect of their lives and social identity.

Well I think there is more than one reason. It was definitely to keep me up to date in computing with an eye on getting a job when my son is older. But as I came there were other things. Like B and I are great pals and we come together. I have made a lot of friends and we socialise together. Like a few of us started running and that to keep fit. (early entrant, female).

The relationships this woman developed with others attending the same community learning centre were very important in her becoming both a confident and committed learner.

Changing goals

Associated with the development of learning careers, the goals which learners wish to pursue may change over time. This can be seen in the development of learning careers among a number of the women in this study. Many of them initially returned to learn for self-development and issues relating to their gender status, but tied up with this is a desire to re-enter the job market with better qualifications so that they do not return to what they perceive as dead-end jobs such as shop work. As their confidence in learning increases adult learners feel that this is possible:

It's like once you start and you get some modules, and you know you can do the HNC, and you think well I'll keep going because if I don't I will be back to where I was before. And I don't want that. I suppose I want better – I don't mean that in a bad way – but I want different things now. Different jobs anyway. (early entrant, female)

Another woman who had been made redundant enrolled on a social care course because her other colleagues did although she was not initially interested in the subject. This changed within a term:

See I really didn't want to come to this course. I just came 'cos all the others were and it got me out of work and it's turned out I love it. It's the best thing I have done in my life – it's brilliant. If we can afford it I am going on to another course. (new entrant, female)

5.4 Factors associated with non-progression

This study has not enabled us to undertake a systematic investigation of issues associated with drop-out or withdrawal, but some factors have emerged from our interviews.

Although negative feelings about the 'self' and abilities and expectations may be challenged in terms of progression and learning careers, other barriers may not change in relation to these dispositional changes. New entrants may be prevented from furthering their learning career not through lack of motivation, but for other reasons related to their position in the socio-economic structure. The issues which we have identified would suggest that these factors are often similar to the ones which create barriers to initial participation, and are associated with the deep-rooted social and economic difficulties experienced by many people from these social groups.

Finance

Finance emerged as an important problem associated with withdrawal from college courses. One woman describes her situation:

I went the first day ...I thoroughly enjoyed it and I came home and my fiancé wasn't working at the time and he said 'there's absolutely no way we can afford this'. I've been to the welfare rights officer and I've been down to the Social Security and there's no way. Because we are two single people living together we basically have to pay full rent. ...It was just a nightmare. We were going to end up worse off than we were and I spent the whole night crying my eyes out. I really did and I was very, very disappointed ... (new entrant, female)

In addition, although dispositions to learning may change, other structural constraints may not:

I would love to do a bit more [at college] but I am the breadwinner in the house. My man doesn't work so I have to (new entrant, female)

Another woman revealed that at an interview for a full-time course she was assured that she would be 'better off' coming to college than remaining on benefits. She described her horror when she discovered four weeks into the course how much the bursary was and how this then affected her benefit payments for rent etc. She had no alternative but to drop out of the course.

Unstable or violent family situations

In other cases, unstable or violent family situations made continued participation difficult. For one woman the difficulties in her own personal life, including living with a violent partner, meant that she was only able to sustain attendance at college for a few months:

So that was the problem I had with my college course. Because I was getting battered and all that and I wasn't telling anybody. And you know if you are getting up through the day and you have the college to go to, you can't concentrate on the college and you can't do anything because your mind is on other things wondering what I would have to go back to. I remember taking [daughter] to college and when we came back he would be there and we would have an argument. So I couldn't take in what I was being taught. (non-participant, female)

Other women reported lack of support as it caused friction with their partners who wanted their wife/partner to either stay at home or earn a wage (Merrill, 1999). As the same woman above who had to drop out of college says about her partner at the time:

It was jealousy as in I was out meeting a lot of folk. It was like 'who was I meeting, who was I talking to' all that kind of stuff. That was another issue.

Lack of suitable facilities for disabled students

Problems associated with the lack of suitable facilities for disabled students within a college led another of our respondents to drop out.

I did go to X college once to do some computing but the access was terrible. All the folk that could walk used to use the lift so I couldn't get in. So I used to be late for classes and then if there was a fire I couldn't get down so eventually after complaining I got moved to the ground floor – but then even things like the way the desks are designed I couldn't get my chair under it so I had to sit to the side. We need to think about access and design – and transport – transport for wheelchair users is terrible. (non-participant male)

As with participation, drop-out may be associated not just with one factor, but by a combination of circumstances which result in the 'turning point' back from participant to non-participant.

5.5 The complexity of factors affecting participation and non-participation

The data illustrate that people on the margins of society face multiple barriers to participation in education. Similarly, those who transcend the barriers are motivated by a number of interacting factors, not only in relation to their initial decision to return, but also with respect to decisions regarding continued participation.

Culture and structure interact in ways which make it difficult for people living on the margins of society to participate in FE. Although presented as part of individual life histories, the barriers experienced are collective ones such as: cultural attitudes towards education; the poverty trap and the benefits system; unemployment; drug problems; and gender constraints. These life histories revealed people facing and

dealing with severe personal problems and crises in the context of struggling to keep together their fragmented life, and in some cases, their family.

Many adults in the study had a work history dominated by a series of short-term, poorly paid jobs or periods of unemployment. Others had difficult family or personal relationships culminating in mental ill health, alcoholism or homelessness. For others, early educational experiences were negative and unsuccessful. In such a situation of coping with their day-to-day life, education is neither thought about nor viewed as relevant.

Yet despite the structural constraints and problems, some enter FE and others do not. While the structural forces which constrain them are similar, some actors through human agency decide to enter education, while others remain non-participants, either through choice, or because the constraints, structural and individual, remain too great, even if they would like to go to college. However, if one or more of the perceived constraints lessens, they may well make the transition from participant to non-participant. What makes one person and not another enter FE is, therefore, tenuous, a fragile thin line or boundary which some people cross.

Participation was often not the outcome of a planned decision-making process in which goals are weighed up, life situations assessed and participation decided on. As with previous research (Blair *et al*, 1993) participation seems much more of an unplanned process where often a particular set of circumstances promotes participation and people may be drawn into education as a result of a variety of circumstances.

As such, Matza's concept of 'drift' outlined in Chapter Four is a useful way to describe this situation, where this may be a gradual process where the first stage may be accidental or unpredictable. This is not to say that all people on the margins of education and society who become participants 'drift' into education. For some it is a positive, conscious and planned decision, or the result of a critical incident. However, the stories that some respondents told indicated notions of drift. However in presenting the idea of 'drift', we must note that this process is shaped by factors such as the type of institutional provision available (e.g. community-based provision), and through interaction with peers, college staff and others. We have also noted that this 'drift' can lead on to increasing commitment to 'learning careers', through which people become increasingly engaged with the learning process. It is this process of commitment to a learning career which is crucial if these marginal, and 'uncertain' learners are to become fully included in the learning process.

5.6 Case study illustration

Adult Returner (Early Entrant) Bernadette, Female aged 31

Bernadette left school at 16 with two O-grades. On leaving school she felt that the only choice open to her was to go on the then Youth Training Scheme (YTS). Eventually she did get a job in an opticians where she worked for two years. She left and went to work in a shop for about 6 months, then to a factory where she worked for about 3 years. At that time, she says, she would never have considered going back to education if it meant giving up a paid job. Bernadette then became pregnant with the first of her two children. She stayed at home to look after the children and her grandfather came to live with her too. He wasn't well and needed looking after. At that time in her life, she says, her days were so busy she never really had time to think. One main turning point in Bernadette's life was the death of her grandfather: 'There

was just this big hole in my days... I found the house quite isolating.... My husband went to work and came home but I felt I had nothing to talk about my day'. Bernadette saw an advert in the local paper for cooking classes in a local unemployed centre and thought she would give it a go. The advert said there would be a crèche which would take really young children so she thought that would be good for her wee boy too. She says she felt really nervous about taking the first step and going along to the classes: 'I didn't really have a lot of confidence'. She kept coming to the classes and began to meet other women. These relationships became very important in terms of forming a learner identity as the women began to go to other classes together.

Then the computing classes started, run by the local college and she says 'that's where it all kicked off really'. Although admitting at the start she didn't know how to turn a computer on, Bernadette is now on the point of gaining an HNC in computing through classes attended at the centre. In addition, she has modules in painting and decorating and has attended keep-fit classes. Her experiences of learning in the community environment are very positive. Her motivation for learning came initially to get out of the house, 'back into civilisation', and to get back some of her own identity, not solely to be seen as a 'mum'. Her motivations over the year have, however, changed. Although the social contact is still very important, Bernadette wishes to go back to work when both the boys are at school. She feels that the qualifications gained will enable her to go and 'get something better'. In addition, another key motivating factor for Bernadette is to keep up with what her children are learning at school so she can help and encourage them.

Bernadette is now doing things she says she would never have seen herself doing such as applying for grants and being on the management committee of the centre. She says she has gone from someone who was painfully shy at school to someone who is far more confident in herself and her abilities. For her, the availability of the classes in her local community was the most important thing in enabling her to go back to learning and to continue learning. She would not, even now, go to a main college as they remind her too much of school and she feels that there wouldn't be the same relaxed atmosphere that there is at the centre. In addition, she strongly feels that the centre is important for the community, giving people of all ages somewhere to go and meet each other. As she says 'see it also matters for our community. We are classed as a deprived area. I think when you say you come from here everyone thinks you are a waster. But this gives people the chance to show, yes there might be problems here ...but we have brains and don't write us off 'cos we come from here'.

5.7 Conclusions

Why people return to learn is a complex interaction between the agency of the individual and structural forces in society. This study shows that it is difficult to isolate one factor which influences an individual to return to learn. Adult learners are also not a homogeneous group. Reasons for returning to learn and their subsequent experiences of learning are shaped by differences in age groups, gender, class and geographical location. Data in this study reveal that adult participation in FE is rarely the result of a carefully planned, conscious decision-making process, but rather a combination of several factors interacting over a period of time. The data also show that adults can and do become more committed learners but the processes through which this happens are also complex and involves different interconnecting factors.

6 Young People

6.1 Introduction

While FE colleges cater for an increasingly heterogeneous student group, their role with regard to younger students continues to be important, and ensuring participation by young people in appropriate education and training is an essential element of the social inclusion agenda. These young people are encouraged to participate in a wide range of programmes, including specific Government initiatives such as Skillseekers, as well as National Certificate, GSVQ and other programmes. In our research we have tried to focus on young people with limited educational qualifications, who are most marginal in terms of participation, and most in danger of social exclusion. For the purposes of this study young people have been defined as being between 16 and 19.

In this Chapter we will explore the barriers to participation, and the processes through which young people become engaged in learning and develop learning careers. We will also comment briefly on some of the factors associated with drop-out or withdrawal. As we have indicated in the previous chapter, the factors and processes which lead to either participation or non-participation are complex and inter-related. In the first place we must recognise and explore the structural factors which constrain and shape the lives of the young people involved. However, we must also examine the processes through which young people become involved in FE, and through which they become more committed learners and either more firmly embarked on a learning career, or withdraw from study, or decide to proceed with another option such as employment.

Data for this chapter come from three focus group interviews with new entrants and a total of 24 life history interviews with new entrants, non-participants and early entrants.

6.2 Barriers to participation

A number of major barriers to participation in FE which are of particular relevance to young people can be identified. A number of these problems are associated with the disadvantaged position which many of these young people have within the socio-economic structure, and wider problems of unemployment, poverty and low levels of educational achievement experienced by families in these situations. Associated with these structural problems are ones of attitude and motivation. Together they create a complex set of issues which must be addressed if participation among excluded young people is to be increased.

Disrupted personal and family lives

There is evidence, particularly from our non-participants, that a number have experienced extremely disrupted family and personal lives. This is often associated with, and the result of, unemployment and poverty. In a number of cases this has resulted in the break-up of the family. Others have run away from home and school, or have become separated from their parents and have ended up in their own homes or living in hostels at a very early age:

I came back up and stayed with my other sister for a few weeks, got myself a house, then all that went wrong. Then I just started staying at mates, and moved into hostels. (non-participant, male)

These problems often led to situations where the level of support which these young people enjoy is very limited, sustaining daily life is difficult, and little thought is given to plans for education or training.

Negative experiences of schooling

Associated with these problems are negative experiences of schooling. A number of young people refer to 'hating' school, and to being excluded, or sent to residential schools. These problems are also linked to ones of low levels of achievement in school, with many pupils leaving with no qualifications, and problems of literacy or numeracy in some cases. One non-participant who is now keen to take up an outdoor education course refers to his concerns because he is '*no good with my spelling because I never went to school*'. This problem clearly has implications for employment prospects as well as participation in college courses as another young man explains:

I canny really write you see. That's why half the jobs I go fur are labouring and that. It's all I can do. I don't need to touch a pen or a bit of paper. So I go for things where I don't have to write. (non-participant, male)

Financial difficulties

For many of these young people financial difficulties act as a further disincentive to participation in college. This may be because they are living on their own, and they do not think that any financial support they will receive from college will be adequate to meet their needs. It may also be because there is an expectation within the family that they should contribute to the family income. This has resulted in some young people dropping out of courses:

The Skillseekers thing was really difficult to live on [£40 a week plus fares]. I think I would like to go back at some point, but the money would need to change before I did. (non-participant, male)

Pregnancy and childcare

For a number of young women in the sample the problems outlined above are further complicated by early pregnancies and the associated problems of childcare:

Before I was 16 I had this boyfriend and I moved in with him Then I was in a homeless hostel, then I got pregnant to X's dad just after I left the hostel. Then I moved in when I was pregnant. Then I got a house of my own and moved up here. (non-participant, female)

In these cases the problem is not just the availability of childcare, but also the expense and the quality of what might be available. Young women in this situation clearly feel that their real options are severely limited, although, as the following quotation indicates, a number of them would like to feel able to undertake some further study.

I think I would feel guilty about leaving with a child minder all the time. Then there's the expense of a childminder or crèche or whatever, and then I don't know if I could cope with studying and all that. But then I would like to do it [go to college]. (non-participant, female)

College is not for them

Many of these young people have strongly-held views that college is not really an option for them:

Never really thought of college. I'm 18 and just want to enjoy myself just now.
(non-participant, male)

I just feel that college would be the same as school. I hated most of the teachers and they hated me so it just didn't work. (non-participant, female)

These views were also held by some of the participants, although in these cases they have been encouraged to investigate college as an option and their views have changed. This quote from a focus group interview with young men showed that before they came to college, they thought it would be full of people very different to themselves:

C: *I thought it was full of hippies.*

M: *People with folders.....and full of foreigners. A bit of a strange place.*

P: *And folk with green hair.....*

(new entrant, males)

These views were also associated in some cases with a belief that they do not have the necessary ability or qualifications which would be required:

I didn't think I could do it. I thought that when I came to college I would fail...and everyone would laugh at me. (non-participant, female)

A number of non-participants also commented on the fact that none of their pals went to college, and they would not want to go somewhere where they did not know anyone. Conversely, as will be noted below, the presence of mates who were already there, or going with them, acted as a strong incentive to attend. Social relationships were very important for the young people in either becoming more committed to an identity as a learner, or conversely rejecting learning as not an option for them.

A number of respondents raised issues which questioned the point of studying. This was sometimes associated with the experience of friends who had studied but had gained little in the way of improved job prospects as a result.

One of my mates did go, he went for a year doing a trade I think, but after the year he came out and still couldn't get a job. So when you see that happening you do think, what's the point of it. ...I just wouldn't want to go. (non-participant, male)

This was also associated with the perception that a long period of study would be needed to get a qualification which will realistically lead to improved job prospects:

..see in this area you would have to go for a long time and get really decent qualifications to get a decent job. (non-participant, female)

Some respondents, possibly quite realistically, were doubtful about their ability to sustain a long course of study which would lead to a qualification and job of this kind.

Overall then, the factors outlined above have created circumstances in which many young people do not see college as an option which is realistically open to them and

have little information about the opportunities which may be there. Thus a young man attending a community-based project which provided football etc commented:

...to be honest I am not sure what's available at college – that's not to say that they don't put posters up and that, 'cos they do – even in here – but I suppose I don't pay much attention to them. (non-participant, male)

6.3 Identifying why young people participate in learning

Like the adult returners, the processes through which young people become engaged in learning often involves the complex interaction of a number of factors.

6.3.1 Factors which influence participation among young people

Our study has been concerned not just with the barriers which prevent entry into FE, but also with the processes through which young people become involved in education. These depend on the complex interaction between a number of factors. Some of these are associated with the position of these young people in the socio-economic structure, some to do with the attitudes which they have developed towards education, and some to do with the institutional provision.

Socio-economic position

Among at least some of the young people who are participating in FE there is evidence that they have a less marginal socio-economic position than the non-participants.

Family support

There is greater evidence of family interest and support than among non-participants. In some cases this is expressed as positive encouragement to stay on in education and gain additional qualifications:

...She [Mum] encouraged me to go to school because she didn't want me to be like her. She said she used to skip school all the time. She didn't get qualifications...her mother didn't encourage her very much...She wanted it to be different for me. (new entrant, female)

In other cases this is expressed more negatively that parents viewed college as better than hanging about the house:

My mum did not like me lying in bed all day, so she said I better do something, and get a job or go to college. (new entrant, male)

In general, these young people seemed to be staying in more stable family environments, and parents were providing some encouragement for participation in further study.

More positive experience of schooling

There was also less evidence of negative attitudes towards, and experiences of, schooling:

I was well behaved at school, I think I was pretty good at school. (new entrant, female)

More of these young people had left school with some qualifications. This was usually a mixture of Standard Grades and SCOTVEC/SQA modules. Overall then, there is some evidence that in many cases participants in college were building on attitudes towards school which were at least ambivalent, and quite positive in some cases. It appears that they were also less likely to have serious problems of literacy or numeracy as a result of non-attendance. All of these factors helped create circumstances in which progression to college was more likely to appear as an option which they could seriously consider.

6.3.2 Motives which encourage participation

In our study of young people it has also been possible to identify a number of motives which have encouraged them to take the first steps towards participation in FE. In a number of cases these represented only a very limited initial commitment to further education, but they have been enough to get them started and develop a fragile learner identity.

Employment related factors

The desire to obtain qualifications which will lead to improved job prospects and longer-term career opportunities emerged as important motives encouraging participation by the young people in college courses. In some cases this was associated with very clear aspirations towards a particular type of employment:

...all I ever wanted to do was cooking. It's like you're upping yourself, if you know what I mean, 'cos then you've got something, like a qualification. (new entrant, female)

In other cases students enrolled on programmes, such as Skillseekers to widen the options open to them:

I don't fancy doing that [fish processing] all my life. I want a good career. (new entrant, male)

Lack of positive alternatives

However, among other students there was less evidence of strong positive motives towards education or training, and their involvement in FE reflected more the fact that there was little to be found in the way of employment, and this was better than doing nothing:

...I think going to college is in fashion at the moment. Well it's like there is nothing else to do 'cos you can't get work. (new entrant, male)

In these cases young people may initially participate because they see little in the way of attractive alternatives.

Financial incentives

An interest of this kind in participation may be further strengthened by the financial support which is made available to many students through schemes such as Skillseekers and EU ESF programmes, as well as college bursaries. The importance of this form of support, as an incentive for participation emerged as a strong factor in many of our interviews:

- I. *How did you find out about the course?*
 R. *My mates told me...*
 I. *What did they say?*
 R. *That you get paid £50 per week.*
 (new entrant, male)

This payment is important, not just as an incentive, but as an important means of financial support in many cases:

I couldn't afford to come if we didn't get the money. (new entrant, male)

Support of this kind can be a means of overcoming the financial hardship we referred to above. However, for many people who are living in real financial hardship the levels of support currently available do not seem to be adequate. This is an issue which colleges and funders need to examine carefully.

Interesting course content

A further factor of some importance in encouraging an interest in participation was the extent to which the content of the programme was itself interesting and attractive. In some cases this reflected strong interests which the students already had. However, in other cases it appeared that students were attracted by content which seemed interesting and topical:

- R 1. *I was told we were going to get building robots.*
 R 2. *That's what I heard – that we would get to build robots, and it would be a challenge.*
 R 1. *That we would get to take part in robot wars.*
 (new entrant, males)

Other respondents expressed interests in areas such as catering and outdoor education, and the issue of the relationship between the profile of available courses and the interests of prospective students is an issue which may require further investigation.

6.3.3 Pathways and routes into learning

We have discussed above the general factors which motivate participation. We must now consider the processes through which students become participants on the programme. This involves considering aspects of the participant's own life situation, and their interactions with peers and others, and aspects of institutional provision which encourages participation.

Peer support

A number of students commented on the role of their mates in providing information about the courses, and in encouraging them to participate.

My mate is doing the NC and he told me about it. He told me you got paid and that, and I thought no' bad, getting paid to go to college ... and I know another couple of folk that were coming. (new entrant, male)

Support of this kind can clearly have a key role in enabling young people to overcome the uncertainties which many of them face regarding their suitability for college, and

whether college is an option which people in their position can consider. Conversely, as we have noted above, the absence of peer group support can discourage people from considering college as an option. This shows the importance of relationships with others in developing a learner identity.

The role of other agencies

The relationships between the FE colleges and a number of other organisations and agencies are also of considerable importance in the processes through which students come to participate in FE. With respect to young people, one key agency is the Careers Service, and a number of respondents commented on this role:

My careers officer phoned my house and asked me what I was doing, and I was doing nothing, so they suggested coming down to the careers office for an interview. So I went down, and they suggested I went to college. So that is what I did. (new entrant, male)

While the Careers Service is clearly of importance in facilitating the participation of young people on programmes such as Skillseekers, our research did not enable us to establish the extent to which it is successful in maintaining contact with the groups who are at greatest risk of social exclusion. This is an issue which requires more careful investigation.

There is also evidence that other agencies with whom our respondents were involved could have a valuable role in providing information and support which enabled them to move on into relevant programmes of study or training. Thus one young man who is interested in outdoor education has been able to gain information and support through the homeless projects where he had been living. This has led him to the point where he is now applying to college, to undertake the course in which he is interested.

- I. *...do you feel you have had support from people?*
- R. *It has mainly been from the old volunteers who used to work here [homeless project for young men]. Because they were here nearly five days a week I got on well with them. (non-participant, male)*

The research has generally shown the importance of the involvement of people in a wide range of activities, some of which may be formal education, but others of which are much more informal, in the processes through which many people make the transition into education. Through involvement in these activities young people may engage in informal learning through which their confidence and self-esteem increases, and they feel more able to consider the demands of a more formal college course. The case of the young man referred to above is a good example in this respect in that he has been making the transition from someone with a very unstable lifestyle to someone who now feels ready to plan a future programme of activity which he hopes will take him to Camp America and India.

Local availability of provision

Participation in FE can also be encouraged by the local availability of opportunities. The importance of the local provision of FE for many students has been recognised in earlier work (Gallacher *et al*, 1997). This issue again emerged in this study, where a number of our young respondents made it clear that ease of travel to the college was an important factor which encouraged them to attend.

I think this place is easy to find. I live maybe three miles away and get one bus and I'm here, so that's great. (new entrant, female)

It should also be noted that the location of the college is not just something which contributes to ease of travel, but it is also important from a psychological point of view, in that many students, particularly those most at risk of social exclusion, will find it easier to participate in a college which is part of their community and not something culturally distant.

6.4 Developing learning careers

Having considered the factors which encourage initial participation, we must now examine the processes through which young people become more committed to their roles as students, and develop their learning careers. This helps us understand why students persist with their studies, and where appropriate proceed to another course. As we have indicated above, in doing this we are interested in the processes through which social identities are changed through interactions with college staff, peers and others.

Relations with college staff

Institutional factors emerge as very strong factors in understanding why students continue with their studies. In this respect, an important point for many students is that they are treated with respect by the staff, and they find the college to be a supportive environment in which their confidence has grown. This often leads to favourable comparisons between school and college.

...the teachers at college respect you. They treat you equal. They don't look down on you as a child or something like that. (new entrant, female)

In addition to this generally supportive environment, a number of students also commented on the special support facilities which were available for students with additional learning difficulties.

Overall it is clear that many students find the general atmosphere of the college to be one which provides greater freedom than school. The relationships with staff are ones in which they feel that they are, for the most part, being treated in a more adult way. This has an important impact on their own perception of themselves, and has enabled them to grow in the role of student.

Peer group support

Peer group support is also a significant factor for a number of students. Many clearly enjoy their relations with their fellow students, and this has become an important source of support for them. It is something which has contributed to their growing self-confidence and to their positive attitude towards college.

I. So what's been good about college?

R1. Meeting new people, learning new things

R2. It's been great for me. I'm much healthier and happier....

(new entrant, females)

A number of students have also commented favourably on the social side of college life.

- I. What else have you enjoyed about college?*
R1. Social side – I like the football.
R2. I like the pool room, meet other people.
R3. You do get a good laugh here.
R4. We had a weekend away, like one of those teambuilding things. Ropebuilding and all that. It was good.
(new entrant, males)

A young male student in a predominantly female class also commented on the advantages which this brings:

The girls are nice – a bit of romance. (new entrant, male)

Overall, the importance of this social side of student life and social relationships emerges as potentially of considerable significance in the processes through which a positive commitment to college is developed among young students. This is an issue which has perhaps not received sufficient attention, and it could be an important means of ensuring that colleges are more attractive to a wider cross-section of young people, and that their commitment to study is maintained.

Financial support

While social relations of the kind discussed above are clearly of importance, for many students the more concrete issue of financial support is also of continuing importance in ensuring that they are able to pursue their learning career. The various schemes we have referred to above can have a key role in covering expenses which make continued participation in college possible. There is, however, an issue which will be returned to below, of the extent to which the level of support is sufficient to enable a number of students to continue with their studies.

Growing self confidence

For many students their continued participation in college is associated with a growing confidence in their ability to succeed, and a growing recognition of the value of study for their own future development.

A number of students have commented on how the experience of being a student has made them feel better about themselves, and has contributed to a process of maturity and growing self-confidence. In some cases these students may have entered college for more negative reasons, such as the lack of alternatives or the financial incentives, but their attitudes and self-perceptions have changed while they have been on the course.

- R1. It's not just the money – it's about learning new things.*
R2. It has made me feel better about myself – more grown up.
(new entrant, males)

A number of respondents also comment on their pride in what they have achieved, and the importance for them of completing their course because of the satisfaction which this will bring.

Importance of completing the course

The importance of completing the course and gaining a qualification was recognised as crucial by many of the students. This would help provide evidence to employers that they were capable of sustaining a course of study, and had relevant qualifications. This was seen as giving them advantages in the job market:

... if you have no qualifications then they are going to think, well if somebody else comes along and they have got qualifications they are going to take somebody on who has qualifications. So that is why going to college is pretty important, and to finish your course. (new entrant, male)

In a number of cases students emphasised the importance of completing the course as an achievement in its own right, which gave evidence of reliability, irrespective of the qualification obtained.

The process of undertaking this initial course of study has led a number of students to recognise the opportunities for further study, and the value of this study. It has also increased their own belief in their ability to undertake further study:

I will go on and do the NC after this. I would like to go straight on to do the HNC, but it's a bit too hard to go straight into....but I will try to move on all the time. (new entrant, male)

In a number of other cases the students expressed a desire to move more directly into employment, but with the idea of obtaining an apprenticeship, or some further training. There is therefore evidence that for many of these students the initial process of study has been of importance in setting them off on a process of further study and training.

6.5 Factors associated with non-progression

Within the time available for this study it has not been possible to investigate fully the issues associated with non-progression. However, it is clear from our interviews, both with participants and non-participants that there is a considerable number of young people who do begin a course of study, but do not sustain this. These are issues which require further investigation, but some initial indication of the factors can be provided from the existing research.

Personal and family problems

For a number of young people continued difficulties in their personal and family lives, which we have outlined above and which in some cases may lead to homelessness or pregnancy, contribute to the inability to complete their college course either because of lack of strong motivation, or because their personal circumstances make continued attendance impossible.

College routine and relations with staff

Associated with the above problems there is some evidence that a number of young people continue to find it difficult to settle into the routines expected of them in college life. This may lead to problems with discipline, timekeeping etc. A number of them leave for these reasons.

The importance of supportive attitudes among staff has been strongly emphasised as a very important positive feature of college life, which contributes to favourable attitudes among many students. However, there was also some evidence of more negative attitudes expressed by some staff, which had a discouraging impact on students. There were also cases where students commented unfavourably on a lack of information and structure which left them feeling very uncertain, particularly at the early stage of a course. This can clearly have a significant effect in undermining commitment and confidence.

Finance

We have noted above that while bursaries and allowances have been a strong incentive for some students, in other cases the level of financial support is too low to enable people to complete their programme, or to move on to another course.

Lack of appropriate provision

While the convenience of location has been recognised as a strong factor which facilitates participation, the absence of appropriate courses in a convenient location can become a disincentive for students who wish to carry on to the next stage of their studies.

6.6 Case-study illustration

Mark, Male, aged 17 (new entrant)

Mark left school at 16 with one SCOTVEC module. His experiences of secondary school had not been good, having been bullied in third and fourth year. Although he wanted to do well at school, because of the bullying he missed lots of classes and couldn't concentrate on his work. Although he says his parents were interested in how he got on at school he didn't tell them about the bullying for fear of upsetting them. At 16, Mark left school and got a manual job which he stuck for a few months. Difficulties in the family resulted in him leaving home and moving on his own to a large city. After a few months he wanted to come home, having no job and no money. His parents said he could on the proviso he looked for work. On return to his home town he found out about going to college on the Skillseekers programme through the local careers office. With the backing of his parents he enrolled at college. Although Mark could have found unskilled work in his local area he felt that he wanted to try to get better qualifications. He chose to study electrical subjects, feeling 'there is going to be a future in that'. His experiences of college are much better than school. There is no bullying (even though some of the people who bullied him at school are at the same college). He feels he is treated 'more like an adult'. He has made new friends and his self confidence has greatly increased. Going to college on the Skillseekers programme enabled Mark to get some money of his own, thus not be totally dependent on his family, whilst gaining qualifications that he hopes will lead him to a job that he would like to do. He hopes to continue on with other courses.

6.7 Summary of key points

As with the adult returners, participation by young people in FE is the result of complex processes. For young people, the process of involvement in FE is rather different. A number of them have clear motives associated with improving employment prospects.

Others are more reluctant participants, often coerced by financial incentives, or lack of alternatives. Some then become more positive in their commitment, while others drop-out. Peer influences are very important for this group.

7. Adults with Learning Difficulties

7.1 Introduction

One of the case -study courses selected was specifically for adults with learning difficulties. Central to the commitment to widening access to Further Education is to open up opportunities to learning to groups who are traditionally under-represented not only in education, but in society generally. Adults with learning difficulties are a group who are often marginalised, not only from education but from many other aspects of society including employment opportunities.

In 1996 the Tomlinson report was published which centred on notions of inclusive learning based on the premise that inclusion should be more than integration. It should extend what most of us can have to marginalised groups (see Florian 1997:7). The report was the first national review of FE for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Central to its recommendations was that learning should take the learner's individual requirements as its starting point, and challenged the FE sector to provide *meaningful* learning opportunities for all those who wish to participate (Florian, 1997 emphasis added).

As a group who are historically on the margins of education, employment and society, the research team were keen to include the views of the adult students with learning difficulties. Research into lives and experiences of people with learning difficulties is undergoing change, and people with learning difficulties are increasingly being seen as 'reliable informants who hold valid opinions and who have the right to express them' (Stalker, 1998). The students on the course were keen to tell us about their experiences and attitudes to college.

The section begins with some details about the specific course that the students attended. It then goes on to investigate the barriers to, and motivations for, learning that the students told us about. The options that people with learning difficulties have in their lives, and the role and position of FE in those options is then discussed.

The course in question is specifically designed for adults with learning difficulties who are moving towards greater independence and self-reliance. It lasts for two years and is a combination of modular and non-modular provision. Students can attend for up to 4 days a week. The aims of the course are:

- to provide a positive and realistic bridging course between day centre provision and independent living for adults with learning difficulties;
- to increase the independence, self esteem, social skills and competencies of each student through a range of structured college activities;
- to negotiate with each student a Personal Learning and Support Plan which includes a balanced and coherent programme tailored to individual needs.

The students on the course were living with varying degrees of support in their lives. Some were living in highly supported accommodation (with 24-hour staff available), others were living alone with some professional support (e.g. a keyworker who would visit them). Almost all were 'independent travellers' in that they could travel to and from college unaccompanied.

Data for this chapter come from three focus groups and six life history interviews.

7.2 Barriers

Although this section examines barriers the students faced to initial participation, they are examined in a different way than in the previous two chapters. Many of the barriers to participation faced by the adult returners and the young people are not ones which have relevance for these students. For example, in terms of finance, enrolment on the course did not affect benefits and all the students received some form of help with travel costs, although the use of travel cards could restrict the times of day students could travel. This is not to suggest that these students were financially well off, just that participation did not affect the receipt of benefits. The data show that often the option to participate in FE is one presented to the students by someone they know, usually a keyworker. After interview if they decided to take up the place on offer, there was often help and support to enable them to attend college. However, the interviews revealed some issues which made students hesitant about initial participation:

Negative school experiences

Many reported negative school experiences, and a common theme was an individual attending numerous schools, indicating little stability in early educational years:

I went to 4 or 5 schools. I went to primary school, then another kind of special school and then another special school, then to the XX School.
(new entrant, female)

In addition being bullied at school was a common theme to emerge from the data. Such experiences left some initially wary of returning to learning.

Family members unease about college

For two of the students, family members had initially been resistant to then coming to college. It may be that family members are anxious about what they perceive to be risk-taking activities.

Something new and unfamiliar

Some of the students reported feeling nervous and anxious about attending the college as this was a new experience for them. Many told life stories that were built around routines with familiar places and faces, such as attending the same adult learning centre for many years, going to the same social clubs each week on the same night. Others had been in institutional care for parts of their lives with built in routines and structures. Coming to college was a big life change, presenting new experiences and challenges such as going to new places, meeting new people, or trying new bus routes. For some initially this provoked some anxiety.

7.3 Motivations

Like the other groups in the study, the adults with learning difficulties were motivated to participate in learning for a variety of reasons. Although motivations to engage with learning showed some similarities to other groups, different motivations were also given. These could be related to the position of people with learning difficulties in society.

College is better than other options

Many came to college as it was viewed as the best option in what was a limited range of alternatives. College was often compared to adult training centres or work centres where many respondents had been attending for many years. These were the most common alternative provisions for the students and college was seen as 'better than looking at four walls'. The quotes below are typical of responses the students gave:

They do teach us a lot here because in the Centres there is not much to do. You get stuck. (new entrant, male)

College gets you away from the workcentre and gives you time and the chance to make friends. (new entrant, male)

Gaining new skills / interest in the subjects on offer

The adults with learning difficulties also wanted to go to college to improve skills such as reading or writing or were interested in specific subject on offer such as computers or gardening. The data show that for these students, as with others in the study, learning about computers was an area that many were interested in,

One woman who reported loving her work centre and did not want to leave, made the decision to go to college in order to break up her week. In addition she wanted to go to college to re-learn reading and writing skills. Her decision can be viewed as planned in that respect:

I like the college. I do like to get away from the Centre a wee bit. So I go to college 2 days and the work centre 3 days. It breaks up my week.I can read a bit but when I was at school I couldn't read cos they [teachers] wouldn't teach me. So I went to college. I thought well if they won't teach me at school I will go to college. And it has helped me a lot... (new entrant, female)

Employment related goals

For others, motivations and goals were related to the hope of gaining some kind of employment through skills gained on the course. For this student the fact that he was gaining these skills in an educational setting gave them extra value that he could show to potential employers:

I have done painting and decorating and see then if you want to do a job in somebody's house then you have the skills for that job. If you want to be a painter then on the form you can tell them you have done it at college and they can see you have done it at college. (new entrant, male)

Another student, although having enjoyed the course, told how he wanted a 'real' job that because of attitudes and prejudice against people 'like him' from society and employers, felt this would not be a possibility. Research does show that the employment rate for people with learning difficulties is falling and forms of supported employment are increasingly the route for those who do find work (Riddell *et al* 1999:60).

Meeting new people

Like others in the study, the chance to meet new people and extend social networks was important for this group of students:

The thing that has been good for me is meeting my pal Sarah and meeting each other and meeting new people. (new entrant, female)

7.4 Learning pathways

People with learning difficulties can lack control over decision making in their lives and often choices are made for, not by, them (Stalker *et al*, 1999). In addition they are a group who are known to acquiesce, and not to criticise service providers. The research team were interested in the choice or choices that students felt they had had over coming to college. For this group of students their pathways to learning were very different from both the adult returners and the young people. Almost always they were approached by someone they knew, usually a keyworker, and asked if they would like to go for an interview to go to college.

Joe describes how he was asked and why he decided to come:

I: *Who did you talk to about college?*

J: *Well my keyworker suggested it. At first I thought she was kidding on. She said 'how would you like to go to college and try and learn some things'. And now I do go 4 days at college - 4 full days. I thought she was kiddin' on. I never thought I would go to college. See some of them here [at the Centre] just sit and smoke and they have been asked. I thought it might help me to get a job after college. I thought I'd give it a try.*

(new entrant, male)

The majority of the students stressed that the ultimate choice about whether they came to college or not was their own. They had decided:

Nobody made me come. I was asked and I thought it would be a good thing.

(new entrant, female)

As such the decision to come to college is not one which students agonised over. Often it is presented to them as a choice in a limited range of other choices, but neither is it one that they 'drifted into' in Matza's sense of drift. The data show that people with learning difficulties have motivations to learn and aspirations for themselves. The context in which people with learning difficulties have to try to realise their aspirations may be more limited than for the other two groups in the study, for example opportunities for employment. Realising inclusiveness for this group gets to the core of the debate and problematic nature of the social inclusion agenda.

7.5 Learning careers

As with other groups in the study, goals and motivations changed over time. Some of the students were hoping to go onto other college courses or some kind of employment after the course and were hoping to use this college course as a stepping stone to move onto other things. There were factors which encouraged the students to keep coming to college:

College environment

The students enjoyed the college environment. Important to them were the relationships developed with other students on the course. Coming to college was something that students described as fun, often 'having a laugh'.

Tutor support

All the tutors on the course were spoken about positively. They were described as very helpful and the relationships developed with tutors were influential in this experience.

Peer support

Like other respondents in the study, peer relationships and peer support were important in developing a learning identity and career.

Interest in developing specific skills

Some developed specific interests which they wanted to pursue:

I want to go somewhere where I can do more with computers. I have learnt things here and I want to do more. (new entrant, female)

Growing self confidence and independence

Learning had a wider impact on the students' lives. For many the experience of attending a 'mainstream' college was positive both in terms of what they learnt and the friendships they made. A main focus of the learning experience for this group of students was to build confidence and self-esteem. The course has supported some to be more independent in their lives and integrate into society, for example one man spoke of starting to use his local library, another of college helping her to be 'less shy'. One woman's biography showed how starting to come to college was part of her getting a new life together after many years spent in a psychiatric hospital. Another student shows how her learning experience has been valuable in her life:

It has helped me be more independentIt has helped me sort my money and get about. ... But I think it has helped me cos they take us to the pictures, 10 pin bowling, out for tea. So now I do things with my boyfriend. (new entrant, female)

Work experience / work placements

In the second year of the course, student got the opportunity to go on work-placements organised through the college. This was something that the first year students looked forward to and the second year students valued. The students highlighted the value and importance on work-placements:

I think this has been good [college]. The work experience is good. You can see what happens in a place, then maybe move on to get a job you can get good at something and that feels good. I might like to work. (new entrant, female)

In addition work-placements were used to improve social skills, such as mixing with people and working with the public, as well as improve self confidence.

Lack of other options

Wanting to do more things at college was also framed in the reality that often people with learning difficulties lack many options and choices in their lives:

I would like to go to another college. It gives you something to do.
(new entrant, female)

One man, however, expressed he had had enough of college, that participation in FE was no longer providing anything new in his life. He was in a sense 'colleged out'

But now I have had enough college. I don't want it anymore. I want to be a DJ. I have been to lots of colleges and now I just do the same things.
(new entrant, male)

The data showed that about half of the adults on the course were not 'New Entrants'. Many had attended other college courses in the past. As such, going to college may be an accepted part of life for some adults with learning difficulties. This was not to say that the students did not benefit from going to college as clearly many of them did, but this might raise issues about clear progression routes for adults with learning difficulties within the FE system.

The college in question had recognised these problems and had developed a new course with greater focus on practical skills. Two students on this course were interviewed as 'early entrants' (both have completed the first course in 1997). Both had placements at adult training centres, but had again decided to spend part of their time back at college. Both responded that they were enjoying the new course.

7.6 Case study illustration

Maureen, aged 47

Maureen lives on her own, with some support from professionals and family. In secondary school Maureen attended what she terms a 'special school' which she loved. She left at 16 and went to a local work centre for adults with learning difficulties. When it closed she went to another work centre where she still goes today. Maureen likes her work, making brackets for vertical blinds. Information about the course had come from the college course leader, who visited her day centre and asked if she would like to attend. Maureen had been to one college before, doing a course on life skills, but jumped at the chance to go to college again, choosing herself to go for 2 days. Although she loves her work centre she felt that college 'would break up her week'. She has specific reasons for wanting to go to college, the main one being to improve her reading and writing skills:

when I was at school I wanted to read and write and the teachers wouldn't help me.... I can read a bit but when I was at school I couldn't read because the teachers wouldn't help me. So I went to college now. I thought if they won't teach me at school I will go to college. And it has helped me a lo'.

In addition Maureen felt that, through the teaching of travel skills and other living skills, she had become more independent and organised in her daily life, for example going to the pictures, going to cafes and doing her housework. At the time of interview she was due to start a work placement in a local supermarket organised through the

college, which she is happy about and knows that part of its purpose is to see how well she can get on with other people and work in a team. For her one of the best things about going to college has been meeting new people and making new friends. Initially her brother was a bit hesitant and reluctant about Maureen going to college but now fully supports her.

7.7 Summary

Adults with learning difficulties are not a homogenous group. They are individuals with different personalities, aspirations, likes and dislikes, skills and abilities. FE was making significant changes in the lives of the students. Increased self confidence and feelings of control over more aspects of their lives were highlighted as positive. Participation was helping students to begin to 'break free' from some of the many societal constraints they felt in their daily lives. Overall the students spoke of their experiences of college in positive terms. As with other groups in the study, meeting new people, both students and staff, was important. Course tutors were described as nice and helpful. For many social networks had been extended. The students enjoyed the variety of subjects on offer, some of which were focused on filling or managing leisure time, whereas others had a greater vocational emphasis (e.g. painting and decorating). In the second year students were found a work placement in local industries, and this was viewed positively in terms of using skills learnt at the college in the 'wider world', meeting new people and, for some, the possibility that this might lead to work.

The interviews also showed that a number of the students had attended other colleges. This may indicate that there is the danger of people with learning difficulties not embarking on any kind of learning career, but more of a learning circle as they move (or are moved) from college to college or around different forms of provision. The college in question had recognised this danger, and we developing the curriculum to meet new needs. It will take a concerted effort by not just educators, but employers and society generally, to provide meaningful and useful learning experiences that do not replicate each other and that do provide real and meaningful progression routes, be that to other colleges, supported employment or 'real' employment.

8 Institutional Responses

8.1 Introduction

As part of the research process, the views of key college staff within each of the four institutions were sought. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tutors/programme leaders / community co-ordinators who had some level of responsibility for the selected 'new entrant' case study courses, as well as the Principal (or their representative) from each college. The aims of these interviews were to:

- allow college staff to articulate the challenges that the social inclusion agenda posed for their own college;
- to investigate how each college was responding to these challenges;
- to investigate to what extent the national framework within which college operates supports or hinders this work.

8.2 The challenges of the social inclusion agenda

The challenges of the social inclusion agenda were described in the context of how to widen access to non-traditional learners. College staff articulated social inclusion as not just widening access to participation, but as a means to promoting social justice and equality of opportunity for the communities they serve. Across the four colleges the target groups for inclusion showed some overlap and included disaffected young people, adult returners, people with disabilities and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. There was evidence of specific initiatives in each of the colleges, for example working with people who are homeless, people with refugee status and travelling people who were wintering in the locality. Concern was raised by several staff about the invisibility of adult men within FE, and young people who were extremely disillusioned with any form of education. One college, working in a very rural area, highlighted the challenges of trying to respond to the social inclusion agenda in a large geographical area with a thinly-spread population and small pockets of rural deprivation.

Responding to this agenda has brought with it the challenges of greater inter-agency and inter-disciplinary working. The colleges were working ever closer with a range of agencies including community education, voluntary organisations and Local Enterprise Companies (LECs), often in very successful ways.

Colleges were to 'reach out' to students who were not participating; to inform them of what was available and what forms this provision took; to encourage them to participate; and to facilitate progression. Some staff felt that non-traditional learners brought distinct challenges for them in that in the words of one Principal, these 'new entrants' may bring with them more 'social baggage' than other students. One community worker phrased this in a different way, arguing that the colleges have a responsibility to people who are 'fragile' – people who because of a series of knocks and setbacks throughout their lives, may come to learning with little confidence in their abilities, low self-esteem and with other difficulties in their lives. As such, the colleges and their staff have a responsibility to these students to make the experience of FE different and positive. These students, therefore, may require greater levels of support and guidance and may benefit from different ways of teaching that are flexible and informal. All of these will have resource implications for the colleges. One Vice-Principal noted that the greater the penetration into the most socially-excluded groups,

the higher the level of resources required to reach and retain these students. This will also pose new challenges for teaching staff in terms of increased workloads and reflections on their own approaches to teaching and learning.

There was general recognition that college infrastructure needs to be in place to meet the needs of students wherever possible, for example, increases in learning support and guidance facilities. In addition, a key feature of institutional provision is the need for crèche facilities. As this research shows, the provision of childcare is one of the major barriers that (particularly) women raised in relation to returning to learning. In addition, transport to and from the college, particularly in more rural areas, is an important factor.

8.3 Responses

The interviews show that the four colleges were rising to these challenges and responding to the social inclusion agenda. Responses take the form of college-wide initiatives and strategies, to innovations at the 'ground level', the latter involve teaching staff instigating changes that they feel will be responsive to the need of non-traditional learners.

At the college level all four were using widening access monies to increase provision to non-traditional learners, although the ways they were doing this did differ. One college had developed and was in the process of implementing an 'inclusive learning plan', which detailed target groups, methods of communicating with these groups, and dedicated staff to implement each part of the plan. Another, because of geographical location, had concentrated more on outreach work and on transport initiatives. Another responded that the widening access monies had supported a number of community initiatives.

..because to run classes in the communities is costing money, so some of it is in tuition, some of it is in equipment in terms of mobile computer units, some of it is in putting in more time in guidance staff. Some of it was in physical adaptations for disabled students.

All the college staff placed great importance on issues around widening access. Several of the teaching staff responded that 'social inclusion' was what colleges had always done (and should be doing) and another responded that he felt the social inclusion agenda was bringing the college 'back to its roots'.

At both the strategic level and the more grass-roots level the importance of building partnerships with other agencies was highlighted as an important response to the social inclusion agenda. Several of the colleges were active within Social Inclusion Partnerships areas (SIPS). The relationship with community education was viewed as important, although the strength of relationships varied between the colleges, ranging from 'excellent' to fears of a 'turf war' and clashes over different working cultures. The voluntary sector was one which was gaining prominence, with a recognition that voluntary organisations may provide the routes and pathways back to learning for some students. In addition the interviews showed that colleges are developing stronger links with local schools in their areas. One college runs a scheme called 'vocational pathways' for young people (aged 14/15) who have lost interest in education at school. These young people attend a mixture of college and school in the hope this will rekindle their interest in learning.

An issue which emerged is how to communicate effectively to non-traditional learners about what FE has to offer. There was general acknowledgement that traditional prospectuses may not be the best way, and the importance of word-of-mouth was recognised. More informal mechanisms of communication were being developed such as posters, using local newspapers, sending children home from school with information, and using contacts in other agencies who may already be in contact with target groups, including mental health projects, youth projects, unemployed centres and family centres.

In the context of widening access, all the four colleges placed emphasis on taking learning out to the community. It was recognised that some students would not participate in learning within the main FE colleges. As one college principal stated: 'they won't come to us; my view is that we will have to go to them'. The strength of community provision varied among the four colleges, although all four had some form of provision in the community. Although all the senior staff interviewed thought this was an area that would and should grow in response to the social inclusion agenda, the 'status' of community learning varied among the four colleges. In one, community provision was central to the whole college. A large amount of this colleges work was in community learning centres, unemployed centres, community halls. Students could advance to HND level in the community and there was recognition and acceptance that some students would never participate in FE in a main college building. This college had particularly strong links with community education and other agencies. In the others, the strengths of links varied and some community provision had a more peripheral feel. Some staff working in community settings responded that other college staff and Heads of Departments did not, at times, understand or value the work they did.

Other responses were being developed by course teaching staff themselves. One staff member had developed a NC and HNC in 'Working with Communities' as a course for people already active in the community, for example, in volunteering work. Another course leader, working mostly with young men, had established a new teaching role as a 'key person' who spends over half of their time teaching the same group of young men. This was developed from the recognition that the students were not responding well to changing teachers all the time. This initiative has led to better retention rates on the course.

The success of the colleges in responding to the social inclusion agenda relies not just on the commitment of staff but the ways that staff are encouraged and supported to take forward this agenda. At the senior level, this challenge was recognised and staff training, for example, on inclusive learning was being undertaken. The responses from teaching staff, however, varied. Some felt that they were being given tremendous opportunities for staff development, whereas for others they felt that workloads were increasing with no proper support mechanisms in place for them. One staff member felt that they were being asked to teach people who didn't want to be at college and this was problematic both for them and other students in the class. This is a staff development issue which needs to be addressed.

8.4 The framework within which colleges work

Senior college staff were asked if the national framework, government agendas and policies within which they were operating were helpful to widening access. All felt that the role of their FE college was to be responsive to the needs of all members of their community and non-traditional learners should be encouraged and supported to participate. To this end the widening access monies made available by Government

had been useful and had been used in a variety of different ways appropriate to each college. Access to European Social Funding under different objectives was also key to providing courses to encourage participation, particularly as these could address both travel and childcare expenses. There was some concern that whilst the Government may want colleges to widen access, there remains an issue that some non-traditional learners, because of their life situations might need extra support and guidance, yet this was not being recognised within the overall funding framework.

Other Government strategies, such as New Deal and Skillseekers, received a more mixed reaction. One college Principal described New Deal in positive terms:

Well, I think in terms of New Deal, which I think is a genuine attempt to higher their options, the full-time education and training option is a good choice for some individuals, because it allows them to stay in a benefits situation. Rather than getting into a debt situation in terms of student finance. Now, what we've done is we've put down a whole variety of programmes that people could infill under New Deal.

Another describes New Deal in a different way as a 'financial disaster' for colleges:

New Deal is a financial disaster for further education... New Deal, we don't get our mainstream funding, we only get less money, we get less money with New Deal clients.

In two of the colleges the Skillseekers programme was viewed as contributing to the widening access agenda. In another college, however, neither the Skillseekers programme nor New Deal was viewed as part of the widening access process. The rationale for this was that these were viewed as Government programmes that are focused very much on achieving specific Government outputs. If people are in Skillseekers in the New Deal programme, they are in 'society' somewhere. As such, they are not truly non-participants who the colleges should be targeting.

The issue of the benefits system was raised by several of the Principals. They felt that the present benefits arrangements did not support people in moving on in education, particularly on a full-time basis as full-time status meant many benefit losses for students. As such, many non-traditional learners have to always study on a part-time basis to keep benefit provision intact.

8.5 Summary

All four colleges recognised that responding to the social inclusion agenda posed significant challenges for them. The four colleges were adopting various strategies and responses to meet this agenda. The national framework within which colleges work both facilitates and mitigates against this work. There were differences in opinion about the usefulness of Government schemes such as New Deal or Skillseekers, and it was generally agreed that the funding framework does not take into account that new learners may require additional support which has resource implications. Responding to the social inclusion agenda may also pose new challenges for staff with implications for staff training and support.

Challenges from the social inclusion agenda

- Widening participation to non-traditional students
- Strengthen and support local communities

- Promoting social justice and equality of opportunity
- Supporting staff in responding to new challenges
- Improving college infrastructures including childcare and transport
- Improve inter-agency working

Responses to this agenda

- The use of widening access monies to promote new initiatives.
- The provision of learning in community locations
- The provision of childcare facilities
- The provision of courses financed, for example, through ESF money so that childcare and travel can be financed.
- Staff development on, for example, approaches to inclusive learning
- Improving and strengthening local partnerships with other agencies
- Specific course initiatives developed on the ground by staff themselves

The framework within which colleges work

- The national funding framework does not recognise that non-traditional learners may have extra guidance and support needs
- Funding from sources such as the ESF are useful in attracting non-traditional learners
- The benefits system can work against encouraging participation
- There is a mixed reaction from college management to Government initiatives such as Skillseekers or New Deal

9 Summary and Implications

9.1 Introduction

- The increasing emphasis on lifelong learning in a knowledge based economy raises a key question for the social inclusion agenda. What measures can be taken to reduce the gap between the 'knowledge haves' and 'have nots'? It is increasingly recognised that steps must be taken to tackle the 'learning divide'. If this is not achieved, existing inequalities will be deepened.
- FE colleges have been increasingly recognised as having a key role in widening access to education and training, and in implementing the social inclusion agenda.
- This study investigates the role of FE in widening access to education for people from social groups most likely to experience social exclusion. These issues are explored with respect to three groups:
 - Adult returners
 - Young people
 - Adults with learning difficulties
- Barriers to learning are complex, and are associated with people's position within the social and economic structure.
- The processes through which people become engaged in learning involves a complex interaction between the agency of the individual and structural forces in society. These include:
 - Key motivating factors
 - Circumstances which facilitate initial involvement, which we refer to as pathways and routes into learning
 - Factors which encourage greater commitment to a learner identity and engagement with a learning career
- Many of the people who are the focus for this study could be described as 'uncertain learners'; the process of involvement in learning is often not a planned and linear progression, but can be seen to involve an element of 'drift' in many cases.

9.2 Summary of key factors associated with participation and non-participation for the three groups studied.

9.2.1 Adult learners

For many of the adults in this study participation in FE was not the result of a carefully planned decision-making process and some 'drifted' into FE. Initial participation often resulted in commitment to the role and identity of learner and the desire to develop a learning career. Barriers to participation were linked to attitudinal barriers and structural constraints.

Barriers to learning

- **Poverty and unemployment.** Many respondents came from families which had experienced poverty and unemployment. This in turn contributed to low levels of achievement in school.
- **Negative attitude towards schooling.** Many of our interviewees, particularly among the non participants, had developed negative attitudes towards schooling which made participation in formal education difficult in later life.
- **Finance.** Problems associated with finance are a major barrier to participation in study for many people.
- **Childcare.** For non-participant women childcare was a major barrier to studying.
- **Travel difficulties.** Travel difficulties were of note, particularly in rural areas.
- **Age.** Many adults perceived their age an important barrier to participation. They view FE as being for younger students and not for them.

Key motivating factors

- **Self-development.** An important motive which emerged was that of self-development, particularly with respect to women.
- **Improving employment prospects.** The idea of improving employment prospects was important for many adult students, and particularly men. However, while many adult returners expressed the hope that learning would lead to better employment they were also not confident that it would do so because of other factors such as age or health problems.
- **Involvement in community and voluntary organisations.** A desire to be more effective in other activities, such as community and voluntary organisations was another reason, which led some respondents into FE.
- **Overcoming health and related problems.** A significant number of the adult returners suffered or had suffered from mental or physical health problems. Participating in education had helped them to 'come back into the community', ending their personal isolation.

Pathways into learning

- **Critical incidents.** Critical incidents, such as divorce, bereavement or redundancy, in a person's biography may act as a catalysts which encourage participation in education.
- **Drift.** Some respondents told stories of unplanned pathways and routes into FE, such as the chance meeting of a friend who was engaged in learning.
- **Turning points.** For some respondents a particular set of life circumstances enabled the transition between non-participant to participant, for example the availability of a course at a local centre, the desire to keep up and help children with homework, along with a desire to meet new people.
- **Involvement in informal learning.** Involvement in other projects such as local family centres, tenants' groups, women's groups, community resource centres, youth projects, which often involves a considerable amount of informal learning, was also important in facilitating the return to more formal learning for many adults.
- **The role of community based FE provision.** The availability of local community-based FE provision was of great importance in enabling some respondents to make the transition from non-participant to participant. This was particularly the case for those who had left school at the earliest possible age with a negative experience of schooling.
- While all the adult returners located in community provision were very positive about this form of learning, the research did find evidence that there is the danger

that students become too dependent on the centre, and are limited in the opportunities to develop their learning careers.

- **Crèche and childcare facilities.** The availability of crèche and childcare facilities was a key factor which facilitated the participation of many women in FE.
- **Information and encouragement.** The way information about courses in FE is communicated to non-traditional learners is a critical factor in persuading such learners to participate. Getting the language, presentation and style right is crucial. Word of mouth from a friend or relative was frequently cited in this study as the main means of hearing about a course

Developing a learning career

Many of the learners in this study, both in community learning environments and in bigger campuses, became increasingly committed to the role and identity of learner once the hurdles of entering college had been overcome. There were factors which supported this:

- **College environment and tutor support.** A number of our respondents indicated that the atmosphere of the college, and the relationships which they established with their tutors were important in enabling them to become more committed to their role as learners.
- **Peer support.** The support which students receive from their fellow students is also of considerable importance in the development of their learning careers.
- **Changing goals.** Associated with the development of learning careers, the goals which learners wish to pursue may change over time.

Factors associated with non-progression

- However, there is evidence from our research that although perceptions of 'self' may change and develop, and self esteem may increase, other more structural barriers may inhibit this progression in a learning career.
- In the new entrant interviews, finance was the most commonly cited barrier to continuation of study
- In addition new entrants may have other domestic commitments which prevent progression.
- In other cases unstable or violent family situations made continued participation difficult.
- There may be a lack of appropriate facilities in learning environment to facilitate progression for students with disabilities.

9.2.2 Young people

As with the adult returners participation by young people in FE is the result of complex processes. Young people who wish to participate in FE may be constrained by social structures. In addition, however, there are young people who do not wish to participate in FE, not viewing it as having any relevance or value to their lives.

Barriers

- **Disrupted personal lives.** Some young people in the study had disruptive or unstable personal/ family situations, for example living in homeless accommodation with little family support. In addition several of the young women had become pregnant at an early age, at times bringing up children on their own with no support from partners or family.

- **Negative school experiences.** Some young people had negative school experience which had left them doubting their educational abilities. Some had experienced bullying or peer pressure to be disruptive in classes. In addition some young people in the study lacked basic numeracy and literacy skills.
- **Finance.** Finance may be a significant barrier especially when there are cultural and family expectations to contribute to the household income.
- **Childcare** For young people who are parents the non-availability of childcare for young children can be a barrier.

Key Motivating Factors

- **Employment related.** For many of the young people in the study participation was motivated in order to get employment, for example to equip themselves with skills and qualifications that would give them an 'edge' on their CV or at interview.
- **Lack of positive alternatives.** However, among other students there was less evidence of strong positive motives towards education or training, and their involvement in FE reflected more the fact that there was little to be found in the way of employment, and this was better than doing nothing.
- **Financial incentives.** An interest of this kind in participation may be further strengthened by the financial support which is made available to many students through schemes such as Skillseekers.
- **Interest in the subjects studied.** Some young people in the study were motivated because of a strong interest in the subject area (e.g. mechatronics).

Pathways to learning

- **Family support.** Young people may be encouraged towards learning through support from their family
- **Peer support.** Young people may be encouraged towards learning through their peers, e.g. having a mate or a pal who starts college.
- **Role of other agencies.** Other agencies may provide pathways to FE, for example through family learning centres or youth projects.
- **Local provision.** Locally available provision where young people do not have far to travel and which does not feel 'culturally' distant to them is also important.

Learning Careers

- **College environment and relationships with college staff.** Young people may be encouraged to keep learning by building up good relationships with college staff. Young people like the college environment where they report they are 'treated like adults'.
- **Peer group support and social aspect of student life.** At college young people extend their social networks and have an expanded social life.
- **Financial support.** While social relations of the kind discussed above are clearly of importance, for many students the more concrete issue of financial support is also of continuing importance in ensuring that they are able to pursue their learning career.
- **Growing self confidence.** For many students their continued participation in college is associated with a growing confidence in their ability to succeed, and a growing recognition of the value of study for their own future development and employment prospects.

Factors associated with non-progression

Within the time available for this study it has not been possible to investigate fully the issues associated with non-progression. However it is clear from our interviews, both with participants and non-participants, that there is a considerable number of young people who do begin a course of study, but do not sustain this. These are issues which require further investigation, but some initial indication of the factors can be provided from the existing research.

- **Personal and family problems.** For a number of young people continued difficulties in their personal and family lives, which in some cases may lead to homelessness or pregnancy, contribute to the inability to complete their college course.
- **College routine and relations with staff.** There is some evidence that a number of young people continue to find it difficult to settle into the routines expected of them in college life. This may lead to problems with discipline, timekeeping etc. There were also cases where students commented unfavourable on a lack of information and structure which left them feeling very uncertain, particularly at the early stage of a course.
- **Finance.** We have noted above that while bursaries, and allowances have been a strong incentive for some students, in other cases the level of financial support is too low to enable people to complete their programme, or to move on to another course.
- **Lack of appropriate provision.** While the convenience of location has been recognised as a strong factor which facilitates participation, the absence of appropriate courses in a convenient location can become a disincentive for students who wish to carry on to the next stage of their studies.

9.2.3 Adults with learning difficulties

The data show that for adults with learning difficulties there are similarities and differences to the other groups:

Barriers

The factors which made adults with learning difficulties wary about participation were quite different from that for the other groups in the study:

- **Negative school experiences.** The data show that often the students had had negative school experiences which initially impacted onto their perceptions of college. These included being bullied at school and being moved from one school to another.
- **Resistance to participation by family members.** The data show that for a few students family members were resistant to them going to college.
- **Something new.** Some were apprehensive about trying something new in lives that were often highly structured and built around routines.

Motivations

Like other groups in the study the adults with learning difficulties had motivation and reasons for going to college.

- **College is better than other options.** Some students came to college as it was perceived as more interesting than the limited range of other options available.
- **Extending social networks.** Going to college helped the students make new friends and meet new people
- **Learning new skills:** college was helping people learn new skills such as reading and writing, independent travel, computing skills and using the internet.
- **Employment.** Some students wanted to come to college to learn skills that might lead them to some kind of employment opportunity.

Pathways to learning

The pathways to learning for this group of students tended to be more structured than for other groups in the study. Often the option to go to college was presented by a third party, often a keyworker.

Developing a Learning Career

There were factors which encouraged the students to maintain participation.

College environment. The students enjoyed the college environment. Important to them was the relationships developed with other students on the course. Coming to college was something that students described as fun, often 'having a laugh'.

Tutor support. All the tutors on the course were spoken about positively. They were described as very helpful and the relationships developed with tutors and peers were influential in this experience.

Interest in developing specific skills. Some developed specific interests which they wanted to pursue such as going onto courses where they would learn about computers

Growing self confidence Students spoke about growing self-confidence as participation at college went on.

Growing independence Students spoke about the college helping them become more independent in their daily lives, for example using a local library for the first time, or using new bus routes, going to the pictures.

Work experience / work placements. Some students hoped that college may lead them onto supported work-placements or to 'real' jobs.

Lack of other options For some, wanting to do more things at college was framed in the reality that often people with learning difficulties lack many real options and choices in their lives.

9.3 Implications

- There is evidence that those who do not currently enter FE, or are not able to pursue successful learning careers, are people who often have deep-rooted problems relating to their position in the socio-economic structure. These people have often come from families in which there are multiple problems associated with poverty and unemployment, and in which they may receive little in the way of support. They have often had negative experiences in school, have few if any qualifications and they continue to experience a range of problems associated with poverty and lack of a stable base in society.
- The needs of these groups must be clearly identified, and appropriate provision developed if they are to be enabled to participate successfully in FE. If this is not done there is a danger that the expansion of FE may exacerbate the problem of social exclusion, rather than lessen it. There is the possibility that as we widen the net to include more people who have some educational achievements, even if only limited, those from the most disadvantaged circumstances will become more isolated in their lack of achievements and qualifications which will enable them to participate in education and the job market.
- The measures which will be required to attract these students into colleges, and to enable them to pursue their studies successfully will require a heavy investment of resources, given the nature of the problems to be overcome. These are, however, issues which must be addressed.
- Financial factors are ones which mitigate against participation in FE. This is associated with factors such as low income and poverty. However it is also associated with regulations within the benefits system. It seems to indicate a problem in policy which advocates lifelong learning and social inclusion through education and training and participation in the labour market, yet at the same time makes it difficult for people caught in the poverty trap to take the first steps towards learning. It is this challenge that FE colleges and policy makers need to confront if they are to be socially inclusive.
- The importance of financial support provided through programmes such as the European Social Fund and Skillseekers must also be recognised. This was clearly a very positive incentive encouraging many people to participate in educational programmes. Further ways of providing support and incentives of this kind should be examined.
- Childcare issues are of crucial importance, particularly for women. Many women lacked informal support networks from family and friends, and did not possess the financial resources to pay for high quality childcare. They were therefore dependent on whatever support is available within colleges or other support agencies. They were also very conscious of their responsibilities towards their children, and did not wish to neglect them in any way. This raises important questions regarding the most effective ways of meeting these needs.
- It is essential that potential participants are well informed regarding the range of options which are available to them. There is evidence that many people still have limited, confused and outdated ideas about the role of FE colleges, and the opportunities available within them. Informal methods of communication, including personal recommendations from friends, and community newspapers seem to be of particular value.

- Involvement in other projects such as local family centres, tenants' groups, women's groups, community resource centres, youth projects, which often involves a considerable amount of informal learning, is also important in facilitating the return to more formal learning for many adults and young people. Such involvement may increase self-confidence, extend social networks and increase knowledge about provision with regard to FE education in a local area. It may be that other such projects provide a stepping-stone to more formal learning. This points to the importance of the links between FE and other organisations and agencies in developing provision which will provide pathways into learning.
- Staff at all levels in the four colleges demonstrated great commitment, enthusiasm and innovation in reaching out to non-traditional learners. There may be, however, staff development issues that need to be addressed in responding to the challenges of the social inclusion agenda.
- Many of the learners within the groups studied could be seen as 'uncertain learners', with initially ambivalent attitudes towards learning, and considerable doubts about the relevance and value of college, and their own ability to succeed. However, a number of these students became increasingly involved in 'learning careers' and engaged in the process of learning. This is associated with a number of factors. These include:
 - Supportive learning environment and college staff;
 - Practical support through finance, childcare etc;
 - Peer group support;
 - Changing self perceptions and attitudes towards study.

It is important that the development of these learning careers is recognised, and measures taken to support these processes of development.

Although the study showed that there are common issues and areas of importance the data show that for the three groups there are some more distinct issues:

Adult returners:

- The availability of local community-based FE provision was of great importance in enabling some respondents to make the transition from non-participant to participant. This was particularly the case for those who had left school at the earliest possible age with a negative experience of schooling. It was clear that without this provision they would not have taken the first step back into learning. Their reasons for not wanting to go to the main campus of a college centred on the fact that community provision is local, more flexible, more informal and friendly. Reference is also made to smaller classes, teaching aimed at adults, and the approachability of the tutors.
- While all the adult returners located in community provision were very positive about this form of learning, the research did find evidence that there is the danger that some students become too dependent on community provision, and are limited in the opportunities to develop their learning careers. There is also an issue concerning the relationship between the outreach centres and their main campus. In some cases it appeared that contact or interaction between the centres and the main campus was limited, thus marginalising both the centres and the learners, although in other cases the community outreach provision was clearly well integrated into the strategy of the college.

Young People

- For young people the process of involvement in FE is rather different. A number of them have clear motives associated with improving employment prospects. Others are more reluctant participants, often coerced by financial incentives, or lack of alternatives. Some then become more positive in their commitment, while others drop-out. Peer influences are very important for this group. We need to consider the measures which will achieve higher levels of participation, and retention among these groups.

Adults with Learning Difficulties

- Overall, college is viewed as a positive option. Many of the students felt that the range of skills they were learning was helpful to them in building self-confidence and promoting greater independence. Participation was enabling people who are very much on the margins of society to participate more in society and as such the course has the ideals of social inclusion at its heart. The data do show that some students have attended many colleges. This may result in students being drawn into 'learning circles' rather than actively contributing to and shaping a 'learning career' which poses a challenge not just to colleges but to society generally.

Future research

This study also has implications for future research:

- There is a need to undertake a longitudinal study of non-traditional learners to look at the concept of learning career in greater depth
- Research is needed which investigates the impact of other factors such as race and disability onto participation in learning.
- Further study of factors associated with withdrawal and drop-out, which would provide useful information about what strategies might be useful to support people as learners.

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