

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

An examination of the experience of individuals, from different vocational and academic entry routes, on a B.A. Educational Studies degree and in subsequent postgraduate study or employment

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An examination of the experience of individuals, from different vocational and academic entry routes, on a B.A. Educational Studies degree, and in subsequent postgraduate study and employment.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research, undertaken between 2004 and 2010, examines the progress of a single cohort of students on an undergraduate degree – the B.A. Educational Studies – at the University of Hull. It investigates their entry profiles, their progress on the degree and the impact their studies have had on their postgraduate lives.

The research has been informed by a range of literature, most notably that of Archer *et al.* (2003), Thomas (2001), Wolf (2002) and Connor *et al.* (2006), in its examination of the policy and values underpinning education as a force for economic growth; widening participation; the impact of family background in relation to education; and the links between vocational and academic entry routes to higher education. The research has been set within a series of policy and value contexts, moving from the global to the national and finally to the local.

The research combines quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate an overarching research question: *How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?* This has been done through an examination of seven key sub-questions:

- 1. What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 2. Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 3. Whom do Hull University admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?*
- 4. How do these students perform on the degree?*
- 5. Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?*

*6. What are the students' eventual ambitions? Do these change, or stay the same? If they change, what leads to this?*

*7. How beneficial have the students' pre-university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study/work?*

The outcome of the research shows that the students are predominantly young and female, living in or near to Hull. Applicants from traditional academic entry routes were accepted with a wider range of UCAS points than students from vocational entry routes, but both groups fared equally well on the degree, whatever the nature of their pre-entry qualifications or whichever subjects they studied beforehand. Mature students, in general, had higher achievement rates on the degree than younger students. In their early postgraduate lives, the students themselves perceived their pre-entry qualifications as having provided little benefit in preparing them for their undergraduate studies, but those with vocational qualifications had found these useful in their postgraduate studies and working lives. Later interviews suggested that these perceptions began to change once the former students were settled in careers. From the research, it emerges that – outwith the nature of students' entry qualifications – family background and teacher expectations have importance in determining the students' reasons for entering higher education. In addition, one of the most significant factors in their successfully gaining graduate jobs appears to have been students' access to work experience both before coming to university and during their time as undergraduates. The sample interviewed three years after graduation was able to reflect on their degree studies as having been a positive and personally fulfilling experience, a finding that relates to key literature underpinning the research.



## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research**

This research focuses upon the experiences and performance of students as undergraduates and graduates, as these relate to their prior qualifications and experience. The research was undertaken between 2004 and 2010 and records an investigation into the experiences of a single cohort of 34 students, on a B.A. Educational Studies degree, studying at the University of Hull. It examines the progress of students on the degree and relates this to their profiles upon entry, with particular reference to their previous experiences and qualifications. The research looks at the final results of these students and examines these in relation to their entry profiles to see whether or not their pre-entry qualifications have a bearing on their eventual qualification. The work then follows a sample of this cohort after they have graduated and entered the world of work or postgraduate study, relating these postgraduate experiences to both their pre-university qualifications and to their progress as undergraduates. The work is produced as a case study which examines the experiences of a particular group of students and locates this within an examination of the wider policy and value context. In particular it examines whether the students who have had a combined set of vocational and academic experiences before entering university are well placed to succeed as undergraduates and meet their postgraduate aspirations. The research uses multiple methods to examine the student experience, beginning with a quantitative examination and following this with a qualitative examination.

This chapter will briefly describe:

- the personal journey that led to the research;
- the cohort under investigation;
- the wider context of the research;

- the research questions; and
- the structure of the thesis.

### Background to the research - a personal journey

This work raises questions about the nature of educational achievement and fulfilment. It is therefore unavoidably impacted not just by the varying contexts of educational policy over the last century but also that period's changing social dynamics, cultural values and political imperatives – as well as the subjective passions that national education strategy foments in the population. Without wishing to promulgate personal beliefs in an academic thesis, therefore, it nevertheless seems necessary to provide some of the researcher's own career context, to highlight the personal journey in education that led not only to the research's genesis, but the specific questions that it investigates.

My academic career began in further education where I studied nursery nursing. Although more traditional academic study was to be accessed in later life, this initial experience of vocational education at the local technical college proved to be some of the most intense and successful learning that I had ever experienced. This led eventually to a career teaching and managing in further education.

Thus it was that, prior to August 2004, my experience for more than 20 years was centred around work within further education colleges, especially those in which a considerable amount of higher education was delivered. This included work in a variety of roles that provided considerable personal experience of vocational qualifications at level 3 (which are promoted as entry criteria for higher education). Throughout these years, close contact with

vocational training led to an awareness of the educational breadth it encompassed in its marrying of learning to practical contexts. Yet the core proposition from Connor *et al.* 2006, and supported by the other key texts, was that vocational learning was sometimes misrepresented and mistrusted in higher education, a factor which could serve to undermine perceptions of the value of vocational study.

What value vocational learning might provide to society as a whole, in terms of the links between educational and economic prosperity for the nation, was not a personal consideration during these years; it was only later that it became clear that the drive for improvements in vocational training and the up-skilling of the national workforce were perceived by politicians to be irrevocably intermeshed with wider economic prosperity, and therefore seen as being of political importance. Yet counterbalancing texts (Thomas 2001, Wolf 2002) cast doubt on these beliefs, indicating that there were several sets of assumptions held by politicians and policy makers that appeared to lack rigour and which ignored a key issue: education as being of intrinsic personal value to the individual.

It was these experiences that led me to question both my personal beliefs and the traditional viewpoints about education – a line of enquiry that directly initiated this study. The issues it brought into question were:

- Whether or not vocational learners could prosper as undergraduates and achieve their aspirations in their postgraduate lives with the same level of efficacy as individuals from traditional academic backgrounds.
- To what extent vocational learning could deliver personal value to the individual beyond the assumed economic benefit it gave to the nation or wider world;

- To what extent education and learning could enhance and enrich the lives of individuals irrespective of any personal economic or pragmatic outcomes such as improved career prospects or higher wages, being instead about personal growth and the enhancement of individual quality of life.

In August 2004, a change of career direction led to my taking up of a new post as Course Leader of the B.A. Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull, arriving just as the UCAS clearing period had begun. As a relatively new programme, the degree was expected to recruit heavily during this period and was therefore looking at candidates with wide-ranging entry profiles. It was therefore a surprise to discover how little admissions staff knew about vocational qualifications – especially those that were well-established, such as BTEC National Certificates and Diplomas – and to observe the reluctance of my new colleagues to accept them as appropriate entry criteria. This was true not only for the staff on the Educational Studies programme but also on other programmes across the university.

After several informal discussions, it emerged that this lack of eagerness among my colleagues to accept vocational qualifications, in line with the findings of Connor *et al.* (2006), appeared to stem from two factors: (1) a long-term acquaintance with A-Levels and therefore a confidence that they were reliable indicators of future academic success, whereas vocational qualifications were little understood; and (2) an assumption that vocationally qualified applicants were likely to be less able, and therefore less likely to be successful in terms of their academic achievement.

These observations led to further discussions with admissions staff. When asked why they held these views, their answers showed considerable uniformity and would usually focus on

notions that vocationally qualified applicants were less academically able, were more likely to have success as undergraduates only at the lower end of the classification scale, would have difficulty with essay writing or examinations, and would be less likely to get good graduate jobs on completion of their degrees. Alongside this, there appeared to be a belief in the value of A-Levels as indicators of success and staff often would use the term “proper A-Levels” to refer to applicants undertaking A-Levels in traditional subjects.

The apparent belief that students with vocational entry qualifications would not only struggle to cope on an undergraduate course but, once graduated, would be less likely to gain good jobs contrasted with my experience as a staff recruiter. That experience had suggested that candidates with a combination of vocational qualifications at levels 2 and 3, coupled with academic qualifications from level 4 upwards, had a good platform from which to assimilate new information rapidly, undertake new tasks and apply theory to practice in the workplace. Likewise, experience from over 20 years of teaching, examining and managing work-based learning in further education and higher education had given me direct access to many students who had progressed through a combined vocational and academic route from further education to higher education with considerable success. It was these personal experiences – contrasted with the views of my new colleagues – that further directed my interest in conducting this particular research project.

Having outlined the personal journey which led me to this research, this chapter now goes on to introduce some of the contextual aspects of the research and to establish definitions of terms which appear throughout the thesis, beginning with an explanation of how the different forms of vocational and traditional academic education have been described within this work.

## The nature of different forms of education: the vocational and the traditional academic

The definitions of ‘vocational’ or ‘academic’ in education are not straightforward. This is especially true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, since the lines between the traditional academic routes of study and the vocational routes have become increasingly blurred, due to both the advent of vocational A-Levels and the high knowledge-content requirements in many level 3 vocational qualifications.

Further complicating the issue is the disparity between the perception of what vocational study encompasses and the reality of such programmes of study. At the Association of Colleges annual conference in Cambridge in June 2003, the Schools Standards Minister at the time, David Milliband, referred to these views as follows:

“A 1950s perception continues – that vocational education is something you only do with your hands, something only done as a second best, always an alternative to general education rather than a complement to it.” (*The Guardian* Education Supplement, “F.E. News”, Wednesday June 18, 2003)

The research outlined in this thesis was primarily undertaken whilst Labour was in government in Britain (1997-2009) and, in relation to vocational education, this government itself seemed unclear about the proper definition of the term. The government white paper produced to address the issue of skills training (DfES 2005), described its policy as one which would “provide better vocational routes which equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for further learning and employment” (DfES 2005 p. 2) suggesting that

vocational education should have the dual aim of allowing learners to use vocational learning as a route to either employment or to further study, or both. Later, when it commissioned the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education (DfES 2007), the government acknowledged that this duality could create confusion when designing new vocational programmes of study, saying (in relation to the introduction of new Specialised Diplomas at levels 2 and 3 from September 2008):

“It has not always been clear to what extent the new programmes are intended to be vocational, or applied, or to serve a more general education purpose.” (DfES 2007 p. 4)

Confusion about the nature of vocational qualifications, therefore, extends beyond problems of definition into the issue of their very purpose. It is unsurprising that employers, higher education admissions staff, parents and teachers are confused by vocational qualifications in view of the fact that the government itself even seems unclear about their purpose.

Given these areas of confusion, in order to analyse the data for this research it has been necessary to devise some form of clear definition of what is meant by vocational qualifications. A decision was made with reference to Huddleston (1998), who argues that for the purposes of most debate in modern British policy-making circles, the term ‘vocational education’ refers to any study that is not related to an academic subject. In the end, therefore, the study uses the common-sense understanding of the term, based upon the negative definition that vocational qualifications are those that reflect education or training in a subject area which is not listed in the range of pure academic subjects available for external assessment at GCSE level, A-Level or the Scottish equivalents.

### The cohort under investigation

The cohort of students involved in this research was taken from the B.A. Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull, entering the degree programme in September 2004. The course was at that point in its second year, having recruited its first cohort in September 2003. The programme was therefore located in a faculty that had had little undergraduate provision prior to that time and which had until then concentrated principally on postgraduate teaching and supervision for trainee teachers, and for postgraduate taught and research students. The University of Hull describes itself as ‘traditional’ in its own publicity material ([www.hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)) and has been in existence as a university since the 1920s, with a good record of traditional subject teaching and research.

The students who formed the group under investigation came onto the B.A. Educational Studies course from a range of educational backgrounds. They included a small number of mature students but were principally young people who were aged 18-21 at the time of their recruitment to the university. The students were from homes across the north of England, with approximately half coming from the immediate locality.

It is recognised from the outset that this piece of research, focusing as it does upon a single, small cohort of students, is limited in its generalisability. It does, however, provide a portrait of a group of students from a range of backgrounds, on a new programme, in an expanding department, within a traditional university. As such, it endeavours to provide a platform for further research as well as useful recommendations for the university that could be of benefit both to staff and to future cohorts of students.



### The wider context of the research

The principal underlying theme of this research examines the experiences of a single group of students, both as undergraduates and graduates, in relation to their prior qualifications and experience. It initially sets the context by examining key literature in the field, the wider impact of globalisation on national education policy making; the impact of national education policy on student recruitment and higher education and the impact of local issues on the research cohort. In addition, the research examines the impact of relevant historical developments in education, and looks at key sociological issues, such as family background and social aspirations, in its examination of the student experience.

A wide range of literature underpins the thesis but four pieces of work raised arguments which then helped to inform the context of the research, notably Archer *et al.* (2003), Thomas (2001), Wolf (2002) and Connor *et al.* (2006). The focus of each of these texts is slightly different in that Thomas examines widening participation; Archer specifically examines issues of social class and access to higher education; and Wolf questions the claim that national prosperity is predicated upon ever-higher levels of educational attainment by individuals within society. These writers' arguments have helped to raise critical questions that have given direction to the research, or they have provided information concerning the national and local context. Connor *et al.* (2006), within their project report for Action on Access, provided factual information and other case study material relating to university admissions, as well as an exploration of the attitudes of staff in higher education institutions to recruiting vocational applicants.

To address the political context of the research, the ramifications of globalisation are examined. In the last 40 years, globalisation – and its perceived implications – has had a major impact on all national policies and practices, including those that have education and training as their focus. As Peters and May (2004) point out, all the major educational policy initiatives since the 1980s have stressed the need for Britain to increase its skill level in order to compete on a global stage, and politicians have focused on this factor in the rhetoric surrounding the advent of a wide range of new white papers in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century underpinning emerging policies in education, (DfES 2003a, DfES 2003b, DfES 2005). In 2006, the Leitch Report (DIUS 2006) stressed the need for Britain to be more ambitious in raising levels of educational attainment in order to compete with other countries. More recently, a 2009 government white paper, (DBIS 2009), has carried the same message. Although its focus was essentially about university funding, research and widening participation, in the foreword, Peter Mandelson, then the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills said that:

“[...] we are operating at the knowledge frontier. We no longer have the choice in the globalised world to compete on low wages and low skills.”

(*ibid.* p. 3)

In 2011, therefore, the perception that globalisation must necessarily impact on the formulation of national education policies is widely perceived by both policy makers and the general public as an irrefutable proposition. And since national policies, in turn, impact upon local education, especially when the policies reach the stage of being operationalised, this thesis initially provides a context for the research at a global level; then looks at how the

globalisation revolution has been distilled to policy at a national level; and finally the implications of this national policy at a local level.

Within the national context, the work is fashioned with particular reference to two policy documents produced by the Department of Education to address issues of widening participation in higher education (DfES 2003a, DfES 2003b), as these were critical documents at the time the research cohort was enrolled. These policies demanded that higher education institutions should recruit more students, provide more access routes, and reach a more diverse student population (Slack 2004, Schwarz 2004). Although some university staff have declared their reservations about these policies (Connor *et al.*, 2006), they have, in general, responded well to the challenge, recruiting more applicants with vocational qualifications and providing more vocational degrees. As Becher (2001) says:

“[...] the H.E. curriculum is becoming more vocationally oriented [...] there has been an increasing emphasis in government policy and rhetoric on the vocational functions of higher education in both its role in supplying qualified students for the professions, industry and commerce and in terms of its research functions.” (Becher 2001, p. 3)

Within the national context, the thesis also takes a historical perspective insofar as it has relevance to the research questions – for example, historical attitudes to vocational training. In doing so it makes specific reference to key developments that may have an impact in the analysis of the data and the research questions.

The local context of the research focuses on the attitudes and actions of the particular university in which the research is set. At the study's outset, the B.A. Educational Studies degree, as an undergraduate programme, signalled a complete departure from past practice for the home department in which the research was located. Although staff had had experience of postgraduate teacher training with both primary and secondary Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes, and had had a long history of Masters' and Doctoral programmes in education, they were generally unfamiliar with undergraduate regulations and standards. For this reason, the examination of this cohort began to have an important additional purpose, as the staff involved in their recruitment, selection, teaching and assessment regularly expressed concerns about their own ability to perform in an unfamiliar undergraduate environment. Given the novelty of this environment, the research has been designed to help inform an enhanced programme for future students on the B.A. Educational Studies degree; to provide institutional information to inform recruitment strategies; and to provide a platform for further examination of the employment opportunities and threats for Educational Studies graduates in general, and University of Hull Educational Studies graduates in particular.

### The research questions

The research has, at its heart, a principal research question: *How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?*

In order to investigate this, there were three initial subsets of underlying questions to be answered. One set was designed to ascertain which students had been accepted to the course;

why these students had succeeded in gaining a place; why they had chosen to apply for this particular course at this particular university; whether they had arrived at university with a clear career plan; and/or whether this plan had changed. The second set of questions related to students' progress on the course; how they coped on the programme of study; how they fared in final assessments; and what degree classification they attained. The final group of questions related to the students' postgraduate lives; whether they had managed to continue on to their choice of career or postgraduate study programme; whether the degree studies had helped them; and whether their pre-degree study had helped or hindered them in making these choices.

As the research progressed, these overarching questions were continuously refined and reduced, the outcome of which was the creation of a set of seven specific questions that would be posed by the research. These were:

*1. What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*

This question was investigated through an examination of students' entry profiles including their age, gender, and their entry qualifications and experiences. The qualitative data also later provided some exemplification of the kind of students enrolled on the degree.

*2. Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*

This was investigated in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research, with an examination of factual data provided on UCAS forms and by personal research using both questionnaires and follow-up interviews.

*Whom do University of Hull admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?*

This question was investigated through an examination of students' entry qualifications and included an investigation of any differences in the application of entry criteria to those with traditional academic qualifications and those with vocational qualifications.

*3. How do these students perform on the degree?*

This was investigated initially by examining the quantitative data relating to students' eventual degree qualifications. It also examined the differences between young and mature students in relation to both their retention and their ultimate success on the degree. The question was later examined in terms of the students' perceptions of their experiences, in the qualitative phase of the research, in an attempt to explore how far their educational journey was perceived to have been challenging and how far it was seen as having been of value to each of the respondents at a personal level.

*4. Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?*

This question was investigated by comparing students' eventual degree outcomes to their entry profiles, examining exactly what they had had on entry and what they had achieved on completion of their undergraduate studies.

*5. What are the students' eventual ambitions?*

- *Do these change, or stay the same?*
- *If they change, what leads to this?*

Both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research were used to investigate this. At the beginning of the research, the students provided data on questionnaires about their ambitions and these were then further investigated in later qualitative interviews by a series

of questions about how their educational experiences had impacted on their eventual choices. Where a student had changed their ambitions as a result of their studies, this was investigated in greater detail to find out what had influenced this change.

6. *How beneficial have the students' pre-university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study/work?*

This question was investigated within the qualitative phase of the research through a series of interview questions which asked the students to reflect on their educational journey. The resultant discussions broadened out the question, as students discussed both their pre-entry studies and their undergraduate studies in relation to their postgraduate lives.

### The structure of the thesis

While this chapter provides an overview and rationale for the thesis, Chapter 2 discusses four key texts that raised arguments which helped to frame the research.

Chapter 3 introduces the wider global and national context surrounding educational directives, and relates this to students' ability to access higher education, thereby informing an interpretation of the research results viewed through the prism of education policy. This chapter also looks at some of the relevant historical events that have had an impact on policy issues, and at the effects of social and family background on students' ability to access a higher education and succeed in it.

Chapter 4 focuses more specifically upon the local environment, taking account of the factors raised by the wider examination in the previous chapter and narrowing their focus even

further. It looks at the specific nature of widening participation as it relates to this research and to the University of Hull's B.A. Educational Studies student cadre.

Chapter 5 outlines the research methodology, and describes the instruments used in the research. Chapters 6 and 7 present the results of both the quantitative and qualitative research and Chapter 8 provides the analysis, discussion and recommendations from the research. Chapter 9 then provides a short concluding chapter looking at how things have changed during the course of the research, the limitations of the work and future directions. The analysis of the data collected is designed principally to answer the research questions, but this final chapter will also show how the findings can be used in future as a platform for further research.

In the chapter that follows, four of the critical pieces of literature that informed the initial journey to the research questions are examined in greater detail.



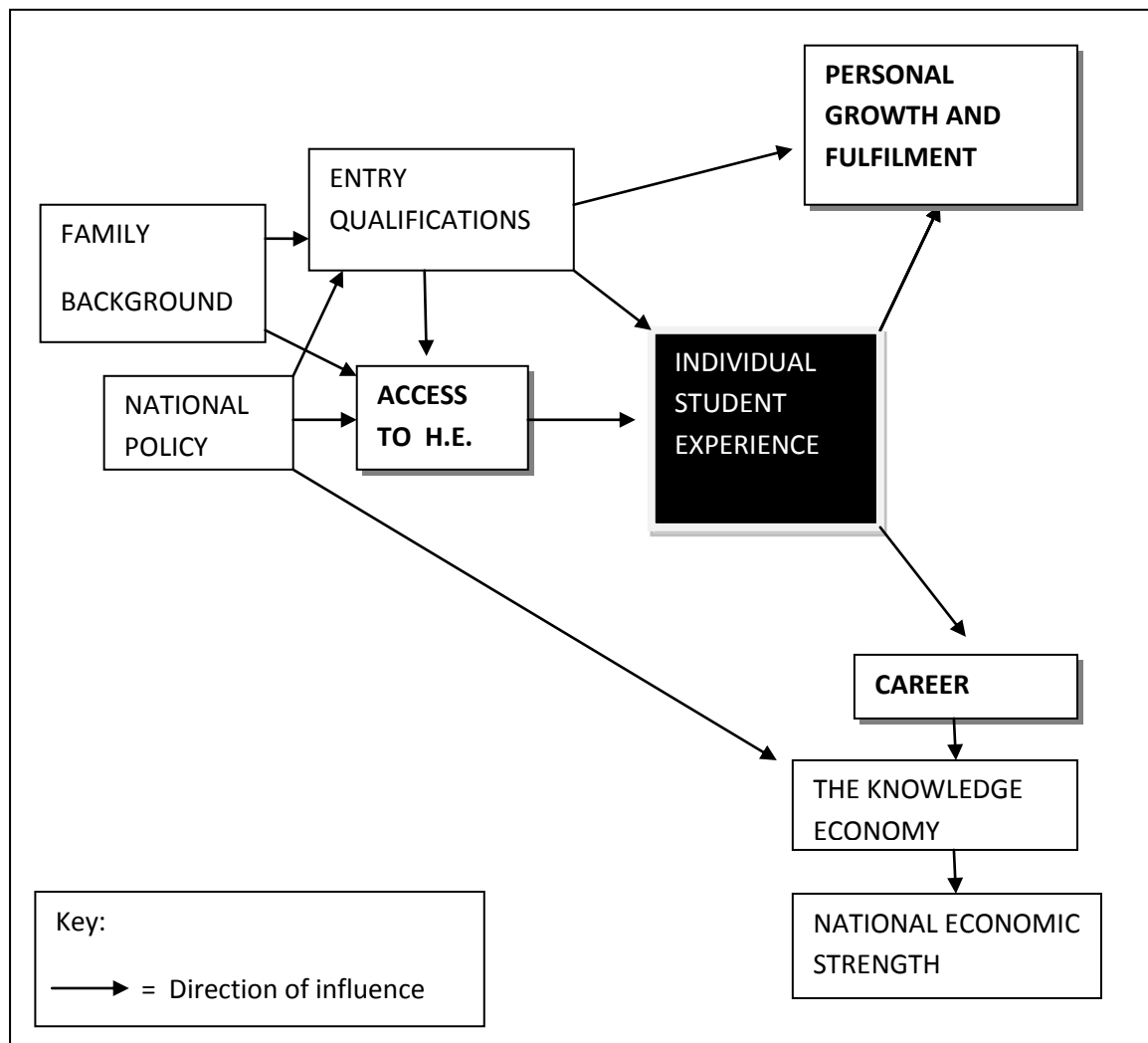
## **Chapter 2: The Literature that Informed the Research**

The research findings contained within this thesis address issues relating to the experience of a group of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree. The impetus for the research stems from a personal journey outlined in the previous chapter (see pp. 2-5); a set of experiences that led to a questioning of the nature and purpose of education and learning, beginning prior to entry into H.E .and extending beyond it into the world of postgraduate study and work. The core research question behind the study is: *How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?*

There are many ways in which this investigation could have been framed. It could have taken a psychological viewpoint, examining students' self-perceptions and whether or not these change as a result of their educational experiences. It could have addressed the main research question from a sociological standpoint, from a feminist perspective, or from a pre-determined political viewpoint (for example, Marxism). Alternatively, the nature of the research allowed the opportunity to examine the student experience from a policy and values perspective, thereby positing it in a global, national, and historical narrative. However, given the well-defined avenues of analysis that were already raised in the central literature – and the fact that the inter-relationships between these works suggested its own coherent, yet complex, overarching narrative – it seemed most appropriate to view the study's focus as being primarily from the policy and values position these texts addressed, rather than allowing it to expand too widely into a psychological, sociological or pre-determined political context as well. (Taking this approach, however, did allow some inclusion of aspects related to social psychology, in terms of the students' family backgrounds and their own perceptions of their

experiences.) In essence, the inter-relationship between the individual student experience, the policy and values context, and personal experience, led at the early stages of the research to an understanding of the research narrative that can be summed up in diagrammatic form as represented in Figure 2.1:

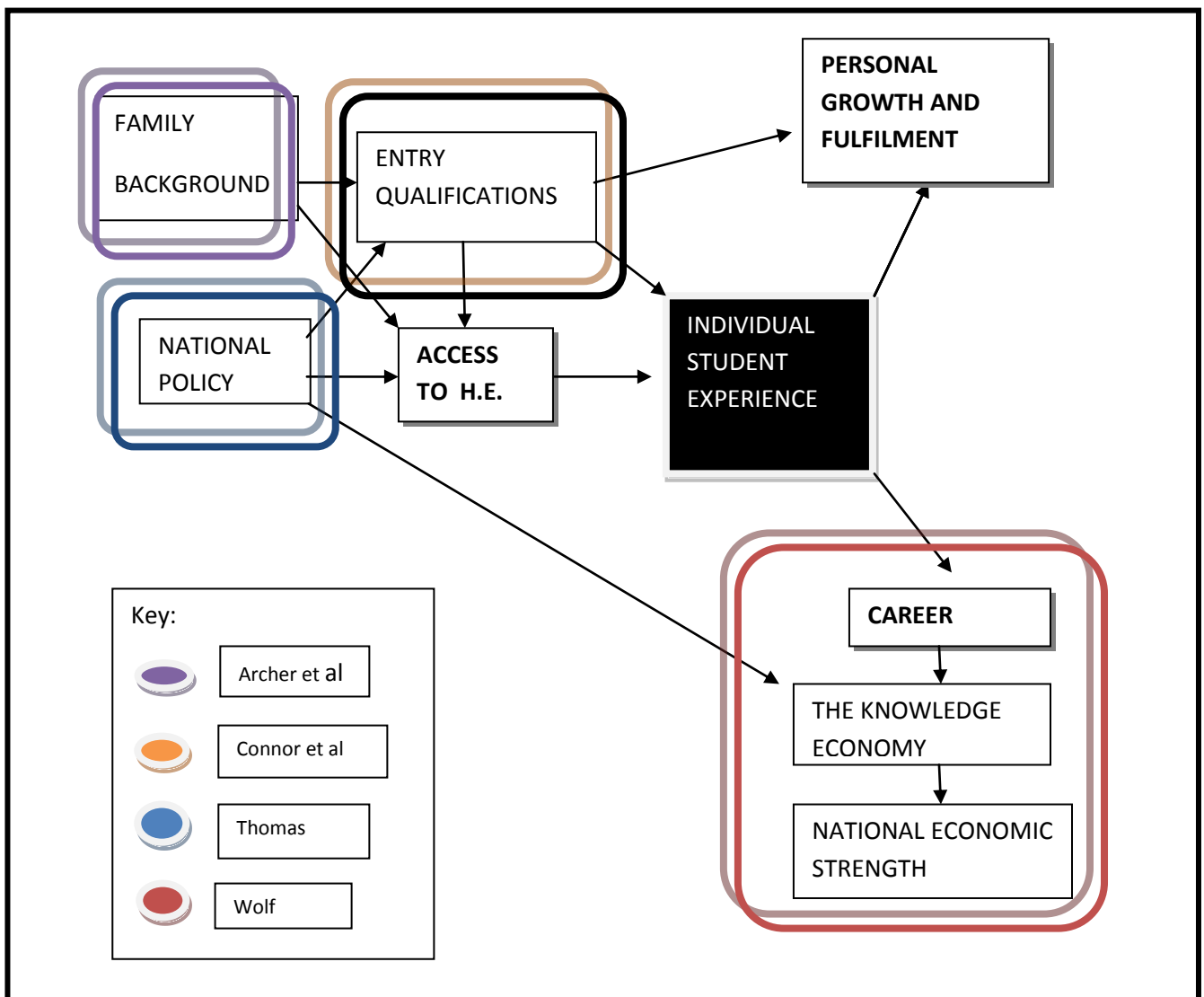
**Figure 2. 1: Interrelationship for the individual student**



During the early stages of the research, a wide range of literature was reviewed to give a broad understanding of the issues involved in relation to the wider policy and values context. Three texts (Wolf 2002, Thomas 2001, Archer *et al.* 2003) proved to be particularly

important – in challenging personal beliefs and assumptions, raising new lines of enquiry and providing a broader perspective on the key issues. One further document (Connor *et al.* 2006) was of special significance to the work in terms of its specific relationship to the recruitment of students from different entry routes. A wider range of texts receives reference in later chapters but these critical documents are examined in this chapter to demonstrate how they contributed to the formulation of the research questions. Figure 2.2 shows how each impacted the research:

**Figure 2. 2: The connection of the key literature to the research**



While each text provided a distinctly different perspective, they all contributed to the way in which the research journey progressed. The first of these writers to be examined is Wolf (2002).

Wolf (2002): A challenge to ideas about the value of education to the ‘knowledge economy’

Wolf (2002) takes the view that the intrinsic value of education to the individual – for personal fulfilment and growth – is largely ignored as a driver for educational expansion through policy. She further argues that this has led to some educational decision-making that is flawed, rooted as it is in the perception that greater economic growth and prosperity are the direct products of ever-higher educational attainment by ever greater numbers of people. She claims that the political rhetoric in Britain predominantly emphasises this core belief – that the country needs to recruit more people to more advanced levels of education, including formal higher education; and that by taking the existing population to ever higher levels of attainment and widening participation in education, economic prosperity will be ensured.

It is to this central underlying assumption that Wolf (2002) presents counter-arguments and, indeed, whose underlying validity she repeatedly questions. She claims that economic growth and well-being, and the rise of a so-called ‘knowledge economy’, are not, in fact, predicated upon continually increasing levels of education across the population – and, furthermore, that this presumption is little more than a myth that has gathered its own momentum over time, and that is now constantly reiterated in Western political rhetoric to the point that it has taken on the mantle of an unassailable truth. As Wolf says in her introduction:

“[...] an unquestioning faith in the economic benefits of education has brought with it huge amounts of wasteful government spending, attached to misguided and even pernicious policies. Just because something is valuable, it does not follow that yet more of it is by definition a good idea.” (Wolf 2002, p. xi)

She goes on to argue that the notion of there being a link between national prosperity and ever-increasing levels of education is essentially flawed and she mounts a challenge to these ideas by questioning the fundamental perceptions underlying them. Wolf argues:

“[...] the idea that education and success will be more closely linked than ever in the globalised twenty first century is less obvious the harder you look [...] the links between education and growth are far less direct than our politicians suppose. Unfortunately beliefs about these links dominate current policy. They have produced patterns of government spending and detailed centralised controls over education, many of which are fundamentally misconceived.” (Wolf 2002, pp. 14-15)

In her work, Wolf points out that this obsession with economics as a driver for education overlooks two facts:

- 1) At present in the world, the biggest growth economies are those, such as India, where skilled labour is cheap and plentiful. Meanwhile, countries that have the oft-desired high level of graduate and postgraduate workers, such as Italy, USA, France and Germany, are frequently found to have struggling or stagnant economies;

and

2) The drivers of these ideas are largely the central government's close advisors, who are predominantly drawn from large manufacturing organisations. Yet the majority of the population work for small and medium-sized companies – and these organisations express a need for more workers with basic skills, a phenomenon also highlighted in previous personal research (Shaw and McAndrew 2008).

Wolf's depiction of the common assumption in policy-making circles of there being a *de facto* link between educational and economic achievement provided a wider context for understanding and broadening the research; until that point, the assumptions underpinning this study had been to see national economic growth as merely a secondary by-product of the individual student experience (see Figure 2.1, p. 18). Yet if Wolf's assertions were correct, and policy makers have indeed been preaching the value of academia as primarily a financial proposition – and, furthermore, through media influence and political campaigning, inculcating those beliefs in the wider population, including students considering entering university – it could have profound implications for this research's core propositions. Students entering the B.A. Educational Studies degree, and the admissions staff accepting them, might not see the purpose of the endeavour as being one of personal value, but primarily of wider social and economic duty to the individual and nation.

Although Wolf (2002) suggests that political thinking in relation to education and economics is based upon some flawed associations of factors, successive governments have remained committed to it (Thomas 2001). One side-effect of this thinking is the constant drive from

employers to demand ever-higher qualifications, a development that is currently apparent across a wide range of professions; for example, teaching, social work and nursing are now all graduate-entry professions, whereas 20 years ago they were open to those with sub-degree qualifications. The group under examination in this research forms a useful exemplar. Educational Studies, as a discipline for study, did not exist 20 years ago. Those who wished to work in education either trained as teachers or took positions in educational support without any formal qualifications beyond level 3; today, almost all the major universities in Britain offer undergraduate degrees in the subject ([www.ucas.co.uk](http://www.ucas.co.uk)).

Not only have successive post-war governments believed that economic prosperity and increasing educational attainment are causally linked but their rhetoric has suggested that Britain is continually falling behind other countries in the race to keep up (*The Economist*, 2005). This perception has led to a range of policy measures that have been designed to drive up the attainment levels of those who have elected for vocational routes within education, leading to upwardly spiralling demands of those wishing to undertake a traditional apprenticeship or vocational trade (Shaw 2007). For these reasons, it is axiomatic that the students who are the focus of this research have had to meet more stringent attainment criteria before undertaking their degree studies than those of previous generations, whether or not they have come from a vocational route or a traditional academic route, and this could be seen to be a critical factor in their progress on the degree and beyond it into the world of work. It seems to be widely assumed that, in order to compete with other countries in worldwide markets, Britain needs to have a workforce that is educated, as opposed to merely trained, and to a higher level than other countries. This assumption relates again to the perception of a causal link between economics and education and, in addition, assumes that

the future prosperity of the nation will inevitably rest upon high levels of knowledge and skills.

This belief in the power of education as an economic driver is not confined to higher education. It is also mirrored in beliefs about further education, as evidenced in the Leitch Report in 2006 (DIUS 2006), which stressed the need for Britain to be more ambitious in raising levels of attainment in order to compete with other countries. The report set out what Britain needed to achieve in order to do this, including being able to treble the projected rate of improvement in basic skills, such that 95 percent of adults would have functional skills by 2020 and 90 percent of adults would be qualified to at least level 2 (GCSE level); all with a clear link between raising educational attainment and raising economic prosperity. The report was commissioned by the Treasury and was designed to inform government budgets, so it is little surprise that it concentrates on the economic underpinnings of education. Yet it is also significant for this research that it makes almost no reference to education for self-fulfilment or for raising the quality of life in the population. As Wolf points out:

“[...] we have almost forgotten that education ever had any purpose other than to promote growth. To read government documents of even fifty years ago [...] gives one a shock. Of course the authors recognised that education had relevance to people’s livelihood and success and to the nation’s prosperity. But their concern was as much, or more, with values, citizenship, the nature of a good society, the intrinsic benefits of learning.”

(Wolf 2002, pp. xiii-xiv)



Whatever the reservations expressed by Wolf, and mirrored by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004), Bottery (1998 and 2006) and others, the government rhetoric continues to centre upon the conviction that Britain can only compete in a globalised world by promoting ever-higher levels of attainment by ever-increasing numbers of people. This has been a factor in the expansion of higher education and has led to the creation of new areas of study, such as the B.A. Educational Studies. It is therefore a feature that will be addressed when examining the perceptions of the students involved in this research, to see how far the students themselves have seen their entry into higher education as being for personal growth, fulfilment and empowerment and how far for pragmatic reasons of employment opportunity and personal financial benefit.

The government policies to which Wolf alludes have led to the widening participation agenda that have underwritten the recruitment of many of the students who are the subject of this research. It is in this field of widening participation that the next key text, that of Thomas (2001), has its focus.

Thomas (2001): The drive for widening participation in further and higher education

Thomas (2001) outlines the rationale for widening participation in terms of economic drivers. She stresses, like Wolf (2002), that government policy in this area is motivated primarily by a deeply held belief that economic success depends upon increasing access to further and higher education and examines the links between this set of beliefs and the necessity to align these with the development of policies in lifelong learning. She explains that this perception that the purpose of education for the individual is for its positive impact on the economic well-being of the nation is evidenced in two ways: firstly, by government rhetoric, as in the

government green paper (DfEE 1998); and secondly by the way in which the funding mechanisms for post-compulsory education were altered in the 1990s to reduce or eliminate funding for programmes which were designed primarily to give students access to education for personal interest. Thomas says:

“A government committed to widening participation in post-compulsory education for predominantly economic or liberal reasons is unlikely to adversely change the funding mechanisms as can be witnessed in both further and higher education sectors in the UK.” (Thomas 2001, p. 14)

Thomas goes on to point out that it is this focus on education leading to economic prosperity that caused the government to reduce further education funding for leisure courses, concentrating the funding instead on those courses that would lead to formal qualifications and allow their holders to take an active part in building the economy of the future. This, of course, is not unique to Britain; Woodrow *et al.* (2000) point out that lifelong learning policies in other countries such as France and Germany also stress the significance of enhancing the wider economy.

Thomas highlights the fact that widening participation is encouraged by the government not in order to enhance the life of the individual, but as a mechanism to improve the lives of the whole population in terms of increased economic prosperity. She says:

“[...] post-compulsory education and training in general, and higher education in particular, have expanded rapidly, internationally, in recent

years. This expansion is driven partly by economic arguments and national competitiveness within a context of globalisation.” (Thomas 2001, p. 42)

She argues that this concentration on education as a force for economic prosperity has been a key driver in the development of education policy throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These views have, of course, also had challengers in previous times. Over 40 years ago, Berg (1970) was arguing that the perpetually increasing demands on the population for greater educational advancement was precipitating a pointless upward spiral; a non-zero-sum equation in which increasing demand for qualifications was creating a more educated population but thereby formulating a situation in which everyone was ‘equally better educated’, and so no-one was actually improving their economic prospects by studying harder for longer. Thomas describes this phenomenon as Berg’s notion of “a race in which everyone runs harder but no-one wins” (Thomas 2001, p. 29). Thomas herself also offers a challenge to the view but takes a different stance in seeing the policies for expansion as flawed because they propose that they are necessary for economic prosperity at the expense of personal fulfilment and gain.

Given that this research began with reflection upon the respective worth of education for personal fulfilment and education for economic prosperity as a secondary consideration, the inverse emphasis on these two factors’ importance (i.e., national prosperity as a primary driver and personal growth as a secondary outcome) led to a broadening of the original proposition and suggested that different perspectives needed to be taken into account in the study.

Throughout her work, Thomas references socio-economic status and family background as being inexorably linked to the widening participation agenda, in the sense that the expansion of higher education has primarily attracted more middle-class students and relatively few people from the lowest social classes. She says of this:

“[...] it can be stated confidently that social class, at least in part, influences school achievement, and this in turn impedes or enhances progression into post-compulsory education. This assertion is further supported by the low participation rates, particularly in higher education, by students from lower socio-economic groups [...]” (Thomas 2001, p. 74)

Notwithstanding this, it does seem that the widening participation agenda have had, at their heart, a desire to promote social mobility through the encouragement into education of individuals from backgrounds that have traditionally been less inclined to maximise their educational opportunities. It is in respect of these issues of socio-economic status, family background and access to higher education that the third key text, Archer *et al.* (2003), contributed to the formulation of this research.

Archer, Hutchings and Ross (2003): Entry to higher education; links to socio-economic status and family background

The work of Archer *et al.* (2003) examines issues of inclusion and exclusion and relates these to the wider issues of social status. In the preface to their book (*ibid.*) they say:

“Past decades have seen an expansion of the system towards a more inclusive higher education, but participation among people from working-class groups has remained persistently low.” (Archer *et al.* 2003: Preface)

The writers provide a wealth of statistical evidence (Archer *et al.* 2003) to support their assertion that people from the lower socio-economic groups are still not adequately represented in higher education, despite all the policies to widen participation. Their work examines this issue across a wide range of variables relating to such factors as age of entry to higher education, race and gender, all examined across a range of different timeframes from the 1940s to the 1990s. They find that each of these variables produces a different pattern of results, but each reflects the basic finding that people from the lower socio-economic groups access higher education in smaller proportions than those in the higher socio-economic groups.

Archer *et al.* go on to examine these statistics in relation to the perception that disenfranchised groups have of the value of education, and in this their work both mirrors and extends much of what Wolf (2002) and Thomas (2001) postulated. Archer *et al.* (2003) investigate the value of higher education, as perceived by its participants, and place it in relation to the hierarchy of universities, and issues of retention and graduate employability. Their research showed participants who were well aware of the hierarchical nature of British universities and who felt that this acted as a positive discriminator in favour of those from middle-class families. As a consequence, applicants from lower socio-economic groups would fail to apply for the more prestigious universities, believing that they would have no chance of acceptance. Archer *et al.* cite one respondent, who airs a view widespread in the research, as saying:

“I came here because [...] anyone can get in here, it’s an inner-city polytechnic for God’s sake! Like you don’t have to be academically elite to get into [University name] because that is why I’m here. Because I live locally and I am stupid basically.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 129)

Archer points out that this mirrors Bourdieu and Passeron’s assertion (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) that people self-select (or deselect) in certain situations, including in their applications to higher education, because they carry preconceptions of the life paths acceptable to ‘people like us’ – a reflection of what they call ‘habitus’. Bourdieu and Passeron (*ibid.*) also introduce notions of ‘cultural capital’ to describe the culture and values of different social groups, and Archer *et al.* (2003) suggest that these are often what guide students from different backgrounds to consider different routes into and through education. They argue that these assumptions also link to students’ own perceptions of their chances of employability after graduation: students assume that the best jobs and greatest choices will inevitably go to those who have entered the best universities from the ‘best’ entry routes (i.e., via schools which emphasise success in traditional academic entry qualifications). As Archer *et al.* point out:

“Widening participation was thus widely regarded [by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds] as potentially dangerous, creating an overcrowded graduate market. This was closely linked to the hierarchy of universities, through which working class students risked being the first to get squeezed out in a competitive graduate job market.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 134)

As this research was investigating the individual student experience beyond higher education into the world of postgraduate study and work, the issues raised by Archer *et al.* provided an added dimension to the study. From this text's assertions came an impetus to see how far the individual students' backgrounds had had an impact on their postgraduate aspirations and outcomes. Respondents in Archer's study expressed serious concern that becoming a graduate could actively damage their prospects of employment because they felt it would mean they were over-qualified for menial jobs, yet unable to access graduate jobs in competition with graduates from higher status universities. As the writers say: "Thus the social mobility aspirations accorded by a degree rendered certain manual work illegitimate," (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 135).

What is absent from these responses is any notion of the intrinsic value of education, the personal fulfilment for the individual, or the enhancement of life through learning. This mirrors the wider governmental stance outlined in both Wolf (2002) and Thomas (2001). Archer *et al.* (2003) do, however, suggest that there is one aspect of policy that reflects the personal and individual, rather than the national, perspective, but that this is focused upon changing the individual themselves for the betterment of society as a whole. They say:

"[...] dominant government discourses have framed working-class participation in higher education as a way of achieving 'change'; that is, for working-class participants to change themselves and the national/local population by becoming more educated, skilled, affluent, mobile, 'civilised' and (implicitly) middle-class [...] in order to fit into and participate in the (unchanged) HE institutional culture and wider system." (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 176)

This perspective raises questions about the attitudes of British policy makers to the whole idea of creating positive opportunities for social mobility. Archer *et al.*'s view, outlined in the previous passage, suggests that government policy, built so exclusively upon ideas that 'education = economic prosperity' (both for the individual and for the country), might in truth rest upon embedded beliefs about the correctness of the current social status quo. This assertion stimulated a further need for this piece of research to recognise some issues relating to socio-economic status and family background; thereby to ensure that the Educational Studies students' pre-entry routes were not just assessed on a vocational/academic basis, but also from a social standpoint – and that, where possible, linkages and discrepancies between the two be analysed.

The study by Archer *et al.* (2003) examines entry routes into university as a critical issue. They present strong arguments to show that the uptake of different level 3 qualifications (entry routes to higher education) is still differentiated by socio-economic status, with the vocational routes accessed by more children from the lower groups and traditional academic routes by children from wealthier families. They point to the long-held attitudes that underpin these choices, saying:

“Middle-class resistance to vocational education, with the exception of that leading to elite professions such as medicine and law, remains. The warnings implicit in phrases such as ‘getting one’s hands dirty’ or ‘too near the coal face’ are reflective of the lack of respect associated with manual occupations.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 141)



The respondents in the study reflect these attitudes in their commentary, with such comments as:

“BTECs and GNVQs aren’t really recognised, like.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 142)

“When I told my Mum I’m not doing A-Levels, I’m doing a BTEC they just laughed at me [...] They thought BTECs a cartoon character or something.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 142)

Personal experience as a BTEC External Verifier suggests that these comments reflect a considerable misunderstanding about the demands of the qualification and the value it gives. That parents and potential students carry these views is not a surprise, but it provides evidence of a certain mistrust for vocational qualifications in Britain. This is not only true of the parents and students in Archer *et al.*’s (2003) study, but also of a number of staff in higher education, as demonstrated in the work of Connor *et al.* (2006), which has provided further commentary that has helped shape this research in relation to admission-staff attitudes to vocational qualifications. It is this study that is now addressed as the fourth key text supporting the direction of this research into the student experience on and beyond the B.A. Educational Studies degree.

#### Connor, Sinclair and Banerji (2006): A project to assess admission to higher education

The research by Connor *et al.* (2006) covers interviews conducted with admissions staff in 14 universities to investigate their practices around student admissions. The text is different from

the literature provided by Wolf (2002), Thomas (2001) and Archer *et al.* (2003) in that it is essentially a practical report, unpicking the outcomes of a national research project into higher education admissions. It provides evidence that there is a poor understanding, within higher education institutions, of the value of vocational qualifications as suitable entry routes into higher education. The Connor *et al.* (2006) research was part of a UCAS Special Survey, commissioned to support the Higher Education Academy Research Project, and shows that in 2005, applications to UCAS could be broken down as follows:

“[...] the vast majority of young applicants (almost 81%) have traditional academic qualifications, GCE AS or A-Levels [... and ...] a total of 18.4% of young applicants holding a BTEC, AVCE or GNVQ (either by itself or in combination with a GCE A-Level) [...] and 8.1% have a vocational qualification but no GCE A-Levels.” (Connor *et al.* 2006, p. 17)

The UCAS data Connor *et al.* (2006) present show that there is considerable institutional variation in intake. In their research, Russell Group universities nationally took only three percent of candidates with vocational qualifications whereas other ‘pre-92’ universities took 11 percent and ‘post-92’ universities took almost 20 percent. Higher education colleges, further education colleges and mixed economy colleges, in contrast, took 30 percent. Given that the Russell Group of universities are those that have the greatest power to influence government policy with the provision of expert advice, due to their research being recognised as that of the highest quality, the institutional variation in acceptance of vocational qualifications is worthy of note.

In relation to the decision making of admissions staff, Connor *et al.* (2006) cite instances of tutors making judgments on incorrect evidence, openly admitting that they ignore vocational qualifications because they feel that they are too complicated to understand, or making assumptions about entry qualifications that have little basis in fact. Some of the responses they received to their enquiries included:

“Vocational learners don’t know how to write essays.” (p. 28)

“There is a common perception amongst staff that AVCE students are less dedicated.” (p. 28)

“When I started as an Admissions Tutor I didn’t know what a BTEC was [...] I was very suspicious of them.” (p. 29),

“This is not a vocational course; we specify Grade B A-Levels.” (p. 38).

(Connor *et al.* 2006)

The research also found that candidates with vocational qualifications were often asked to jump higher hurdles than those with traditional A-Levels. The research team report on several instances where A-Level points of 260 (BCC) were requested, but for BTEC National candidates the requirement for the same course was 320 points (DDM).

The evidence provided by the Connor *et al.* (2006) study informs this research and its underlying themes in several ways. Most evidently, one of the key areas of examination for this study is the extent to which pre-entry qualifications have had an impact on B.A. Educational Studies students’ ability to access the degree in the first instance, and whether or not their pre-entry education have had an impact on their undergraduate and/or postgraduate experiences. Connor *et al.* (2006) also provide a wider context for the research by presenting

a national picture around admissions to higher education for those with vocational entry qualifications. This has led to this research examining the numbers and scale of vocationally qualified applicants to the B.A. Educational Studies degree, and to an examination of whether or not the same entry criteria are applied to all students or applied differentially to those with traditional A-Levels and those with alternative vocational qualifications.

#### Summary of the key threads provided by these four pieces of literature

When considering the four texts that have helped to inform this research, key threads run throughout all of them. Wolf (2002) and Thomas (2001) provide evidence that educational policy, designed to increase ever-higher levels of participation in education, is almost invariably driven by economic policies whose purpose is financial gain to the individual and society. They highlight the lack of promotion of education for its intrinsic value, for the greater good of the individual, for self-fulfilment or the enhancement of personal life. Archer *et al.* (2003) provide evidence, through qualitative interview data and quantitative analyses, of the lack of full participation in higher levels of education by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. They too highlight the pervasiveness of the economic modelling of education, by which it is positioned as a route to greater financial prosperity and better employment prospects, at the expense of seeing education as a personal journey that will maximise one's quality of life. They go on to show how widening participation strategies have still failed to attract young people from the lower socio-economic groups into the most elite universities. Connor *et al.* (2006) show how the universities themselves can perpetuate this discrimination against those holding vocational qualifications – a group already identified by Archer *et al.* (2003) as containing a higher number of people from the lower socio-economic groups.

It was by critically analysing these views that the foundations for this work were laid. By subsequently marrying them to the experiences of a group of students, drawn from a range of vocational and traditional academic entry routes, this research, in part, endeavours to see how far the ideas generated by the key texts are reflected in the experiences of the research cohort. It thereby aims to use this intelligence to address the main question in the study: *How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?*

Given that three of the four writers examined within this chapter make reference to the idea of Britain's economy and prosperity being driven by continually increasing levels of educational participation, and that this is essential because of the nation's place within a globalised world, the next chapter examines this wider context, looking at the global and national context for the research and making reference to relevant historical issues that have had an impact on the selection of the students in higher education in general, and in this research in particular.

### **Chapter 3: The Global, Historical and National Political Context**

The entry of students into higher education via vocational or academic routes is rooted in a wider context. This chapter explores some of these contextual issues, examining the global and national environments in which the programme of study exists and the historical factors that have affected the introduction and perception of different routes into higher education.

This chapter, then, examines those contexts in the light of available literature and argues that national policy making – rooted in responses to globalisation, and with its emphasis on intellectual capital and the development of knowledge economies as a means of driving economic prosperity – has had an impact in forming British education as it stands today and thus is relevant to any study of the student experience.

In terms of the national political arena, this chapter also examines some key historical issues as these have had an impact on how successive governments have interpreted the need for, and demands of, emerging education policy. As outlined in previous chapters, this is especially true in relation to the perceptions of vocationally qualified people, wherein notions of social class and family background have historically been intrinsically linked to ideas about performance, value and worth. This chapter is not designed to present a comprehensive record of British educational history but relevant features have been examined to shed light on the environment in which the research group of students have accessed their undergraduate and postgraduate studies. The chapter begins with a global perspective before moving to the national policy framework that has informed this research.

## The global context

A variety of views exist as to the essential nature of globalisation and different writers have defined it in different ways, with varying emphases (Ritzer 2004, Lachapelle and Trent 2000, Nye and Donahue 2000, Bradley *et al* 1993, Laserre 2003). Some definitions focus on linguistic universals (Sonntag 2003), some on technological advances (Bradley *et al* 1993), and others on cultural globalisation (Ritzer 2004). One simple definition that summarises all of these approaches comes from Nye and Donahue (2000) who state that globalisation is:

“[...] a state of the world involving networks of interdependence at multicontinental distances [...] linked through flows of influences of capital and goods, information and ideas, people and force as well as environmentally and biologically relevant substances.” (Nye and Donahue 2000, p. 2)

Nye and Donahue’s work encapsulates how globalisation has succeeded in influencing policy and strategy from the global and the macro level down to the level of the national; and from there down to individual institutions, programmes and candidates for higher education. Globalisation, thus defined, refers to the modern world of high-speed communication, transportation and information access; where there is greater unification in terms of goods, services and commodities and where key differences of language, culture, dress, food, socialisation and entertainment are increasingly moving instead towards greater homogeneity. Nye and Donahue show how the power of the nation state is being eroded internationally in favour of the power of large multinational organisations and businesses. In addition, other critical components of globalisation – the movement of goods and services across national

boundaries, and the international nature of finance and resources manifest themselves in the current (and growing) inability of nation states to protect themselves and their economies from external commercial influences that lack national accountability. As Bottery (2005) says:

“[...] economic globalisation is probably the most influential [...] the locking of nation states into free market agreements by supra-national organisations like the IMF, the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank, who stipulate that financial assistance is conditional upon the dismantling of trade barriers and of their entry into a global system of free markets.” (Bottery 2005, p. 3)

The influence of these institutions is currently without historical parallel and persuades national governments to look at education and training in terms of trans-national competition and to formulate policy in response to two factors:

1. the qualifications demands of the powerful multinational companies and financial and trade organisations; and
2. the perception of where their countries are located within a putative, international league table of skills and attainment.

As outlined in Chapter 2, both Thomas (2001) and Wolf (2002) assert that government policy is driven by the belief that economic prosperity, at a global level, is only achievable through increasingly high levels of education for its citizens. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) take this a stage further by arguing that national governments become involved in education policy at



the micro-level as well as the macro-level because not only do they assume a causal link between educational growth and economic prosperity, but they feel that they have to take an active role in the day-to-day elements of the management of public sector organisations to compensate for their lack of real power, due to their enforced subservience to the globalised trade and financial institutions of the world. They write:

“[...] in these days when the power of individual governments to act independently is increasingly called into question by a complex interplay of local, national and international constraints, the one thing that ministers usually *can* do [...] is to announce changes in their own machinery of governance.” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004, p. 6)

Currently the pace of change is both widespread and rapid and it is difficult for nation-state politicians to exert the same influence over their people as they once might have done. As Driver and Martell (2002) point out:

“Key concerns [...] are with economic and political globalisation [...] National governments, it is argued, can no longer control their own economies or regulate capital for the fear of doing anything that will lead to capital leaving the country.” (Driver and Martell 2002, p. 111)

Globalisation can thus be said to create a situation in which national governments see themselves as having a decreasing role in some areas of peoples' lives, as the spheres of influence shift to global organisations; this, in turn, creates a situation wherein those national

policy makers increasingly delve into areas which were once the domain of professionals. As Bottery (1998) says:

“Thus national politicians of all political persuasions increasingly cease to engineer national frameworks, and instead attempt to adapt their countries to cope with these demands, to ride the waves of the global free market and to curry the favour and investment of multinational companies” (Bottery 1998, p. viii)

#### Perceptions of globalisation as a driver for education policy

The perception of the impact of globalisation, with its concomitant power base located in worldwide financial institutions and multinational organisations, is therefore a central factor in how governments now create policies in education and training. Increasingly through the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, successive British governments, as described by Peters and May (2004), have stressed the need for the development of a ‘knowledge economy’ to tackle Britain’s ranking in a globalised world. Such change has created an important underlying context for this research because it suggests that the governmental perception of globalisation has been an important factor in their creation of education policies for widening participation, which themselves have driven the expansion in recruitment to higher education (see Chapter 2 pp. 25-28). Moreover, the rhetoric attached to these beliefs has become pervasive and unquestioned.

The result is that, for reasons of both national policy and personal values, many of the students in the research cohort would not have considered entering higher education, nor

would higher education have considered offering them the opportunity, without this fundamental perception driven by globalisation: that the nation's prosperity is unquestionably reliant upon increasing levels of participation and attainment in higher levels of study, by ever greater numbers of people.

### The national historical context

Across the Western world, more students are now entering higher education than ever before (Wolf 2002) and increasingly, in Britain, they are coming from more diverse entry routes. This has led to a step-change for many universities and their staff, as they come to terms with new widening participation agenda. In order to place the current thinking and policy-making in a context that takes account of these factors, it is necessary to make some examination of recent educational history. This analysis does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of the history of British education (to do so would have required a different direction of travel for the thesis) but attempts to examine some of the key factors that have shaped the perceptions of the students taking part in this research, as well as their parents, their teachers and significant others.

Compulsory education began in England in 1870 with the Forster Education Act, thus ensuring that basic literacy and numeracy skills were universally acquired across the population and the nation was equipped to tackle the challenges of the industrialising world (Royle, 1997). F.E. legislation followed, increasing and expanding the opportunity for young people to access higher levels of schooling. In 1944, the government introduced universal secondary education in a form that was designed to address the needs of industry, commerce, academia and society for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by insisting on the provision of

grammar schools for the most academically able children, technical schools for the technically gifted and secondary modern schools for the remainder. These changes reflected a new era in British politics. The Beveridge Report of 1942 had set out the need for the state to attack the “five giants of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness” (Timmins 2001, p. 260); and, with the end of World War II in sight, there was an emerging popular hunger for major social reform to take place. The advent of secondary education for all was in keeping with this zeal for greater equality of opportunity, mirrored the following year with the election of a new Labour government. For almost 20 years, the system flourished, although always on a restricted basis, as the third strand of ‘technical schools’ only developed in a few places, due to lack of funds (*ibid.*). The 1944 Act represented a departure from previous ways of viewing national education, insofar as it did not apparently draw any conclusions about the relationship between the type of schooling being offered and the social class of the prospective pupils. Working-class children now theoretically had the opportunity to enter the higher echelons of the job market as never before and any middle-class young people intellectually unequipped to meet the grammar school entry criteria would have the chance to succeed in gaining technical skills. In reality, as Halsey *et al.* (1980) point out, the outcome was not so egalitarian: despite these changes, and despite the advent of a ‘classless’ basis for secondary education, the outcome of the 1944 Education Act was that the majority of grammar school places (which were far fewer than the places available in secondary modern schools) went to middle-class children, while working-class children formed the highest percentage of intake to secondary modern schools.

Despite the outcome, the initial premise of creating an egalitarian platform in secondary education did provide a radical way of thinking when compared to previous beliefs about what kind of education different classes should receive. Prior to the Second World War,

Britain had tended to see the world from an imperial viewpoint, with a Britain's contribution to learning and progress across the globe in terms of education, commerce, legislation and culture. British people enjoyed a sense of confidence, self-esteem and pride in their country, their way of life and their values and culture which were largely unshakeable. Wesley (1934) in his bibliographical article in *The Journal of Modern History* cites a wide range of authors from academia, the arts and popular culture who created and supported these views and comments how few of the political commentators of the day "dared omit a reference to imperial affairs and countless motions of thanks proclaimed Britain's imperial destiny" (*ibid.* p. 42). These beliefs were fuelled by the wealth created through the industrial revolution; the mass expansion in overseas territories that British troops conquered and claimed for the crown; and the reflected glory the country felt from its consequent global power. As American writer Low (1916) said at the time:

"The British Empire is bound by no frail rope of sand but is linked by bonds of steel. [...] Come what may the British Empire lives and in the years to follow, no matter what sacrifices it may be called upon to make the spirit of nationality will become more vigorous." (*ibid.*, pp. 223-224).

Intrinsic to these beliefs was an acceptance of the British class system and the acceptance that no matter how hard things were, it was better to be British and poor than to have any other nationality. Abrams (1961), in a study of political party allegiances, points out that social aspirations have always been tied in British culture to notions of class and these ideas link back to pre-war notions of the strength of empire and the importance of being British.

By 1944 Britain was facing a different point of view and the old class boundaries were under question for several reasons (Tomlinson, 2002). World War II had created an awareness that the government, since 1939, had managed to ensure full employment (a dramatic contrast with the depression years of the earlier 1930s). In the armed forces, working-class men had been promoted to officer status and had helped to secure supremacy in the field. Meanwhile, the socialist movement was promising a national welfare system and promoting ideas of social equality. The harsh conditions of the 1930s had fostered a new appetite for social reform, as evidenced by the rise of communism, increasing support for the Labour Party, expressions of national unrest such as the Jarrow hunger marches described by Pimlott (1977), and disenchantment with the old Liberal party (Wilson 1966). Despite these forces for social reform, however, the real outcome of the 1944 Education Act was that the majority of grammar school places went to middle-class children whilst secondary modern schools took higher proportions of working-class children (Halsey *et al.* 1980). Although this seems to be, in itself, a less-than-desirable outcome, it received little challenge at the time. This appears to relate to the fact that, while a change of political attitude was beginning to be apparent, there was still an adherence to the old order's social and cultural narrative – wherein middle-class children had much greater access to a classical education, and working class children were *expected* to concentrate on the vocational, the practical and the craft skills (*ibid.*). Assuming such notions remain influential in Britain today, this historical perspective has pertinence to this research because, for those making judgements about students' suitability for higher education, it could colour their perception of the relative values of traditional academic qualifications and vocational qualifications.

## The early years of higher education in Britain

This research examines the experiences of students at university. It is therefore necessary to investigate in what ways the national historical context has impacted specifically on higher education.

Higher education in Britain is not a single, unified sector. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, the system of qualifications in schools varies considerably from its English and Welsh counterparts and this has led to these two countries adopting different systems for higher education (Gray *et al.* 1983). In Scotland, there are very considerable differences in how universities are organised, with Scottish universities utilising an extra year of study but awarding a Master's Degree to successful graduates (albeit at the same level as a Bachelor Degree in England and Wales). This leads to some problems in definition. This research concentrates essentially on one English institution but much of the literature reviewed does not necessarily differentiate between 'Britain' and 'England'. In general, the texts cited will use the word 'Britain' and only differentiate it into its constituent parts where there is a significantly different impact in one of the other home countries. It needs to be acknowledged, therefore, that where the word 'Britain' or 'British' is cited it refers to a phenomenon wherein there is no discernible difference between the English, Scottish, Northern Irish or Welsh systems.

Britain has a long tradition of higher education but, for centuries, entry remained open only to a privileged few (Archer *et al.* 2003). Initially higher education was designed primarily to recruit, train and maintain the clergy of the established church (Kearney 1970) but, from the 1600s onwards, it gradually developed into a natural progression vehicle for those with power

and influence. Kearney (1970) describes how universities saw themselves as providing the rulers of the future and therefore “confined their attention to the powerful few” (Kearney 1970 p. 169).

Oxford and Cambridge provided university education, to those who could afford it, from the Middle Ages until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Victorian era, there was an expansion of the university sector in places such as Durham (established 1833), London (established 1836) and the Victoria University (1860). Despite this growth, university was still seen as chiefly the prerogative of men from the higher social classes who had wealth and power. As Gordon *et al.* (1991) say, higher education, at the time, was:

“[...] education which emphasised that diligent study in the older disciplines produced better men with alert minds who would be able eventually to fulfil their proper calling within governing elite.”

(Gordon *et al.* 1991 p. 233)

This was not quite as universally true as Gordon *et al.* suggest; the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century had provided some examples of civic universities being built in the north of England and the Midlands. These institutions, known as ‘redbrick universities’, were created in places such as Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham, providing courses in science and engineering to support the industrialisation of the period (Sanderson 2007). These institutions, however, were very specifically designed to cater to the new demands for industrial technology with relevant areas of study. The ancient universities remained largely as the preserve of the wealthy, and drew their students predominantly from members of the higher social classes.



## Higher education through the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Expansion of the higher education continued steadily throughout the first 60 years of the twentieth century, with new universities being granted their own charter and informally becoming members of the group already designated as 'redbrick' (see page 48). These new institutions included universities such as Reading in 1926, Nottingham in 1948, Southampton in 1952 and Hull in 1954. In several cases, including Hull, these institutions had been delivering higher education since the earlier years of the century but had been doing so with degrees awarded from an ancient institution (for example, Hull had been awarding degrees from the University of London since 1927). With the advent of their own charter, the institutions were now able to award their own degrees and become fully-fledged universities, and thus expand their curriculum and intake. This expansion meant that these years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an eightfold increase in student numbers in higher education, from 25,000 full-time students in 1900 to 216,000 in 1962 (Robbins 1963). Apart from a very small number of working-class students who benefited from the philanthropic interventions, however, the prevailing social class profile of students remained little changed from that of preceding centuries (*ibid.*).

In the early 1960s, a Royal Commission was established to examine the country's higher education situation. The resultant report, known as the Robbins Report, recommended that higher education should be supported to expand from 216,000 to an estimated 560,000 by 1980 (Robbins 1963, para.179). Archer *et al.* (2003) point out that this seemed to be a very ambitious target at the time but, in reality, was an underestimate of the eventual growth in intake. The report also recommended that higher education should expand to support more courses in science and technology (Robbins 1963, para. 507) and should encourage the

development of broader-based courses (*ibid.*, para. 262). These latter recommendations are significant to this research's examination of widening participation in higher education, as they represent a move towards valuing vocational study at undergraduate level and thus signify a shift away from the belief that only academic subjects should be at the heart of higher education.

Politicians at the time were agreed that the future economic prosperity of Britain rested upon higher level skills, particularly in science and technology, and were afraid that the country was not moving fast enough to keep pace. In his speech at the Labour Party conference in Scarborough, October 1963, Harold Wilson emphasised this, saying:

“In all our plans for the future, we're redefining and we're restating our socialism in terms of the scientific revolution. But that revolution cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society. The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry.” (Wilson 1964, p. 27)

What followed from both this belief in the need for the country to be more technologically advanced, and then directly from the Robbins Report, was the creation of a binary system of higher education. The university sector remained as it had previously been, with its autonomy in the awarding of degrees and its concentration upon traditional subjects and research; and a new sector of higher education was formed, in which freshly created higher education institutions – known as polytechnics – would provide the scientific and technical degree-level

education recommended in the report. The two arms of higher education each had their own entry system – universities via the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA) which had been in operation since 1964; and the polytechnics via the Polytechnics Central Admissions Service (PCAS). The polytechnics did not have the autonomous degree-awarding powers of the universities but were, instead, controlled in this area of their work by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which was a degree-awarding authority in the United Kingdom from 1965 until 1992. The CNAA awarded academic degrees not only at polytechnics, but also at other non-university institutions such as colleges of higher education. The system assumed that a potential student would choose a particular degree path and apply either to UCCA, if they wished to pursue a traditional academic subject, or to PCAS, if they wished to pursue a vocational subject. Thus, Pratt (1997) argues, the system had an inbuilt academic elitism which reinforced the perception that vocational subjects were quite different from the pure academic ones.

As Pratt says:

“Institutions in the autonomous tradition tend to be exclusive. If what they do is self-justifying, they can responsibly accept only those who are suitable for what they are doing. Exclusiveness, though ostensibly academic, may be effectively social.” (Pratt 1997, p. 9)

In 1992 the CNAA was disbanded (DES 1991) and the polytechnics were given degree-awarding powers in line with the university sector (Pratt 1999). Ostensibly, this demolished the binary system and created an equal platform for all providers of higher education; in reality, views were entrenched and long-lasting, and achieving genuine change would prove

more difficult than could be realised by simply rebranding every higher education institution as a university and giving them all degree-awarding powers. The effects of this are still apparent today: universities are often described by those who work within them as ‘pre-92’ or ‘post-92’, staff in the two forms of institution still operate on different terms and conditions, and the balance between teaching and research is often different across the two types of institution. Thus the ‘pre-92’ and ‘post-92’ designations still carry a wealth of meaning to the initiated, almost 20 years after the unification of the systems.

It could also be argued that the unification of the sector took away a dedicated and well-established route for vocational students and replaced it with something much more amorphous and difficult to negotiate. This was compounded by the response from the higher education institutions themselves, wherein the former polytechnic sector began to offer degrees in more established academic subjects and the pre-92 institutions began to branch out to deliver more vocational routes. Far from clarifying matters, this arguably left prospective students with a confusing range of mixed messages and a lack of clarity as to which university would be most suitable for meeting their needs and aspirations.

In 2003 when the then Department of Education and Skills introduced two significant policy documents (DfES 2003a, DfES 2003b) relating to widening participation in higher education, they demanded that all universities and other higher education institutions should plan to widen participation to under-represented groups, recruit more students overall, provide more access routes, undertake more collaborative provision in partnership with local further education colleges and generally expand their horizons to reach a more diverse student population (Slack 2004). The fundamental drive contained within the policies was that the university sector should look at new markets and make efforts both to expand, and to expand

into new areas of recruitment. There are a number of reasons for the government's production of policies to widen participation in higher education. (Neave 1988, Henkel and Little 1998), but two areas seem to be key: the perception that economic growth is predicated upon the expansion of higher levels of education and learning; and the idea that a global economy demands that only those countries with the highest levels of educational attainment can be successful (see Chapter 2 pp. 20-24). Equally, the underpinning notion exists that universities need to provide a more vocationally orientated approach in order for the country to compete in global markets. As Becher and Trowler (2001) say:

“[...] there has been an increasing emphasis in government policy and rhetoric on the vocational functions of HE in both its role in supplying qualified students for the professions, industry and commerce and in terms of its research functions.” (Becher and Trowler 2001, p. 5)

The government's belief appeared to be that the country's future prosperity depended upon high levels of growth in a knowledge economy and they were convinced that increasing levels of education were synonymous with the potential for such prosperity; a view shared by many other Western governments (Bleiklie 2005).

### The importance of socio-economic status and family background within the national historical context

Socio-economic status and family background continue to be constant influences in all areas of British life, including education. This is not to say that these issues (and our understanding of them) have not undergone changes in the last 50 years but both Archer *et al.* (2003) and

Thomas (2001) argue that they nevertheless remain a major determinant in the life chances of citizens. Jovchelovitch (2007), in the *New Statesman*, (01/10/07) argues that in Britain they remain significant factors in comparison to other countries, saying that the force of class in Britain is stronger than in any other comparable industrialised Western society. She goes on to describe how academics around the world refer to it as the “British hang-up” and how it is rooted within a complex web of signifiers including accents, manners and overall impression management, and it is a sign system that can be difficult for non-British people to understand. Jovchelovitch goes on to say:

“Class here is an attitude, something you believe in or you do not, something you argue passionately about, something you feel in your gut and you understand, as well as the language you speak. Quite apart from different positions people occupy in the class system and the different experiences they have in relation to it, there is widespread and immediately recognisable shared knowledge about class.”

(Jovchelovitch S. 2007)

Socio-economic status and family background are, therefore, important factors in any research that is examining attitudes and perceptions affecting entry to higher education, especially if the research is examining the relationship between differing student experiences and those students’ pre-entry routes. It was for this reason that Archer *et al.* (2003) was identified in Chapter 2 as a piece of literature that could help to inform the work. This thesis does not provide an exhaustive analysis of social class in the way that a sociological study might, but it must, nevertheless, give recognition to the impact of socio-economic status and family background as fundamental pieces of context to this research. The thesis does not

focus on social class as a theme, but rather looks at more general picture under the heading of family background. It has therefore been important to review the available literature and gain an understanding of how socio-economic status and family background can have an effect on the choices people make in relation to their education, and how parents and teachers advise potential students by drawing upon their own backgrounds and educational experiences.

Britain is not unique in differentiating people on the basis of social status and family background, yet in Britain these distinctions are somewhat different and less tangible than the more obvious financial, ethnic, caste or religious bases that characterise them in many other countries. There are many texts that try to define the British system and explain its roots and manifestations, from the Marxist-economic view (McLellan [Ed.] 1998), which characterised social divisions as being based upon distinctions between the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and the workers who produced the wealth through their efforts (the proletariat), through to the views of later Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci who defined Marx's ideas by the incorporation of additional reference to the roles of power and status in forming such distinctions. Writing about the consequent role of hegemony in operationalising those distinctions, he says:

“The ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority.” (Gramsci 1932-34, *Notebook 13*, p. 80 [footnote])

These views are as relevant to education as to other areas of public life. Indeed, Livingstone (2002) picks up this idea and translates it directly to the ways in which the curriculum operates in modern schooling, saying:

“The educational hegemony of schooling and the prevalence in schooling of forms of knowledge most familiar to the affluent classes continues to obscure less visible forms of working-class knowledge and competency.”

(Livingstone 2002, p. 222)

Whilst Marx and Gramsci may seem to be far removed from the main research question addressed in this thesis, their views can provide a series of explanations about critical background issues relating to socio-economic status, family background and education. In order to explore fully how students’ pre-entry experiences affect their lives as undergraduate students and postgraduate workers, it is very likely that their background will have had some impact on their initial choice of entry route, their expectations of higher education and their aspirations upon graduation. These issues will be explored through the qualitative phase of the research, with questions to the student participants concerning their initial assumptions about higher education and its outcomes, and examining to what extent they were taking the routes expected of them by their own family and social circle, and to what extent they were breaking new ground by becoming undergraduates.

The complex interrelationship between social status, family background and education has been investigated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with differing emphases depending upon the researcher. For Basil Bernstein (1979), language was the critical factor; for Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), culture remains a prevailing theme. The original



theoretical approaches, as espoused in the grand meta-narratives of Marx, Gramsci and others, have given way in post-war thinking to the postmodernist view of the world. This has redefined social background as a process, interacting with other inequalities, rather than as a grand construct that stands alone. This approach does not rest solely on factors such as economics or occupation but rather sees social status as a construct built as part of a web of interlocking factors that include sex, race, ethnicity and culture, as well as education and economics. Writers such as Calvert (1982) have even argued that it should no longer be an area of consideration because of the complexity of the construct in postmodern society; others, meanwhile, such as Hennessey and Ingraham (1997), link social background to a feminist ideology, arguing that the two constructs of class and sexism intertwine, colouring our ability to make sense of differential values and cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The postmodernist view of the world does not deny the existence of social differences in peoples' lives, but sees these as a component within a complex network of other factors, including both education and the new knowledge economy – a web of interrelationships that is addressed by both Wolf (2002) and Thomas (2001) (see Chapter 2 pp. 20-28).

This more complex postmodern view of peoples' socio-economic and family backgrounds is perhaps more relevant to this research than the more structured economic models of class, for the research questions will explore wider class-based issues relating to family background, such as: whether or not parents have been supportive; whether or not siblings have already been to university; and what students' parents saw as the rationale for entry to higher education. Despite the changes that have been wrought by the ending of the industrial era – and the fact that Marx's economic model of wealth-owners and wealth-producers could be said to be too simplistic in a postmodern world – the new ideas are problematic in the sense that they are much vaguer than the old Marxist model; are much more open to individual

interpretation; and will therefore provide differing definitions of social status depending upon the subjective stance of the individual, be it feminist, cultural or racial. Archer *et al.* (2003) address this issue in relation to an examination of entry to higher education, saying:

“Postmodern theorists attempt micro-level analyses attending to particular aspects of social class within defined local boundaries [...] but they broadly share a conceptual stance that understands working class participation in higher education as constituted by a complex combination of social, structural, economic and cultural factors and enacted through material and discursive inequalities.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 11)

These postmodern approaches give recognition to the complexities of post-industrial society and to the fact that earlier models were liable to be predicated upon single factors, such as occupation or economic wealth. Postmodernism therefore provides a richer and more appropriate context for this research than the older models.

### Vocational education - links to socio-economic status, family background and entry to higher education

As outlined in Chapter 2 (see pp. 29-33), vocational and academic routes at level 3 reflect issues of socio-economic status and family background. Archer *et al.* (2003) talk about the fear middle-class families have of vocational qualifications (except in areas such as law and medicine), arguing that there is “middle-class resistance to vocational education” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p.141). Likewise, Thomas (2001), Wolf (2002) and Connor *et al.* (2006) all identify the links between family background, social class and the uptake of vocational qualifications,

rather than traditional A-Levels, at level 3. These links may not be as pronounced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as in the past but, as Archer *et al.* (*op.cit.*) point out, the history of vocational education still underpins a common perception of such qualifications as being associated with low status craft trades rather than as a dual-purpose route that can be used as training for work or as entry to higher education. In reality, vocational qualifications have been providing a route into higher level study for a long time, although the scale of such progression is now greater and more widely acknowledged.

Since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, vocational education in Britain has been provided from school-leaving age by local further education colleges, previously called technical colleges (Huddleston 1998). Until the 1970s, the provision of vocational education by these institutions followed a relatively well-established pattern. The technical college was the place where young school leavers could access full-time vocational training or undertake part-time training alongside their employment – on a day-release, block-release or evening-class basis (Royle 1997). These latter part-time routes were well-recognised standard apprenticeship schemes and were supported by employers and trade organisations such as the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), Engineering Industry Training Board (EITB), National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) and scores of similar organisations. For young people who showed particular promise, there was also the option of moving on to a polytechnic where full-time and part-time degree courses ran in almost every vocational area throughout the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Silver and Silver (1997) point out, the system provided for skilled young people in all vocational areas, and appeared to be fulfilling the needs of industry, commerce and the service sectors.

The situation changed in the 1970s, as a drop in intake signalled problems in the recruitment and training of apprentices. Nichols (2001) suggests that this was not due to a shortage of able young people but to a downturn in the economy, especially in manufacturing, brought about by global competition: countries such as Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and later, China, were able to produce manufactured goods far more cheaply than Britain. In addition, Britain, along with other Western nations, suffered from a dramatic rise in the price of fuel during the 'OPEC crisis', when the oil-producing cartels of the Middle East inflated the cost of crude oil (Hickson 2005). This led companies to take on fewer staff, especially young and untrained staff. As unemployment rose, so there was a greater pool of available trained and skilled labour to draw upon, making employers even less willing to take on apprentices and trainees. The situation was exacerbated in the early 1980s by the government's abolition of the well-established industry training boards, which had overseen the training of apprentices, and the removal of the financial incentives for industry to employ apprentices. The situation began to create its own momentum: able young people, seeing the shortage of jobs in traditional vocational trades, began to elect to stay on at school and pursue opportunities in higher education instead. The university and polytechnic sector responded vigorously and attracted many more students (Halsey 1995). As a consequence of this, more young people were opting out of the post-school job market into university and polytechnic. The danger of this situation, as I have argued in another context (Shaw 2007), is that it can lead to an overall perception that somehow young people entering vocational routes into work or training have become less talented, less well educated and less able, thereby adding to the middle-class fear of vocational training highlighted by Archer *et al.* (2003) and leading to concerns being raised about the poor standards of attainment of school-leavers. For example, Sir Digby Jones, former Head of the Confederation for British Industry, said in a

highly critical outgoing speech in 2006 that: “half of all school-leavers were still unfit to enter the job market” (BBC News 07/05/07).

Given that parents and employers have prejudices against vocational qualifications, Connor *et al.* (2006) showed within their research that admissions staff in universities who have difficulty in understanding vocational qualifications can also display prejudice towards those holding them. Admissions staff may be unclear as to the value of vocational qualifications, or have a poor understanding of the content of courses of vocational study and what they entail, thereby adding to the potential for prejudice.

The problems, however, may begin before the point of entry to higher education as Archer *et al.* (2003) suggest, within both the school sector and the 16-19 sector, as students are selected for particular courses of study and encouraged or discouraged from alternative choices (*ibid.*). The Tomlinson Report (DfES 2004) examined these issues in some detail and concluded that only a fully integrated system which removed the artificial barriers between the ‘academic’ and the ‘vocational’ would ever truly serve this purpose. The government of the day, having commissioned the report, then failed to implement its recommendations. There are those who believe that the suggestion that traditional academic qualification routes could, or would, be removed to make way for a combined academic and vocational qualification stream, would lead to a public outcry which no government would have been seen to ignore. As the general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, Steve Sinnott, said in 2005:

“By rejecting the central principle that GCSEs and A-Levels should be scrapped, the government had experienced a failure of nerves. The Tomlinson report attracted a remarkable degree of consensus. His report

made it clear that if there are two separate routes for students divided on academic and vocational lines then a two-tier system will continue to be embedded. It looks as if short-sighted electoral considerations have overridden sensible policy making."

(The Guardian 23/02/05)

These perceptions of vocational qualifications, and the issues which they embody, are therefore important in helping to provide a context for this research with its emphasis on the differential experiences of students from different entry routes and can help to inform the data collection to see whether or not these issues are reflected in the views and experiences of the cohort under examination.

#### The current national, political and social context

As this thesis is examining the experience of a group of students, drawn from different backgrounds, bringing with them a mix of vocational and traditional academic study and qualifications, as they progress through higher education and into their postgraduate lives, it is important to look at how the prevailing social and political culture has affected their recruitment and progress. At the time of their recruitment, universities were being tasked with increasing student numbers through a widening participation agenda promoted by central government. As outlined in Chapter 2 (see pp. 25-28), in promoting the expansion of access to higher education the government of the day, in line with other Western governments, was committed to the idea that it was only with a quantitative rise in the numbers of students accessing higher education that Britain's economic prosperity could be

assured. In his summary of the government green paper (DfEE1998) David Blunkett, representing the government view, said:

“To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable labour force. To cope with rapid change we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite: We need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.”

*(ibid)*

These views represented a considerable shift away from the attitudes that had historically prevailed. As outlined in previous sections, until the 1980s, the dominant attitude held about certain educated people was that they were the professionals in their chosen fields; furthermore, their skills and methods were not usually open to public debate, scrutiny or question. This was true not only of those in medical, legal and religious institutions but also of educationalists such as schoolteachers, further education (then technical college) lecturers and university staff. The rationale underpinning these ideas was largely predicated upon the fact that only an elite few were able to afford the luxury of more than an elementary education (Royle 1997), and reflected the view that those in the higher social echelons had the right to be the people with power and influence. It also reflected the ability of those in positions of power to exclude others from elite education and from professions like medicine and the law (Collins 1990). Collins' view is that these professions utilise 'occupational closure' to ensure that the jobs are only available to a specified group, usually via the completion of a specified set of performance standards, and/or the inclusion in an accredited professional body.

Although there is evidence, for example from Collins (1990), that the occupational closure practised by the professions has its own history, and the evidence of class-driven exclusion has an even longer and more established basis, political intervention in the working life of professionals is a much newer phenomenon. It was not until the 1980s that there was a political shift away from the belief that professionals knew best and should be left to do their jobs without interference. An example of this is provided in 1984 by the government's creation of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) to advise the Secretary of State on the approval of courses of initial teacher training (Taylor 1987). This governmental intervention in the professions was partly a response to changing political agenda, wherein government wanted to have a greater role in managing the professions, but also reflected new ways of thinking within the general population in which individual rights were being more keenly pursued. As Eraut (1994) says:

“The concept of client rights has increasingly gained acceptance. As politicians have sensed these changes in public mood they have sought to increase the role of government in the regulation of professional work.”

(Eraut 1994, p. 5)

It could be argued that this political intervention in setting and maintaining professional standards in teaching and other occupations has created a more egalitarian basis for recruitment to these roles. Yet, as Archer *et al.* (2003) point out, access to the higher education that leads to these jobs has still remained disproportionate across *all* of the social classes. They say:



“The expansion of participation in higher education has been achieved by differential enrolment from different social classes. While all groups have increased their level of participation, the higher groups have substantially increased their contribution with the participation of other groups being more modest.” (Archer *et al.* 2003, p. 79)

Thus although people from a wider range of backgrounds are currently represented within higher education and within the teaching profession, these people are still largely drawn from the higher socio-economic groups than the lower ones, as defined by the Registrar General’s index of social class.

### Summary

This chapter has examined the global, historical and national context for this research. It began with a brief overview of the impact of globalisation – wherein the older European national governments are less powerful on the international stage than ever before; where people, ideas, goods and services are rapidly transmissible across national boundaries; and where traditional skills can be bought and sold in any market across the globe – and suggested how these factors could act as drivers for education policies. The chapter went on to examine the national historical context, examining how attitudes and beliefs about education have changed over time but also how some public perceptions, rooted in old prejudices, still appear to affect today’s undergraduates. The chapter also examined the development of education policies in recent history and the values which underpinned them. It suggested that these values have led to ideas, coloured by fears fostered through the decline of British manufacturing, that vocational education is somehow a ‘second-best’ option

without the intrinsic worthiness of a more ‘academic’ grounding. It has suggested that employers, comparing today’s young people in vocational training with those in the past, seem convinced that standards of education and ability have suffered a national decline. The government, meanwhile, is involving itself in education to a greater extent than ever before, possibly to compensate for its declining power on an international stage, but also because it remains convinced that education and economic growth are causally linked and that Britain is in danger of falling behind its competitors if it does not raise the stakes in terms of performance, as evidenced by Wolf (2002) and discussed in Chapter 2. In adopting new managerialist attitudes to control, the government applies considerable pressure to the providers of education and training to ‘improve’ pupil and trainee performance with a welter of targets, initiatives, strategies, policies and pressures.

This chapter has suggested that many people in Britain, including those who work in education, as has been shown in previous research (Connor *et al.* 2006, Schwarz 2004, Shaw 2007, Sinclair and Connor 2008), remain unconvinced that vocational education is as good as academic education or that vocational qualifications carry the same merit as those in traditional subjects. For the students in this research this is a highly pertinent issue, and it will be addressed through an examination of quantitative data to see how well students from the different entry routes perform in relation to each other and in the qualitative phase through the questioning of respondents as to their experiences as undergraduates.

The next chapter will take these issues, expand on the national context and take them forward to the more local level, relating them to the University of Hull and the research cohort in particular. It will discuss how government policy has affected higher education, especially in relation to widening participation strategies, both in general terms and in relation to the

University of Hull. It will also look at the attitudes and perceptions of staff and students towards the different vocational and academic entry points to higher education and examine some of the anomalies that exist in these perceptions. The chapter will relate this local context to the wider issues relating to the social, cultural and political climate introduced so far.

#### **Chapter 4: University Admissions – from the National Context to the Local Context**

This research focuses on the admission, achievement and progression of students on a B.A. Educational Studies programme at the University of Hull; it examines these issues for all the students, whether they have entered the programme from a traditional academic route or a non-traditional vocational route. If students from the non-traditional vocational group had been candidates for a university place twenty years ago it is unlikely that they would have been accepted for a place at any English university, including the University of Hull, yet in 2004 they were accepted and embarked upon their degree studies. Their application to the University of Hull and their offer of a place reflect a changing political and social environment in which people are encouraged to access educational opportunities and higher education institutions are encouraged to widen participation in learning and study to the greatest possible extent.

This chapter first revisits the national context before taking this forward to apply it to the the University of Hull context. It assesses the impact of the British government's policies on university admissions procedures in relation to widening participation and access to higher education and examines the impact both across the wider university sector and specifically within the University of Hull. It further examines some of the areas of concern which have led to policies not being adopted in quite the manner predicted, or being ignored. The chapter makes reference to two research projects, (see Appendices 3 and 4) undertaken between 2004 and 2008, one an internal project at the University of Hull examining vocational admissions for the university's Strategic Development Unit (Shaw 2007), and one designed to develop a higher level apprenticeship scheme (McAndrew and Shaw 2006). The outcomes from these projects helped with the generation and refinement of the research questions within this

thesis. The two projects suggested that the ability of vocational applicants to access higher education was not as straightforward as for A-Level applicants and that staff perceptions of vocational candidates were problematic. These findings reflect the work of Wolf (2002), Archer (2003), Connor *et al.* (2006) and Thomas (2001) which were presented in Chapter 2.

### The national context

University admissions have increased substantially in recent times and this has been largely driven by government agenda which are themselves predicated upon a desire to see increasing numbers of people entering higher education, as discussed in Chapter 2 in the literature of Thomas (2001) and Wolf (2002).

### Social factors in the political agenda for higher education expansion

Although numbers participating in higher education have risen substantially in the past 30 years (Thomas 2001), there is still a tail of under-achievement and what is significant about the increase is that it is drawn almost exclusively from the upper strata of the working classes and from the middle classes (Archer *et al.* 2003). Many of the students who make up the additional student numbers recruited in recent years are the first people in their family to access higher education, but an analysis of their backgrounds suggests that they are predominantly from the upper end of the working classes and lower end of the middle classes and not drawn from the most disenfranchised groups (*ibid.*). This factor has particular resonance in Hull where there are clear economic indicators of social deprivation and disadvantage across the city (O'Neill 2001). New Labour (1997-2010) came to power with an agenda which espoused inclusivity and social responsibility and, as such, had a vested

interest in being able to claim that they had facilitated greater access to higher education for greater numbers of people. In reality, as outlined in Chapter 2 (see p. 28), they did not have any more success in encouraging those from the lower classes than did their predecessors and the least represented groups in higher education remained those from the lower end of the social and economic spectrum (Archer *et al.* 2003). Indeed, it could be argued that the introduction of fees for higher education in 2007 could have had a damaging effect on this most disenfranchised group in accessing higher education as many are not in a position to have access to bank loans, overdrafts or credit facilities. This was acknowledged at the time by the Universities Secretary, John Denham, who said that “Hard-working families on modest incomes have concerns about the affordability of university study” (BBC News 05/07/07).

#### Widening participation and retention

Widening participation through the recruitment of non-traditional learners can result from vigorous policies, driven by national policy and applied rigorously within individual universities to ensure that targets are met. The other key issue with widening participation, however, relates to the retention of these students once they are on a programme of study. This research does not address retention as a primary focus because taking such a direction would have required a different approach, but the issue of retention as it links to widening participation nevertheless needs to be acknowledged. In relation to students from widening participation backgrounds the issue of retention is both complex and multi-faceted. As far back as the 1970s Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) provided an explanation relating to ‘institutional habitus’ to explain the lack of participation of students from lower socio-economic groups in higher education, suggesting that the norms and culture of higher

education institutions led inevitably to an alienating experience for those from families with no tradition of study at this level. Thomas (2002) uses this notion to examine student retention for widening participation cohorts and says that:

“In relation to student retention in H.E. the notions of habitus and institutional habitus appear to be useful tools. If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early.” (Thomas 2002 p. 431)

Thomas investigates a range of reasons for poor student retention, ranging from financial concerns through to the particular problems of mature students with family burdens. Her conclusion, however, is that institutional habitus has a role to play in the poor retention rates amongst widening participation cohorts but that this is just one of a wide range of reasons for the high rates of attrition.

#### The impact of widening participation on higher education since 2003

The expansion of higher education and the application of the widening participation agenda have highlighted another problem. Scholefield (2000) highlights the impact of the falling birth rate in European countries since the 1980s, and one feature of this is that there are fewer young people eligible to enter higher education and therefore fewer young people following traditional pre-entry routes via A-Level study. This being the case, many of the additional student numbers accessing higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have to be drawn from those who have elected to study for vocational qualifications at level 3 and the university

sector is going to have to look at ways to accept more vocational qualifications as entry to university (Marks 1999). Currently over 80% of young people with two or more traditional A-Level passes go on to higher education (Connor *et al.* 2006). For the number of participants to rise significantly, therefore, students will have to be drawn from other non-traditional routes such as BTEC National Certificate/Diploma, NVQ3 and level 3 apprenticeships. The participation rates of these students is rising, especially amongst those with the BTEC National qualifications, but it still represents a much smaller percentage than those from traditional routes and the participation rates of those young people with NVQ 3 or an apprenticeship remains very small (*ibid.*).

Several studies (Raffe 2001, Greenwood 2004, Payne 2003, Schwartz 2004) have attempted to explain the reasons for the variations in success of universities to embrace the widening participation agenda and these have reached a range of conclusions about contributory factors. One factor evident in all these findings is the assumption by many staff in universities that vocational qualifications lack parity of intellectual esteem with traditional academic qualifications. Schwartz (2004) produced a review of admissions and suggested that one key reason was the lack of understanding of the content of vocational qualifications by admissions staff in higher education, especially in more traditional universities. It appears from the work of both Schwarz (*ibid.*) and Connor *et al.* (2006) that, whilst at the national level the government's widening participation policies have had an impact, at institutional level the impact is neither uniform nor consistent.



### The university sector reaction to expansion policies

Higher education reaction to the government initiatives to increase access and widen participation can be found at both a formal level and an informal level. At a formal level most higher education institutions have created a widening participation policy, many have created programmes of staff development to help admissions staff to understand the range and nature of available level 3 vocational qualifications which may provide alternative entry points for students, and many have forged links with local schools and further education colleges.

If formal policies and procedures are well established to ensure expansion and widening participation, at an informal level there is sometimes a different reaction. Connor *et al.*'s (2006) research suggested that staff within the university sector, when approached for their opinions, admitted that they are concerned that encouraging widening participation and the admission of students with non-traditional entry qualifications could have a detrimental effect on retention, achievement, the maintenance of academic standards and their ability to maintain their reputations as centres of academic excellence (Connor *et al.* 2006). The latter concern is especially tied to worries that any loss of status could affect research capability and funding, an unsurprising response given the significance of research funding to most university departments.

### The University of Hull context

The University of Hull has responded in exactly the same way as many other universities in responding to widening participation. It has formulated a widening participation strategy and policy, provided staff development for admissions staff, created a learning partnerships office

to liaise with local schools and colleges and developed University Foundation Awards (UFAs) to provide access points to undergraduate study ([www.hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)). At the point of implementation of these policies, however, staff at the University of Hull are no less concerned about widening participation than staff in other institutions. Their concerns were reflected in 2005/6 by their reluctance to engage with the Higher Education Academy's research project (Connor *et al.* 2006). Ultimately, this reluctance was so marked that the Higher Education Academy had to abandon its search for three University of Hull admissions staff who would be interviewed about their procedures relating to non-traditional entrants, as only one such person would agree to be interviewed (the research author) – arguably a reflection of the concerns that these issues raise.

#### The University of Hull environment

All of the national issues highlighted in the previous sections have an impact at the University of Hull in the same way as every other higher education institution but, in addition, Hull finds itself in an uncertain position because of its traditional status. Hull is not a Russell Group university but, equally, it is not a former polytechnic, having a history which pre-dates not only the 1992 re-designation of university status but even the Robbins Report. This leaves the university a little unsure of itself, (as evidenced in every discussion about the strategic direction for the institution), in terms of its status and, consequently, unclear as to how it should react to government agenda.

A further complication for the University of Hull lies in its local catchment area and subsequent potential local market in the city and in the immediate surrounding region. Increasing numbers of undergraduate students are currently drawn from local catchment

areas; the impact of tuition fees and the lack of maintenance support for all but the poorest have meant that there has been a sharp increase in the number of home-based students entering higher education. Hull suffers, as a city, from high levels of social deprivation and academic under-achievement in the school sector (O'Neill 2001). The university has an advantage, in terms of recruitment, over rural or campus-based universities, in that it does have a substantial local population but it does not have the dense populations of high-achieving local people that the universities of London and the Home Counties can draw upon.

The university is neither a 'recruiting university' nor a 'selecting university' but holds some middle ground wherein some faculties are primarily 'recruiters' and others are primarily 'selectors'. This can lead to a difficult situation for the support services across the institution such as marketing and admissions. For some faculties these services need to take a dynamic and rigorous approach, actively promoting widening participation, active recruitment, aggressive marketing and promotion whilst in other areas the approach has to be contained, low-key, restrained and focused upon encouraging only the most able candidates to apply.

Thus the problems which Connor *et al.* (2006) encountered in their national research are also apparent at the University of Hull. It was this finding that led to involvement in two personal research studies which pre-dated this research and helped to steer its initial focus. The two projects (see Appendices 3 and 4) provide evidence for the local position and serve to exemplify issues which underpin this investigation. The first research project (see Appendix 3) was commissioned by the University of Hull Strategic Development Unit examining admissions policies and practices across the university and investigating the uptake of places at the university, by vocationally qualified applicants, over a two year period. It showed that few vocational applicants were accepted for places at the University of Hull, many

admissions staff were unsure about vocational qualifications and the most practical of these (NVQs and Apprenticeships) were particularly misunderstood. The second project (see Appendix 4) was an Aim Higher action research project to develop a higher level apprenticeship at the university to encourage progression from a level 3 apprenticeship into higher education (Shaw and McAndrew 2008). This study showed that many traditional apprentices in motor vehicle studies wished to continue into higher education and many employers were willing to support them, but the two groups were often unaware of the opportunities available for progression. An outline of the results from the two projects is reproduced in Appendices 3 and 4 as evidence of the particular issues which are faced at the University of Hull but which the research of others (Connor *et al.* 2006, Schwarz 2004) would suggest are not unique to this particular institution.

#### Widening participation at the University of Hull – policy into practice

The work of the Higher Education Academy (Connor *et al.* 2006) suggests that the University of Hull is not unique in its reluctance to accept vocationally qualified applicants, especially those from routes which are clearly ‘technical’ or ‘craft’, such as apprenticeships and NVQs. There are also, however, other indicators of how the views of staff within higher education are at odds with government policy and these relate to the ‘hidden messages’ which serve to reinforce ideas about the value of vocational qualifications as a means of progressing to university, a form of institutional bias against the acceptance of anything other than traditional academic AS-levels and A-Levels. One example which serves to illustrate this can be found at the University of Hull. When the University website is accessed to see which students are eligible for a scholarship or bursary, it can be seen that the standard measure is via traditional A-Levels. Equivalences are allowed but applicants not holding traditional A-

Levels have to apply specially to the offering department ([www.hull.ac.uk](http://www.hull.ac.uk)). Whilst an example such as this does not necessarily actively discourage vocational learners from accessing higher education, the implicit messages to potential students, employers, parents and university staff could be that these are not people from a critical market for undergraduate level study.

### Widening participation and issues of retention at the University of Hull

In an earlier section in this chapter (see pp. 69-70) there was a brief examination of how retention was a particular issue in relation to widening participation. In the cohort under examination there were 42 students in the initial intake. Of these, seven withdrew before the final phase of the research, four of them having arrived with vocational qualifications and three with traditional A-Levels. This high attrition rate reflects the national concern about student retention rates. This research focuses upon the outcomes for students who complete their degrees and therefore those who left before graduation were not investigated further, however, it needs to be acknowledged that details about these students would be useful for further research. From the outset the decision was made that retention would not be a focus for the research, as it was assumed that such a focus would be better served by the use of a larger sample across either more programmes of study or across more years of study on the same programme, to yield any meaningful evidence, given the conclusions which Thomas (2001) has reached about the variable nature of reasons for student withdrawal. Although the retention issue has not been addressed within this piece of work, it needs to be acknowledged that the B.A. Educational Studies degree suffered from a high attrition rate along with many other programmes which attempt to widen participation, and future research which uses this work as a basis could usefully take this into account.

## The development of the B.A. Educational Studies and its impact for staff and students

The creation of the B.A. Educational Studies degree was, in itself, a departure for the University of Hull. A 'pre-92' university with a clear focus on traditional subject teaching and research, staff who were involved in its original creation were embarking on a completely new venture. In fact, Educational Studies as a discipline had been around for a considerable time but in its early days was limited to research-based postgraduate study (Nisbet 2002). It emerged first in Scotland after the founding of the Educational Institute for Scotland in 1847 and two Scottish Universities were the first higher education institutions to appoint Chairs of Education in 1876. Nisbet (*ibid.*) argues that we can trace the emergence of education as a discipline worthy of study in its own right (as opposed to the training of educators – i.e. teachers - which is a quite different thing) to the emergence of textbooks on education which both suggested that it was an academic discipline worthy of the production of its own study texts and further promoted new studies in the field, and new ideas about child development emerging from psychology which suggested that the whole process of thinking and learning could be studied. Despite this progress in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, education remained a subject which had only two strands, a postgraduate research strand with connections to philosophy, politics, theology and psychology and a teacher training strand which was clearly rooted in vocational, practice-based learning. The emergence of undergraduate degree programmes in Educational Studies did not occur until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evolving initially from the strand which was devoted to teacher training. In the 1950s and early 1960s teacher training had been at sub-degree level and it was only with the emergence of degree level teacher training at the end of the decade that the study of education as a full discipline began to have its exponents. From this point

there was an inevitable movement towards a study of the subject without the concomitant practice elements required to meet the demands of classroom management. Davies and Hogarth (2002) chart this rise, saying:

“Education is increasingly being studied at undergraduate level as an academic pursuit rather than as part of a programme that is exclusively focused on professional certification.” (Davies and Hogarth 2002 p. 82)

As the subject grew in popularity and more and more higher education institutions began to develop Educational Studies degrees alongside similar degree programmes in Teaching and Learning, Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies, the first subject benchmarks for the subject were produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 2000, thus providing recognition for the discipline and reflecting its growth and popularity ([www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)). In its description of the subject the QAA gives recognition to a range of factors:

- That individual institutions have interpreted the subject matter in highly individual ways using a wide range of foci for the degree – for some institutions it is inclusive learning which is the key thrust, for others it is urban learning, environmental learning, globalisation, cultural diversity or spiritual development.
- That, no matter which direction is the key focus, the subject is always centrally concerned with human development and learning, not just in people’s days at school, college or university but throughout their lives in terms of their social, cultural and economic existence.

- That the subject always embodies study of the essential nature of learning and knowledge and demands rigorous examination of the contexts in which learning, development and education (in its broadest sense) take place, psychologically, sociologically, economically and philosophically.
- That, although it does not train undergraduates or prepare them professionally for a particular role, it does provide the knowledge and understanding to inform a range of professions related to education and maintains a broad perspective.

This research is particularly concerned to examine the experiences of Educational Studies students not only whilst they are at university but beyond it in their postgraduate lives. Nationally there has been little research into the postgraduate destinations of students from these programmes and that which does exist has not looked at the wider picture of entry qualifications related to undergraduate progress as well as postgraduate success. Davies and Hogarth (2002) provide one of the few examinations of destination data for Educational Studies:

“Of the 25 responses in the sample of 67 who graduated 1997 to 1999 employment was:

- Fifteen in education or education-related employment (five teachers, three on PGCE courses, one doing higher degree in education, one early years development officer, one NVG trainer and assessor, one nursery nurse, one nanny, one part-time youth leader).
- Seven in jobs that could be ‘graduate’ type jobs or not (recruitment consultant, employee services adviser, social survey officer in Office of National Statistics, conference organiser; PA for charity, police officer, children’s book reviewer).



- Three in definitely non-graduate type jobs or described too vaguely to judge (sales assistant, admin assistant, civil servant).

Thus of the known number seeking employment 74% had professional jobs or were on higher degree training six months after graduating.”

(Davies and Hogarth 2002, p. 92)

These data need to be viewed with some caution as the definitions are somewhat questionable. It is doubtful whether a nanny could be described as in an “education-related job”; likewise a nursery nurse is indeed professionally qualified but only at level 3 and therefore it is somewhat obfuscating to include him/her in the statistic of 74%. The other note of caution to be applied to these data relates to the speed of change within this area in the years since 2002 as the national picture of provision and policy has changed considerably since then, for example with the advent of new Children’s Services divisions in local authorities bringing together education, health and social services under a single umbrella and the provision of new Sure Start Centres, children’s centres and out-of-school and extended schools projects. These new initiatives have arguably provided a wealth of new employment opportunities for Educational Studies graduates. Despite these notes of caution, the Davies and Hogarth data do provide a small amount of statistical evidence which helped to provide a context for the second phase of this research wherein the former students were interviewed.

Despite the fact that Educational Studies was becoming a well-established undergraduate programme by the 1990s, the University of Hull was initially unsure about embracing the subject. The department in which the degree was located had a long history of postgraduate teaching and research ([www.hull.ac.uk/ces](http://www.hull.ac.uk/ces)) with a number of Masters’ and Doctoral level programmes of high esteem, but little or no undergraduate provision. Once the decision had

been taken to develop the degree, however, staff were enthusiastic about making it a very successful programme and promoted it effectively. The first cohort, in September 2003, was small but by 2004 the numbers of applicants had risen substantially.

In general the admissions staff for the B.A. Educational Studies reflected the same perceptions as the rest of the university's admissions staff in the earlier project (see Appendix 3) in their decision-making and therefore no students with modern apprenticeship backgrounds were admitted to the B.A. Educational Studies programme in 2004 and no account was taken of Key Skills grades. The admissions staff did, however, accept students with BTEC National Diplomas and with CACHE (formerly NNEB) Nursery Nursing Diplomas with which they were more familiar having worked previously in school classrooms where these qualifications were recognized for support staff. In addition the admissions team had a new member of staff (the research author) who had knowledge of vocational qualifications and was able to inject more confidence into the team in accepting vocationally qualified applicants. Despite this the staff still felt that they had to respond to a conflicting set of criteria. The university wanted to encourage the programme to flourish; the university had a widening participation policy, reflecting national policy, which demanded that admissions staff took a positive view of non-traditional applicants; and they were keen to give vocationally qualified applicants a chance. In contrast to this, however, staff (including this researcher) were aware of the subtle messages from colleagues about the need to 'maintain standards' and the suggestions that vocational qualifications would not adequately prepare students for degree level study. They were aware that the university had little or no record of recruiting people with the more competence-based qualifications such as NVQs or apprenticeships and, most significantly of all, they felt insecure about making judgements

about applicants with vocational qualifications because they felt that they did not know enough about what those qualifications were like.

Despite their misgivings, in the end a number of vocationally qualified applicants were selected for the course along with a similar number of people with traditional academic entry profiles. It is in examining the backgrounds and experiences of these two groups that this research attempts to ascertain whether or not they have had similar levels of success or failure and in what measure, and to see how far the impact of their pre-university backgrounds, experiences and studies extended into their lives as undergraduate students, postgraduate students or graduate workers.

### Summary

This chapter has established that there are national agenda relating to widening participation and the inclusion of more diverse groups of students on a broader range of courses in higher education. The British government in power at the time of this research was committed to extending the reach of higher education. It had, at the time, a proclaimed target that 50% of the population under 30 years of age accessing higher education by 2012 (Thomas 2001). To this end the government produced policies to further this aim, reproduced in three key policy documents (DfES 2003a, DfES 2003b, DfES 2004). In order to fulfil the expectations of these policies universities, including the University of Hull, needed to address the small number of vocationally qualified entrants going into higher education, especially from routes such as NVQ and apprenticeships where representation was low. Data from national research (Schwarz 2004, Connor *et al.* 2006) suggest that there are a range of problems which underpin the lack of application of policy into practice; a lack of clarity for admissions staff

about the value of vocational qualifications, a lack of understanding about the abilities of students from non-traditional routes and a desire to stay with what seems ‘safe’ and familiar – especially where targets are easy to meet and traditional routes provide a wealth of applicants. In addition, both the national research (Archer *et al.* 2003) and the local research (see Appendices 3 and 4) suggest that there is still a residual bias built into the systems wherein it is assumed that young people who choose a vocational route for their tertiary education are not likely to want to enter the university system and/or that if they do they will need a lot of additional support to succeed.

These new agenda pose challenges for staff in universities, and for staff on the B.A. Educational Studies at the University of Hull the same problems are evident as in many other areas. They have to assess whether or not they should ‘risk’ taking vocationally qualified applicants and, if they do, they then need to feel secure that these students will fare well on the programme and beyond it into their postgraduate lives. This research sets out to investigate whether these notions of ‘risk’ have any veracity and whether or not vocationally qualified students fare as well as those with traditional A-Level qualifications, whether the students’ experiences before university and as undergraduates allow them to achieve success on their degree, how far they are able to progress successfully after graduation and how the whole educational journey has affected their lives. The next chapter examines how the research was designed and carried out in order to investigate these issues.

## **Chapter 5: How the Research was Undertaken**

This chapter describes the methods and tools used to examine the experiences of the students on the B.A. Educational Studies degree and justify the approaches selected by an examination of the relative strengths of the available approaches. It initially provides an overview of the available methodologies to explore the best fit for the research, then goes on to describe the methods used through the stages of the research process.

Any research, however small scale, needs to employ methods which give credibility to the findings. The essential components of this credibility, how it can be established and how we know what we know; are the ontological and epistemological assumptions which provide the bedrock for the findings. Ontological assumptions are about the reality of the world and how we choose to define it; whereas epistemology relates to the approach that we take. Essentially epistemology asks what knowledge is, how we know things, what different kinds of knowledge exist and what are the best ways of creating knowledge in the context of our research. Blaikie (2000) describes ontological assumptions as being “concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality” (Blaikie 2000 p. 8) and, according to Cohen *et al.* (2007), it is ontology which gives rise to epistemology which then, in turn, helps us to find the best methodological tools for the research.

Ontology can take either the form of constructivism or of positivism. Constructivist ontology maintains that meaning is constructed by individuals or groups, whereas positivist ontology suggests that meaning is a concrete phenomenon that maintains that there are ‘givens’ or ‘realities’ which are unchanging. In the quantitative phase of this research the positivist model of ontology can be applied but in the qualitative phase the specific ontological stance owes more to the constructivist model than to the positivist model. The qualitative phase of

the research does not assume that the social reality for anyone, including the students in the research cohort, is a 'given' and therefore unchanging, but is based upon a belief that the students themselves are constructing their experiences as they travel through their studies and postgraduate lives and it is this which allows the individual to grow and prosper through education and learning, enhancing their quality of life. Inevitably this leads to issues of reliability in any of the findings from the research; if each group of students (indeed, each individual student) is a social actor constructing his or her own reality in the process, then the outcomes of the research are not necessarily going to be reproducible in any great measure. Yet this is the nature of a case-study; it presents us with a snapshot at a given time and can simply suggest further investigations to establish reliability. As Bryman (2001) says of constructivist ontology:

“[It] asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision.” (Bryman 2001, pp. 16 – 18)

In examining the epistemology of any research, one is again faced with alternative models; in the case of epistemology these are the positivist and interpretivist models. Again, the positivist approach suggests that knowledge has some universal underlying, unchanging realities whereas interpretivism suggests, in a similar vein to the constructivist model of ontology, that knowledge is available for individual interpretation. In this research, again, whilst the first phase of the work could be said to reflect a positivist stance – relying on UCAS data, degree classifications and student results - the qualitative phase of the research is clearly tied to an interpretivist epistemology. As Bryman (2001) says:

“[...]interpretist (sic) epistemology[...] is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action.” (Bryman 2001, pp. 12 – 13)

The fact that this study relies upon data from individuals, including their subjective opinions, perceptions and reflections, it must inevitably rest on an interpretivist epistemology but this is not to devalue the outcomes. Human subjects *are* diverse and human experience reflects not just the diversity of the individuals but also the changing nature of human perception over time.

#### The available methodologies

In Chapter 1 (pp. 12-15) the research questions were introduced and it was suggested that they form two distinct groups; those requiring factual answers (questions 1,3,4 and 5) and those requiring a more personal in-depth view of the student experience (questions 2,6,and 7). Whilst these designations are not completely rigid and some aspects of a personal view will be expected to enhance the information provided against questions 4 and 5, in respect of establishing the methodology for this research, it seemed that the different nature of these two groupings demanded different principal methods of investigation. A broad quantitative approach could establish the initial position of the case-study group and examine the foundations of who they are, where they come from, what they arrive with, how they are prepared to sell themselves to the university in order to gain a place on their chosen programme of study and how they perform on the degree (questions 1, 3, 4 and 5). The first

stage of the research, therefore, would be best served by quantitative methods and tools, using broader data from UCAS applications, students' results, students' personal details and the answers to some basic questions about their experiences as undergraduates – which areas of learning and teaching they had found difficult or easy to access, whether their original ambitions had changed as a result of their studies and why they had chosen this particular course at this particular university. It was also clear, however, that in order to provide data for the later questions in the research, those which related to students' own perceptions of their undergraduate and postgraduate lives (questions 2, 6 and 7), the investigation would need to move to a different methodology, as the most significant and detailed information was likely to be ascertained using qualitative methods in the later stages of the investigation when following up a sample of graduates to reflect upon their prior experiences as students on the Educational Studies degree. Thus it was initially decided that phase one of the research would employ a quantitative approach focusing on questions 1, 3, 4 and 5 whilst phase two would be better served with a qualitative approach focusing on questions 2, 6 and 7 but also adding some additional data to the answers for 4 and 5. The relative merits of the two approaches were therefore examined in more detail.

### Quantitative methodology

Quantitative methodology is characterized by the provision of fixed, closed, quantifiable data for analysis and tends not to rely on the social context for answers. This being said, the social context is nevertheless significant and one cannot assume that results will be universally reflected in other contexts. The results of this research may well not be able to be replicated if applied to a degree in nursing, a degree with a predominantly male intake, or mature student intake, or a more multi-racial intake. The social context which attracts students to



Educational Studies, rather than History or Chemistry, could have a profound effect on the resultant data. Thus, quantitative research does not exist in a vacuum but will always reflect other factors in the wider context.

In many instances quantitative methodology is essentially deductive; posing a hypothesis, striving to control intervening variables to test the hypothesis in a rigorous scientific manner (Punch 2005). In this case there is no specific hypothesis to test, but rather a series of key question to be answered, yet the use of quantitative methodology in the initial stages of a study is a helpful strategy in identifying the broad critical issues underpinning that question.

### Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research embodies a range of techniques, at one level it concentrates on the descriptive, the narrative and the phenomenological. It is a methodology which looks at the world in a holistic and constructivist fashion (Berger and Luckman 1966) with a view to gaining the greatest reality relating to people, events, perceptions and emotions. As such, it is an ideal form of research for a more sociological approach as was required for the in-depth interviewing phase of this research.

Interviews within this research would allow it to concentrate on the more nebulous area of students' own perceptions of their progress both on the degree programme and beyond it. These areas would have defied any attempt at quantitative measuring or counting and needed to have the opportunity to follow different lines of enquiry as they arose.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe the use of the interview thus:

“[...] it presents a sense of vision, where it is that the analyst wants to go with the research. The techniques and procedures (methods), on the other hand, furnish the means for bringing that vision into reality[...]just as painters need both techniques and vision to bring their novel images to life on canvas, analysts need techniques to let them see beyond the ordinary and to arrive at new understandings of social life.

(Strauss and Corbin 1998, p. 8)

This description provides the impetus for the choice of interview as the technique for the second stage of the research, allowing student responses to “bring their novel images to life” (*ibid.*) for further examination against the research questions.

### Mixed methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can use similar techniques but the critical difference lies in the format and potential for analysis. As Punch (2005) says:

“Quantitative research has typically been more directed at theory verification whilst qualitative research has typically been more directed at theory generation.” (Punch 2005 p. 16)

This research is neither seeking to generate a theory nor validate one, but Punch’s descriptions are also valid if applied to the idea of seeking information in order to establish a picture of the Educational Studies student and graduate. The first phase of the research endeavours to find

out who the students are, why they chose this degree and how they fare upon it. This represents concrete verifiable information. The second phase examines the student experience at a more interpretivist level and thus reflects what Punch calls 'theory generation'; from this phase of the research there are no pre-suppositions and every interview may yield unique results or lead to new avenues of exploration.

In this research there are essentially two distinct phases, two distinct samples and two distinct sets of information collected to answer the key questions. In the first phase there is clear justification for a quantitative approach with closed questions for larger numbers of respondents and the facility to assess data numerically and present it in a range of formats. The second phase of the research, in contrast, meets the criteria for a qualitative approach by asking questions and exploring answers and allowing respondents space to answer freely.

Quantitative methods of research are outcome-oriented but may use resultant data to pose new questions for testing at a later stage. The methodology aims to be as objective and as rigorous as it can be and thus to produce results which can give an honest picture across a broad range, but people are complex and any quantitative research will have problems in controlling all the variables which can intervene in social research. An example serves to illustrate this very well:

“Medical researchers noticed that people with very low levels of cholesterol have higher death rates. They wondered what was going on, because low cholesterol is supposed to be good. As good researchers, they looked at things that could cause this relationship to be spurious. Pretty quickly they found some good candidates for that third variable: smoking and alcohol.

High levels of alcohol consumption and heavy smoking depress the appetite and cause cholesterol to be low. Simultaneously, these activities contribute to higher death rates.” (USCA, 2009)

Quantitative research does, however, create the aura of veracity which gives it a power that qualitative research can lack and which can give it wide appeal in a society which enjoys much confidence in statistical evidence (Handy 1993). Quantitative methodologies can provide the necessary data, results and analyses that give credibility to its findings. In this research, therefore, the initial inclusion of quantitative data serves three purposes:

1. It provides clear objective data as to the performance of a specific cohort of students on an undergraduate programme, linked to their entry qualifications.
2. It provides a data set which identifies possible areas for further investigation into the appropriateness of specific entry qualifications for success on the undergraduate programme
3. It may provide a platform for further investigation into the postgraduate experiences of some of the participants

This last point poses an interesting issue in relation to this research. The research could have been designed so that the two phases were distinct and unlinked in any way except the use of the same cohort of students, alternatively it could have been designed so that the second phase was entirely predicated on the first phase with questions asked of respondents which

have been entirely built upon intelligence gained in the first phase. In reality neither of these extremes is the case. The two phases are not inter-dependent and the qualitative phase was designed to examine the key questions, irrespective of the outcomes of the first phase. Despite this, however, it was assumed that if the quantitative phase should highlight a new issue, previously not considered, then the second phase would have the freedom to follow this up.

Qualitative methodology can provide greater depth in a smaller number of areas of investigation. It can therefore take the broader findings of initial quantitative research, and drill down into specific areas. Whilst quantitative methodology provides higher volume of analysis, qualitative methodology provides greater depth. Each approach has its strengths and utilising both approaches can maximise the validity, reliability and usefulness. Gorard and Taylor (2004) suggest that this approach not only is able to draw upon the greatest strengths of each methodology but that, by using a truly integrated mixed methodology, the greatest breadth and depth of outcome can be achieved.

“Quantitative and qualitative methods are [...] merely tools for researchers to use as and when appropriate. But we suggest they are nearly always more powerful when used in combination than in isolation.”

(Gorard and Taylor 2004, p. 4)

Indeed, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the mixed approach is finally gaining credibility after a century of disagreement about one method's supremacy above the other (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, Gorard and Taylor, 2004).

This research examines two distinct sets of questions. Whilst the first of these areas of investigation lends itself to quantitative methods, the remainder requires a more qualitative approach. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) describe this process thus:

“Research on any given question at any point in time falls somewhere within a cycle of inference processes, often referred to as the research cycle, the chain of reasoning or the cycle of scientific methodology. The cycle may be seen as moving from grounded results (facts, observations) through inductive logic to general inferences (abstract generalisations or theory), then through those general inferences through deductive logic to tentative hypotheses.” (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998 p. 24)

The quantitative phase in itself has not been designed to guide the questions for the qualitative phase but it was always an option available to the research that if anything exceptional should arise from the initial quantitative analysis this could be further explored through the qualitative phase.

#### An overview of the methods used in the different stages of the research process

As outlined in Chapter 1 (see pp. 12-15) this research sets out to answer a series of key questions. These questions drew on established literature (see Chapter 2) to provide a context for the research and the investigations have been designed to ascertain how vocational entrants and traditional academic entrants perform on the degree, the nature of that performance and whether the degree programme has provided a useful platform for postgraduate study or work. It further investigates whether the students’ pre-degree

qualifications, background and experience have been significant in providing that platform and, if so, whether there is any difference between the vocationally qualified entrants and the A-Level qualified entrants. The research sought to find out whether the whole learning process has been a positive and coherent experience of learning or whether it has been difficult or disjointed. It endeavoured to explore the students' perceptions of their learning journey and see how far their experiences have helped or hindered them in moving from their schooldays to the world of work.

The research process began with the selection of an appropriate sample, taking account of the need to find a cohort with an appropriate mix of vocational and academic entry qualifications and the need to build in enough time to follow the students through to postgraduate study or employment. It was also important that UCAS application data were available for the cohort under investigation as the personal statements and references would provide key pieces of evidence as to students' initial choices and ambitions.

The UCAS data, admissions data, the questions completed halfway through the programme of study and the results on completion of the degree have been analysed quantitatively and the results presented in graphical form (See Chapter 6 pp. 109-117). The interview data were collected in two phases, one in a series of initial interviews and one in a later set of interviews, (see Chapter 7 pp. 123-151) and the results were analysed with reference to the key questions (see Chapter 8). The instruments used are shown in Table 5.1 below:

**Table 5.1: Research Instruments**

QUESTIONS	RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS USED TO INVESTIGATE QUESTIONS
<i>1. What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?</i>	Application data from UCAS forms and student lists
<i>2. Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?</i>	Questionnaire data from students
<i>3. Who do Admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?</i>	Application data from UCAS forms and student lists informed by additional data from internal Admissions Project (See Appendix 3) and from an Aim higher Project (See Appendix 4)
<i>4. How do the students perform on the degree?</i>	Examination Board data and interview data
<i>5. Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?</i>	Examination Board data and interview data
<i>6. What are the students' eventual ambitions?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do these change, or stay the same?</i></li> <li>• <i>If they change, what leads to this?</i></li> <li>•</li> </ul>	Interview data
<i>7. How beneficial have the students' pre-University experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study and postgraduate study/work?</i>	Interview data

### The first sample

Initially the research had to identify a particular group of students to use as a sample from the three cohorts of B.A. Educational Studies students available at the onset of the work, the cohorts recruited in 2003, 2004 and 2005. Given that the 2003 cohort were the first ever recruited to the degree and may not have been a truly representative cohort (they were drawn



in higher than usual numbers through the clearing process due to the late validation of the degree), and that the work was a longitudinal study and needed enough time to follow the students through into their postgraduate lives, the most appropriate sample was the cohort who began in September 2004. After an initial examination of these students' entry qualifications to ensure that sufficient numbers of them had the mix of entry qualifications, vocational and academic, to provide a contrasting set of data, the students were approached and asked about their willingness to take part in the research which yielded 100 percent agreement. The cohort entered university to undertake a three year B.A. Educational Studies degree course on one of two designated pathways. The pathways shared a common core which addressed subjects such as child development, the social and cultural context of learning, study skills, social policy and inclusive learning. The two pathways were 'Early Childhood Studies', with subjects dedicated to the study of very young children and 'Urban Learning' which had subjects dedicated to a wider, more sociological and community-focused area of study. Initially there were 42 students in the cohort, of whom 13 were registered on to the Urban Learning pathway and the remainder on to the Early Childhood Studies pathway. The cohort consisted of 40 females and two males. There were 29 young students (under 25 years of age) of whom 22 were 18 and were entering university straight from school or further education. Of the 11 mature students the oldest was 39 with the remainder aged between 29 and 38.

During the first two years of the course seven students withdrew from the programme. In September 2005 two mature students joined the course with advanced standing, having already acquired qualifications elsewhere which could be accredited against the first year of the course. Both late entrants were mature, one male and one female. The male subsequently withdrew from the course and does not appear in any of the data. During the final year of the

course two students deferred or failed to complete. This left 34 students to make up the final cohort under investigation.

The ethical considerations were considerable in undertaking this work as the researcher was also a member of teaching staff on the programme and responsible for student assessment. As Pole and Lampard (2002) say:

“As far as possible sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied.” (Pole and Lampard 2002 p. 277)

It was therefore imperative that students were re-assured, both orally and in writing, that the results of the questionnaire would have no impact on their studies or assessment, that agreement to take part in the research was entirely voluntary and that any student could refuse to take part in the research or withdraw from it at any time. This was done as part of the whole process of submitting the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) and all the students signed to say that they were aware of their rights in this respect.

### The initial questionnaire

The first stage was the designing of an appropriate questionnaire to gather initial primary data for analysis, matching entry qualifications against progress and success, or otherwise, on the degree programme. The students were approached early in their second year of undergraduate study and given an outline of the research and asked to consider whether they would be prepared to take part. This was necessary in order to comply with the University's ethics procedure which is based on BERA guidelines and to ensure that every student who agreed to

take part had had time to carefully consider whether or not they were prepared to do so. All the students were reassured that the data would remain anonymous and that the research would not conclude until after they had completed their degree studies. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was then designed and given to students in May 2006 towards the end of their second year of study and the results collected for later analysis. The quantitative analyses of these data were then undertaken after the students had graduated in the summer of 2007 when their final degree classification data were available. A comparative analysis was done at this stage, comparing the entry qualifications against the final degree classifications across the whole cohort.

#### The initial quantitative data set

The questionnaires were returned and the results filed for later analysis. The students graduated in July 2007 and the data relating to their final degree classifications were compared to their initial qualifications on entry.

The questions asked of the students in the initial questionnaire were designed to fulfil two different functions; some were designed to give answers which could be used directly in the quantitative analyses addressing the key questions – such as those relating to prior qualifications and to school/college attended. Some of the questions were available for analysis relating not to the key research questions but to the other related questions about the student's experience on the programme; for example whether they had found it easier or more difficult than others to succeed. The final question, asking where the student expected to progress, was included to give greater depth to the analysis relating to the key question about postgraduate work or study. It was felt that this was necessary to see how far each student's

ambitions had changed from the mid-point of their studies to the completion point and/or whether having a clear goal, or a lack of a clear goal, had an impact on future postgraduate success. In addressing the ontological assumptions underpinning the research, the questioning sought to explore whether the different areas of study, pre-undergraduate and undergraduate, had been beneficial to the respondent and, if so, in what measure. It also sought to discover whether the students assessed the benefit, where it existed, as largely pragmatically economic or in terms of personal growth.

The approach in the initial stage of the research was, therefore, essentially a quantitative one, using quantitative methods to get a broad picture as the initial canvas for the research. Denzin (1989) has suggested that such methods provide an objectifying force in research and whilst it is true that nothing is ever truly objective in research carried out by human beings, quantitative methods at least go some way towards a reduction of bias (*ibid.*).

### The second sample

When the students had left university and taken up positions on postgraduate study programmes or in employment, a small sample of students was identified for further investigation to address the key question as to whether they had found it easy or difficult to access postgraduate study or find employment and then progress satisfactorily within it. This further investigation was by means of two semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2) which were essentially qualitative in nature and concentrated heavily on the students' own perceptions as to how far their background, their undergraduate studies and their pre-university studies had combined (or not) to give them success, or to hinder their success. The

two interviews took place at the end of the first year after graduation and then in early 2010 when the students had been in postgraduate study and/or employment for three years.

At this stage it was decided that the follow-up would not include mature students. This was because it was felt that there was enough evidence to suggest that, for mature students, there was the potential for intervening confounding factors to unnecessarily skew the results of the research. Mature students have been studied in some depth (Pole and Lampard 2002, Sutherland 1997, Field 2006, Hayton and Paczuska 2002) and it is clear that there are many factors which affect their ability to succeed on any programme of study. This is especially true of their wider life experience whereby, as Sutherland (1997) says, a mature student is able to make use of:

“[...] the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action.” (Sutherland 1997 p. 6)

The impossibility of isolating prior qualifications as a factor from prior experience (what Sutherland calls “prior interpretation”) was such that it was felt that this effectively justified the exclusion of mature students from this group.

Once the second sample had been identified a series of interviews was arranged with them. Prior to the interviews the original UCAS applications from these students were extracted from records held at the University and an examination was made of the students' own personal statements and their references provided by the school, 6<sup>th</sup> form college or further education college prior to their entry to the degree to help to provide qualitative data on how

the students, and their teachers, had viewed their personal perspectives as applicants to university. seen their This retrospective view of how the students had seen themselves, and how their teachers had perceived them, in the year before their entry to university, provided a pen portrait of the students as potential undergraduates and outlined their hopes and expectations for the future.

The interviews were then undertaken following a semi-structured format with five simple open-ended questions in the first interviews and 20 more in-depth questions in the second interviews (see Appendix 2). The interviews were designed to focus on the issues which were pertinent to the key research questions and which related to the critical literature outlined in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

The interviews were deliberately kept as informal as possible to encourage full and frank responses and the questions were not delivered in exactly the same way to every respondent although the essence of each question was the same. This was to avoid an interview which felt too formal which could have restricted the students in answering. Whilst it could be argued that this approach made the process less rigorous and thus the outcomes less unequivocal, it was felt that the research was never going to 'prove' any outcome beyond doubt or to a high level of statistical probability. This was due to the nature of the subject matter, to the small size of the sample and to the restricted environment of a single course of study at a single university. Nevertheless the outcomes would produce a sense of the experience of these students which could have more general veracity and underpin other work at a later stage. The interviews were founded, then, on a basis which could be called a 'fuzzy generalisation' principle, after the work of Bassey (1998). Bassey describes this as:

“[...] a way of encapsulating the claims to educational knowledge of qualitative empirical research. A fuzzy generalisation replaces the certainty of a scientific generalisation [...] Alone a fuzzy generalisation is no more than the researcher’s equivalent of the politician’s sound-bite, and as such has little credence, but, supported by a research account which makes clear the context of the statement and the justifying evidence, it provides a user-friendly account of research findings. Fuzzy generalisation invites replication and this, by leading to augmentation and modification of the generalisation, contributes powerfully to the edifice of educational theory.”

(Bassey 1998 [Abstract])

Given the limitations of the approach used, the data from the interviews were then analysed in relation to the key research questions and the related underpinning issues. The interviews were tape recorded, with participants’ prior knowledge, and the resultant data were transcribed. The interviewees received copies of the transcripts and were able to give a) verification of the content, and b) their consent for the researcher to use them. Whilst it is true to say that the use of the tape-recorder was a critical way to ensure that the transcripts were reliable records of the interview, this is not to assume that there were no other factors involved which means that the content should be viewed with some caution. The very fact of being interviewed (and the conversation being recorded) can give rise to false statements. For example this can relate to a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect (Payne and Payne 2004) wherein the very act of being observed creates a different set of behaviours by those under observation. Only secret recordings can eliminate the Hawthorne Effect (*ibid.*) and these raise ethical dilemmas which would have been impossible to circumnavigate in this case.

Other problems faced in interviewing in this way are similar to those encountered in any research activity which involves the open participation of the researcher, from the work of Adorno in the 1950s (Adorno *et al.* 1950) wherein a range of methods was used to test the existence of an authoritarian personality-type, including participant observational studies, through to Goffman's dramaturgical approach in the 1960s and 1970s (Goffman 1966, 1976, 1990). Through his studies Goffman introduced us to notions about how human beings construct a persona dependent upon their situation and the company in which they are placed. More modern works by researchers such as Beattie (1996), who spent time as a participant observer in the world of the boxer in the later part of the 20th century, have built on these traditions to give insight to how people behave, present themselves and operate in different social contexts. For the former students in this research all of these issues are pertinent. They may well have wished to portray their studies as having been extremely worthwhile to please the researcher, or to justify their efforts at university; equally they may well have wished to portray them as worthless to justify any shortfall in their expectations of success on the degree or as postgraduates.

### The qualitative data

The other key issue relating to the gathering of interview data is the accuracy of recording it and the importance of then using an appropriate technique to make best use of it. Several researchers advocate the use of conversational analysis (Atkinson and Heritage 1984, Silverman 2004) employing transcription symbols to speed recording; others advocate the use of several different interviewers and observers (Miller and Dingwall 1997) and using only the resultant data which showed correlation whilst discarding any which did not agree. These



analyses are highly complex with a range of different methods employed but all take account not only of the text itself but also of the context and the social environment within which the text is embedded (Atkinson and Coffey 1995, Silverman 2004). As Watson (1997) says:

“[...] the text comprises a resource for accessing phenomena existing beyond the text, [...] we common-sensically experience those things in terms of the words for them – be those words oral or textual.”

(Watson R. in Silverman 2004 p. 81)

In analyzing the interview data from the respondents the researcher used a set of similar questions as a basis for the interviews but did not allow these to become constraining. Each of the respondents had a different story to tell and it would have denied the richness of their individual differences to have failed to vary and extend the questioning to pursue different avenues of exploration. For practical reasons the interviews were conducted by a lone researcher so it was important to maintain a similar line of questioning in order to gain useful data. The analyses were therefore done by examining the similarities and differences in the responses in relation to the key research questions, selecting out responses where there was uniformity or clear difference of opinion and tying these to the assumptions underpinning the research.

### Summary

In this research the questions ask about the nature of the student experience for a specific group of students on a specific programme of study. The research seeks to examine whether the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to

their prior qualifications and background, and whether there is a relationship between prior learning, undergraduate study, success (or otherwise) and postgraduate work. These questions relate to the knowledge of how that relationship works, that it exists and how knowledge of its existence in itself affects the relationship. To address both issues it seems clear that only a mixed methodology can provide the fullest answers. Both sets of methods together provide the constructivist, person-centred, view, but the interviews additionally give a contextualised, holistic and phenomenological perspective; whilst the questionnaires and achievement data provide the objective, controlled context for the data gathered. Initially the research began with quantitative data collected by means of a questionnaire. These data served to give an overview of the cohort under scrutiny to establish that the respondents in the sample had sufficiently varied backgrounds to provide evidence to make comparisons and draw ultimate conclusions. These data from the questionnaires, relating to prior study, were correlated with the students' final degree classifications to see if any significant patterns of 'prior study – attainment' were evident and, if so, in which directions these were shown.

The second phase of the research involved moving to qualitative methods as individual students from different backgrounds were interviewed and their responses provided data about their undergraduate experience and their postgraduate study or employment. This heralded a shift to qualitative methods as the most appropriate way to gather information relating to the key research questions. What these methods provide is a data set which provides a rounded picture of how vocational or academic study can promote or inhibit learning at undergraduate level and/or success in obtaining and maintaining satisfactory progress in the world of work or postgraduate study for this particular group of students. Although there was no pre-determined hypothesis in relation to the research the use of a mixed methodology allowed the researcher to find the most rigorous tools to complete the

task; where the researcher wants to know about perceptions, emotional responses, ease/difficulty of accessing learning or work, the qualitative methodology allowed these to be explored. The quantitative data gave the analysis a framework by providing a wider picture of how prior learning has affected the whole cohort, thereby providing a context for the case-study interviews.

Berger and Luckman (1966) introduced the notion of social constructionism, suggesting that, in social science research, where people are the objects of research rather than inanimate objects, it was necessary to contend with the fact that subjects were constantly constructing their own reality, before, during and after their use as subjects. In such a climate no research can ever be truly objective, unequivocal or reflect “truth” or “fact” but by triangulating results as far as possible using a range of methods this research attempts to minimise the margin of error and maximise the potential for meaningful conclusions. In presenting the data Chapter 6 sets out the results of the quantitative data, Chapter 7 the results of the qualitative data, presented as a pen-portrait of each respondent with the key comments made by each one in the two interviews. Analysis of the two sets of data is then presented in Chapter 8 by means of a return to the original key research questions.

## **Chapter 6: Results – The Quantitative Data**

This chapter will present the results from the quantitative data, beginning with the UCAS entry data, moving on to the results from the questionnaire and concluding with the achievement data from the cohort in question. The achievement data will also be presented set against the original entry UCAS points for both vocational entrants and traditional A-Level entrants. This chapter does not discuss or analyse the results as this will be undertaken in Chapter 8. It does, however, present the data in such a way that it can be interrogated in order to answer the key questions.

### Demographic description of the first sample

The cohort under investigation entered university in September 2004 to undertake a B.A. Educational Studies three year degree course. As outlined in Chapter 5 (see pp. 96-98) the cohort consisted of 40 females and two males. During the first two years of the course seven students withdrew from the programme. In September 2006 two mature students joined the course with advanced standing, having already acquired qualifications elsewhere which could be accredited against the first year of the course. Both late entrants were mature, one male and one female. The male subsequently withdrew from the course and does not appear in any of the data. During the final year of the course two students deferred or failed to complete. This left 34 students to make up the final cohort under investigation. All 34 students responded to the first part of the research and are included in the quantitative data presented in this chapter.

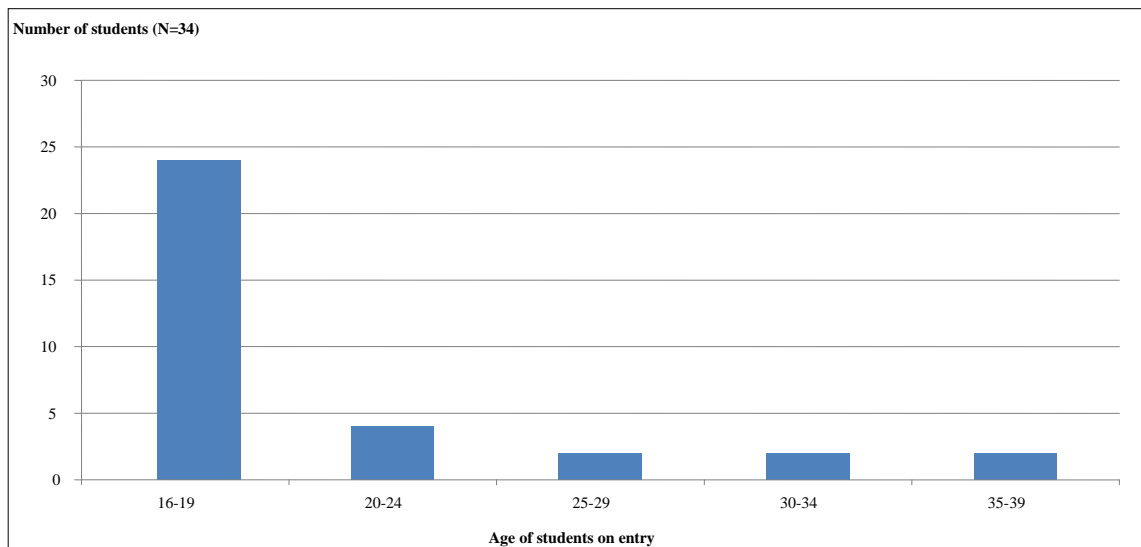
## The quantitative data

The quantitative data were drawn from UCAS application forms, responses to the student questionnaire, and evidence from the University of Hull Examinations Boards as outlined in Chapter 5.

### Initial data relating to the students on entry

For the cohort under investigation UCAS application data were used to examine the nature of the cohort in terms of their age, previous experience and entry qualifications.

**Figure 6. 1: Age of students on entry**



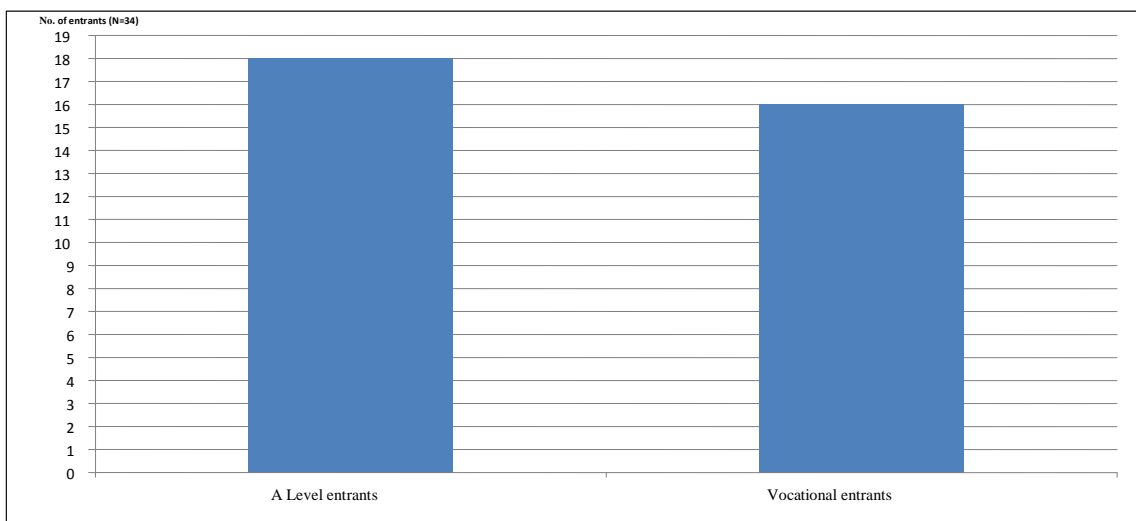
The data showed that the majority of the students were young, aged 16-19 with a small number of mature students of whom the majority were 20-24.

The questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were distributed in May 2006 as the students neared the end of their second year of study. The results were then analysed in a number of areas.

Initially the data relating to entry qualifications showed that the cohort was split, with 18 students coming to University with A-Levels and 16 with vocational qualifications (see Figure 6.2).

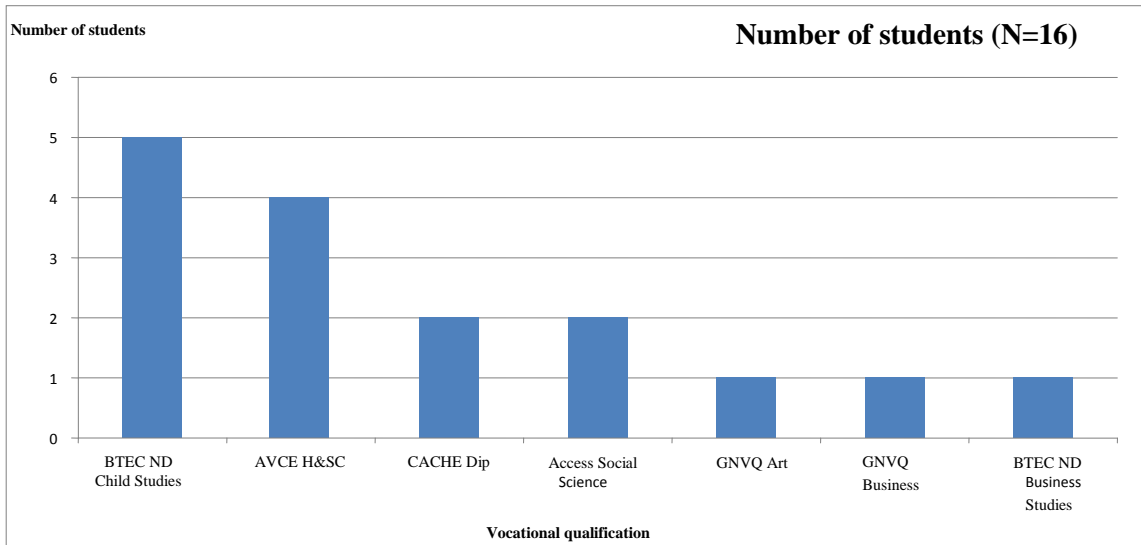
For the purposes of this study, the mature students “Access to Higher Education” course was classed as a vocational course as it is funded by the Learning and Skills Council, delivered in a college of further education and is generally offered in a number of vocationally-orientated pathways.

**Figure 6. 2: Students’ entry profiles**



The range of vocational qualifications on the programme (see Fig 6.3) was limited, with the majority of students having studied BTEC National Diploma in Childhood Studies. (The BTEC National Diploma in Childhood Studies and BTEC National Diploma in Early Years were assumed to be the same qualification for the purposes of this research as the latter was a name-change which occurred during the year in which these students attended their further education course. It did not affect the curriculum or content of the programme and was, therefore, essentially the same qualification).

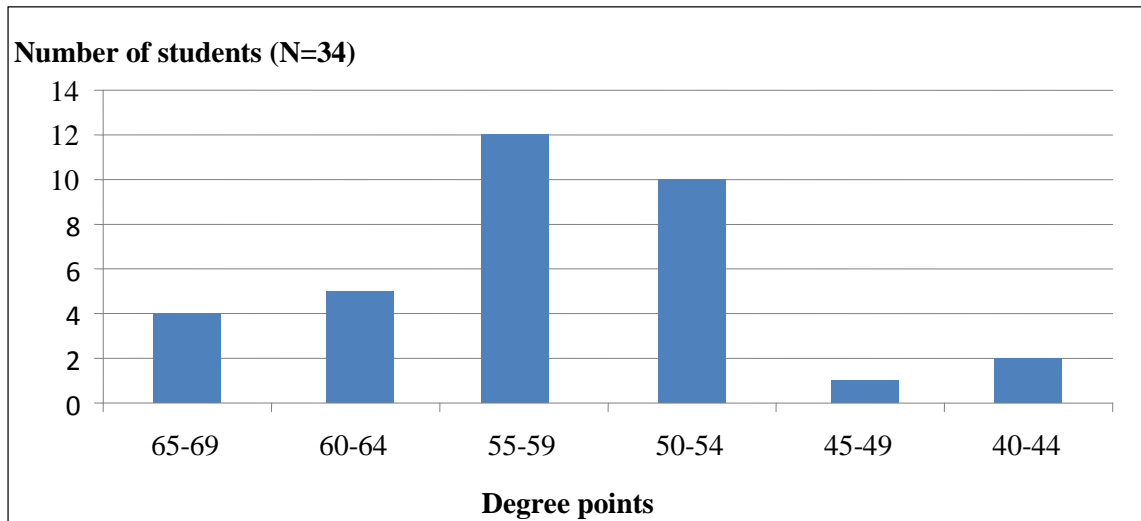
**Figure 6. 3: The range of vocational qualifications on entry**



### Student performance

As the students graduated their points score for their final year was collected. The data showed that there was a spread of points between 40.8 and 68.

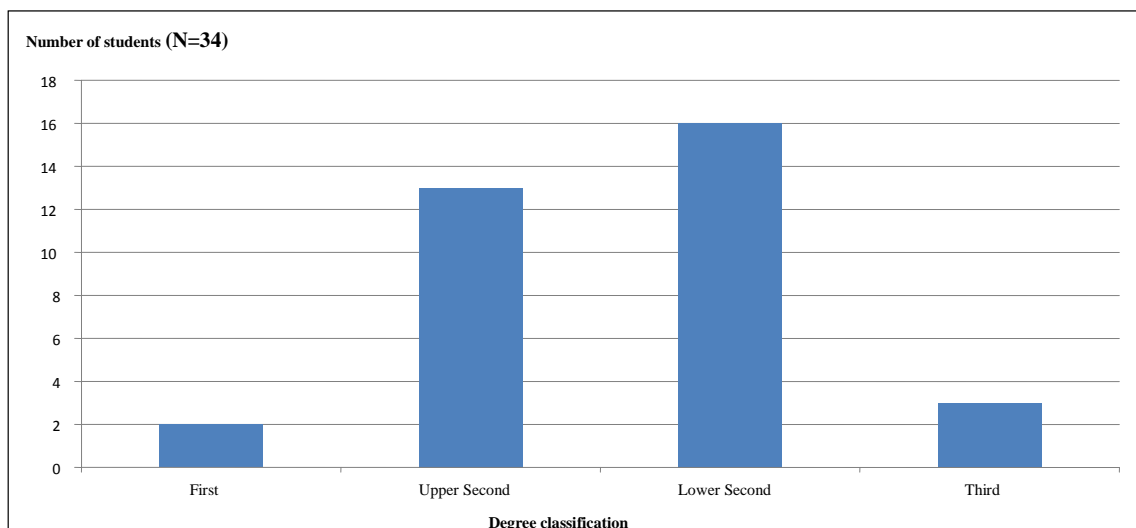
**Figure 6. 4: Degree points on graduation**



The Examinations Board used these data, along with data from level 5 (second year) to calculate the students' final degree classifications. This was done by taking the overall points

score at level 5 and calculating 40% of it before adding it to 60% of the overall score at level 6. Thus the ratio used to calculate the final classification was in the ratio 2:3 for level 5 against level 6. Where a student then had a points score which was within 1.5 points of a higher band, university regulations allowed the Examination Board to raise the classification providing that the student had achieved a majority of their points at level 6 in the higher banding. When these calculations were done for this particular group of students they showed a distribution of classifications across the cohort as shown in Figure 6.5:

**Figure 6. 5: Degree classifications awarded**

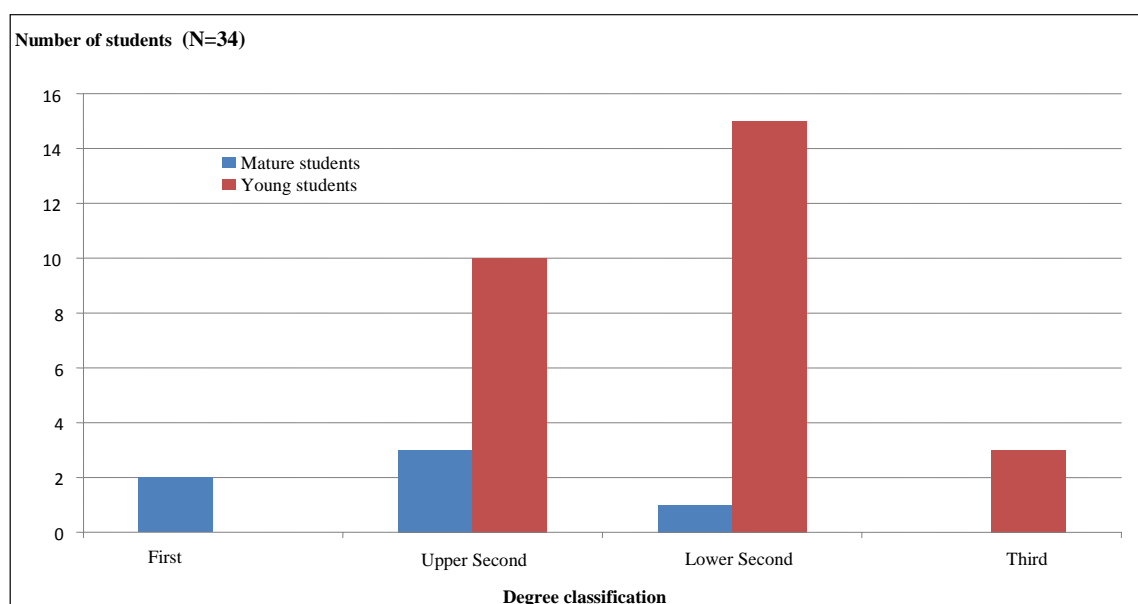


Two students had obtained First Class degrees and three had gained Third Class. The remainder was spread between Upper Second Class and Lower Second Class with marginally fewer students in the former category. The two students who had obtained First Class Honours were both mature students; one had entered university with a vocational qualification profile and one with A-Levels. The mature student with A-Levels had, in fact, been the student with the lowest UCAS score (80 points) in the whole cohort upon entry and had only been accepted because she was a mature student with good work experience in the field.



Analysis of the degree classification data did yield one important finding and this was the plot of classifications against age (see Figure 6.6). The withdrawal figures had shown a higher number of mature students than young students leaving the programme prematurely so that only six mature students completed the course. When their degree classifications were compared with the younger students, however, the difference in attainment was marked with five out of six mature students achieving one of the two highest classifications and both First Class Honours classifications being awarded to mature students.

**Figure 6. 6: Degree classifications for young and mature students**



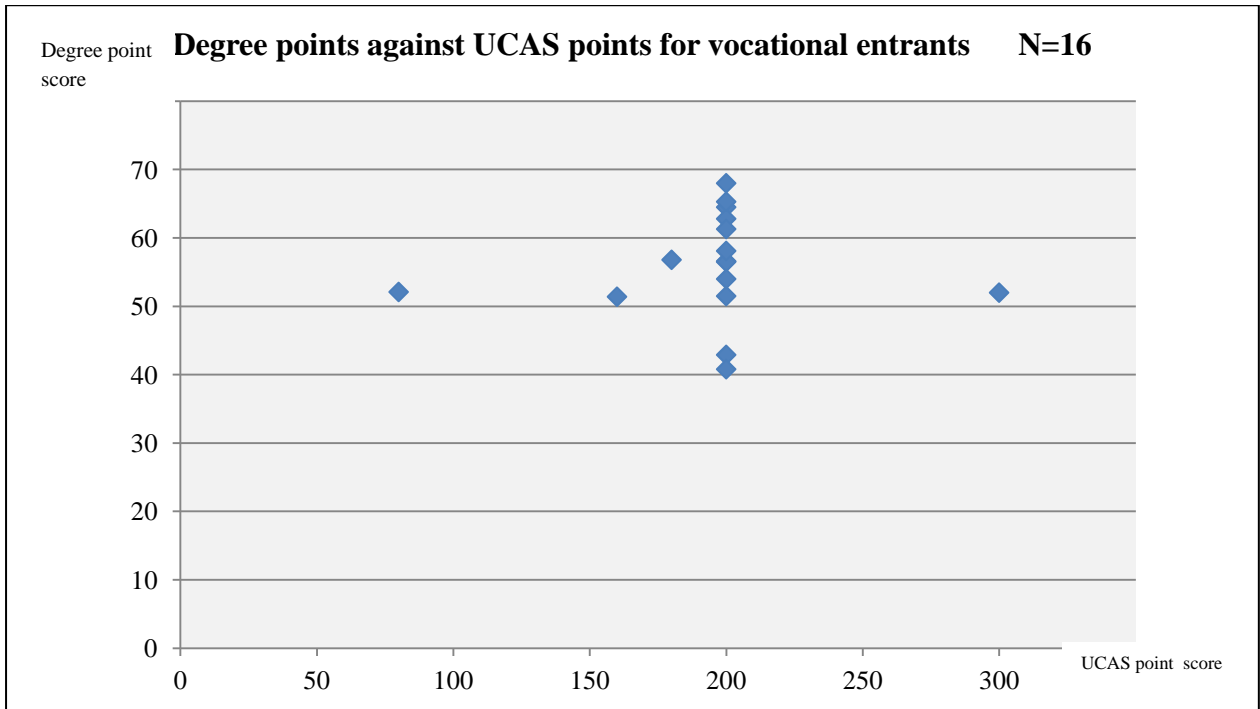
This finding was consistent with the work cited previously (Pole and Lampard 2002, Sutherland 1997, Field 2006, Hayton and Paczuska 2002) which underpinned the decision to exclude mature students from the qualitative phase of the research (see p. 101) as the factors which affect the performance of mature students are numerous and complex and could thus serve to confuse matters when drawing conclusions relating to the significance of particular entry qualifications in predicting final outcome.

In addressing the key questions, the initial data set to be examined was the overall UCAS entry score plotted against the degree points obtained at the end of the final year for each student entering the course from a vocational entry route. As there is no UCAS score for the mature students' Access Certificate, a nominal score of 200 UCAS points was allocated to the three students who had entered with this qualification. The selection of 200 points was an attempt to mirror the university's standard offer to A-Level and vocationally qualified younger applicants against the standard offer to Access Certificate applicants. In other words, an A-Level candidate or BTEC or CACHE candidate would normally be asked for 200 UCAS points as a minimum (except during the UCAS clearing period when offers can be lowered) and a mature Access Certificate course applicant would be asked to successfully complete their Access Certificate; therefore, for the purposes of comparison, it was decided to assume that a Pass in the Access Certificate was broadly equivalent to 200 UCAS points.

#### Relative performance by vocational and academic candidates

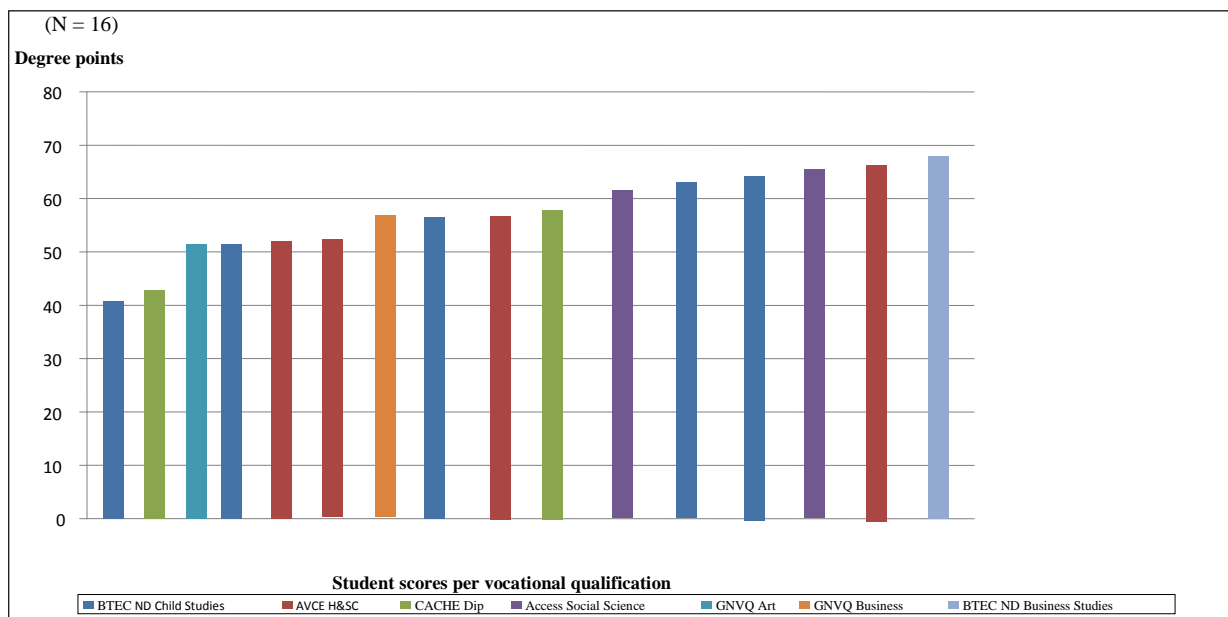
Figure 6.7 suggests that UCAS points, applied to vocational qualifications, are poor predictors of ultimate success on the degree. In addition the graph shows that vocational students were drawn from a limited range of UCAS points with the majority being drawn from those with 200 UCAS points. Interestingly, these students then attained degree points in a range from 42.9 to 64.5.

**Figure 6. 7: Degree points obtained against UCAS points on entry for vocational entrants**



The degree point achievement of these vocational entrants was then plotted against the type of vocational qualification which they had undertaken:

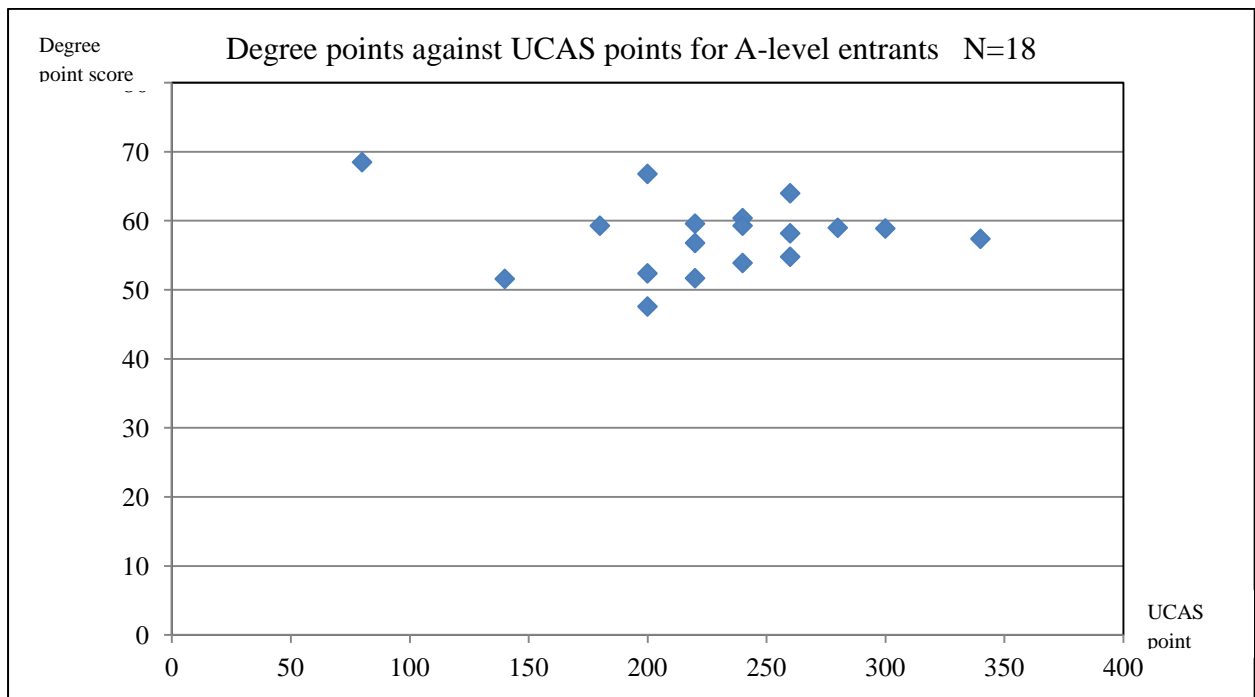
**Figure 6. 8: Degree points against different vocational qualifications**



These data suggested that the subject matter of the qualification had little to do with ultimate attainment. It would have been reasonable to expect that those who had studied a programme at level 3 whose subject matter was clearly linked to Educational Studies, for example a CACHE Diploma or BTEC National Diploma in Early Years, would have done better than those who had studied an unrelated subject such as Art or Business Studies. The data, however, showed that the subject matter at level 3 had no obvious impact on the attainment at degree level.

An examination of the A-Level entrants was then undertaken, plotting their UCAS scores on entry against their end-of-year final degree points:

**Figure 6. 9: Degree points achieved against UCAS points on entry for A-Level entrants**



Once again there was evidence that UCAS scores were poor indicators of eventual success on the degree but it was noticeable that the range of UCAS scores which were accepted for a place on the degree was far wider for A-Level candidates than for vocational candidates.

The two sets of data from A-Level entrants and vocational entrants were then placed in a scatter diagram in order to ascertain whether patterns were uniform across the two groups.

**Figure 6. 10: Comparisons of A-Level entry points and vocational entry points against degree points awarded**

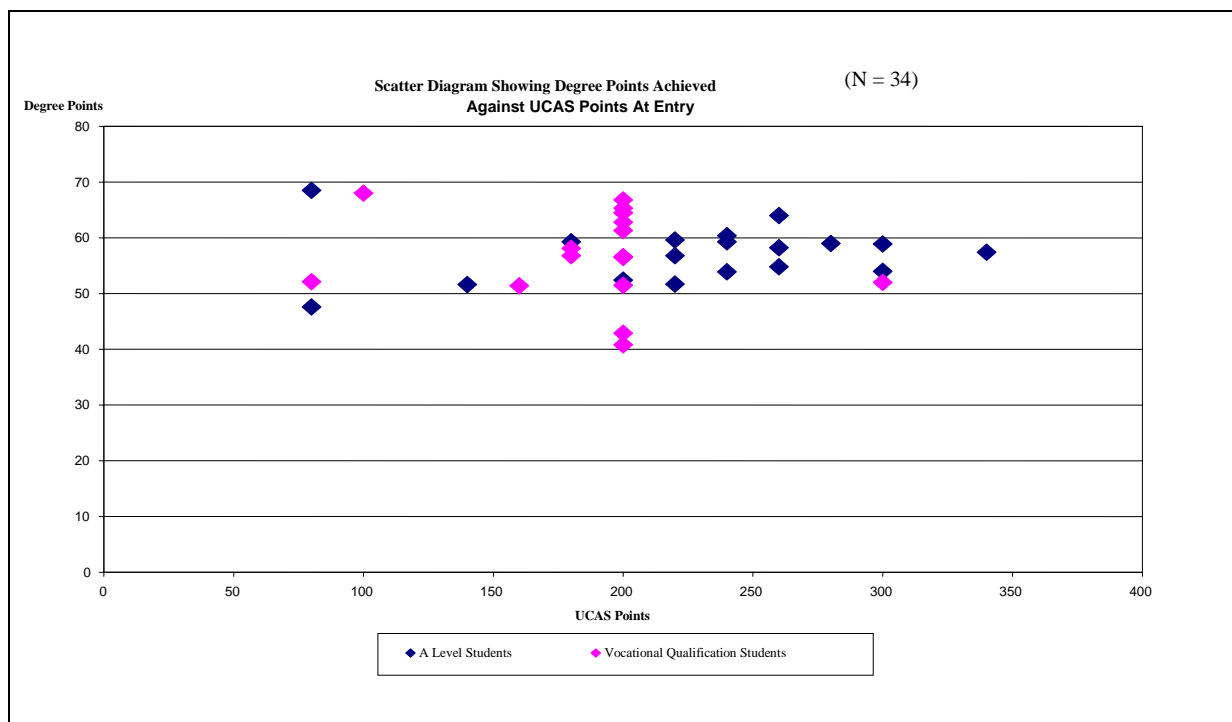
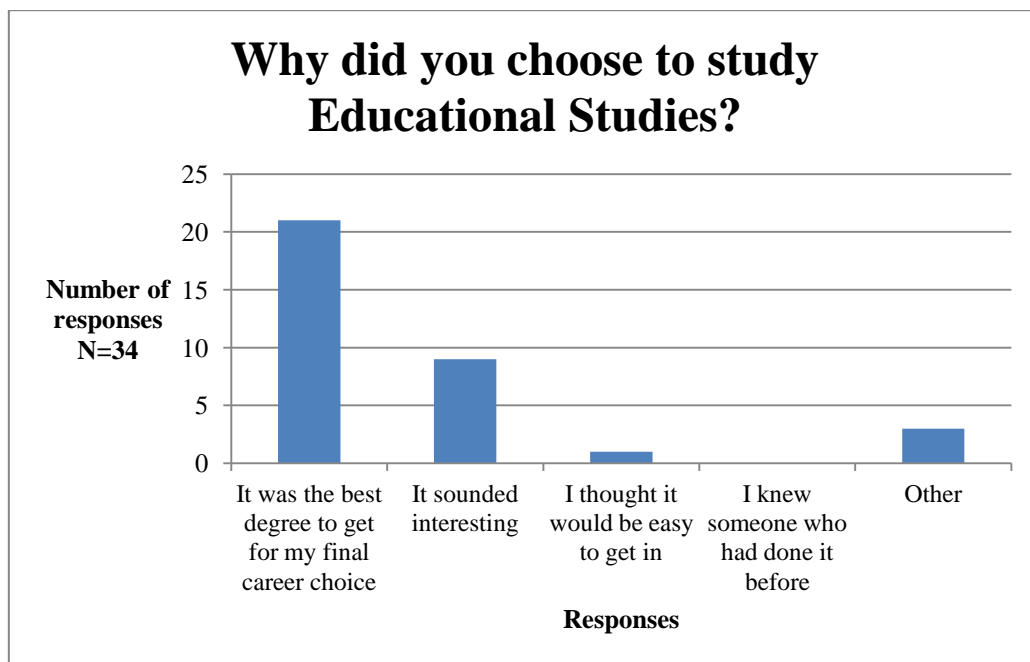


Figure 6.10 suggests that A-Level students are drawn from a much wider spectrum of points than those with vocational qualifications and, critically for this research, the pattern does not appear to show any noticeable difference in attainment between those entering with A-Levels or those entering with vocational qualifications. This will be examined in more detail in the chapter which follows.

## Examining the wider picture

Additional questions had been added to the questionnaire to explore the issues underpinning the key research question. The first of these questions related to the reasons which each student had had for choosing an Educational Studies course. The results showed that the majority of students chose the programme because they perceived it as a clear route to their chosen future career, although many also cited their interest in the subject as a factor:

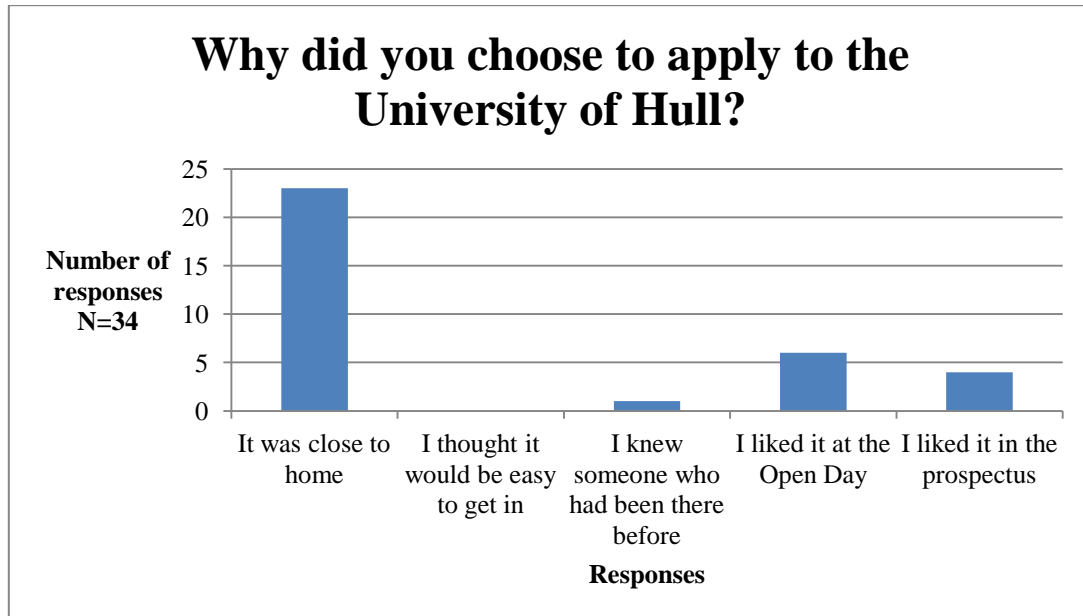
**Figure 6. 11: Why students chose Educational Studies**



The second question asked students to give reasons why they had chosen to apply to the University of Hull. An examination of the entry criteria demanded by all higher education institutions at the time when these students had applied revealed that there was much uniformity across the sector and other universities with similar profiles to Hull were asking for similar UCAS points for entry to Educational Studies. Students had therefore had to make their choice of University on the basis of factors other than their ability to gain a place.

The results obtained from the questionnaire were as follows:

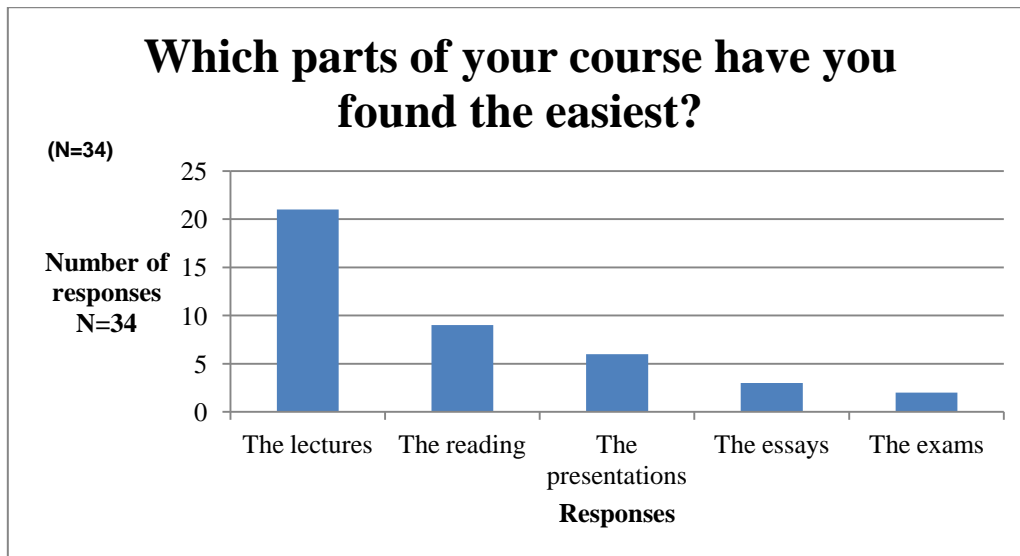
**Figure 6. 12: Why students chose the University of Hull**



The results showed that the majority of students had chosen Hull because of its proximity to home, thus reflecting a growing national trend for undergraduates to live at home whilst studying at university (McNay 2006)

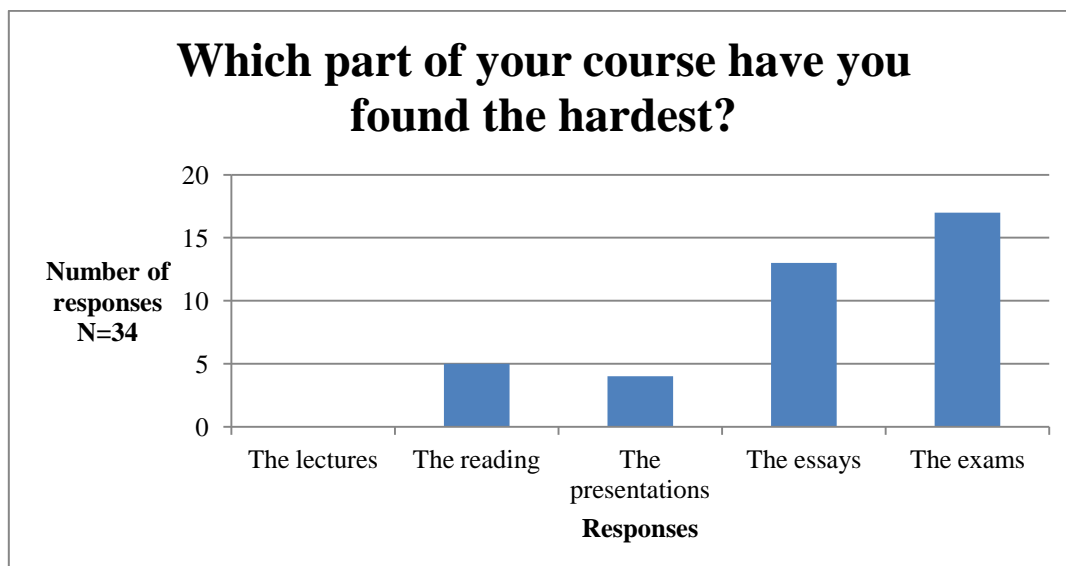
The next two questions asked students which parts of their degree studies they had found to be the easiest and the most difficult. These questions were included in an attempt to see in which ways, if any, there was uniformity of responses as to whether pre-university study of either traditional A-Level qualifications or vocational qualifications had made the undergraduate work more, or less, easy to deal with and find success.

Figure 6. 13: Which parts of the degree programme were easiest



When these data were further examined, the preferences were found to be exactly the same for A-Level entrants and vocational entrants; in each category there was a mixture of both groups showing each category to be “easiest”.

Figure 6. 14: Which parts of the degree programme were most difficult

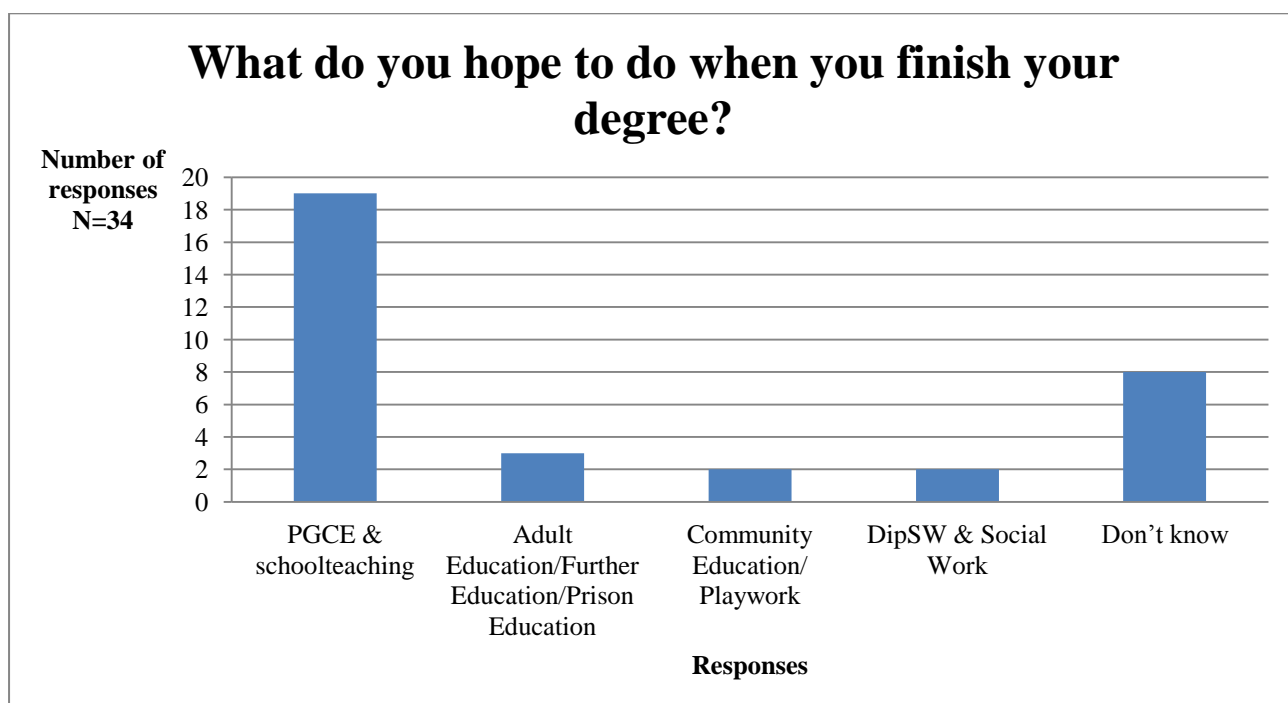




Once again, when these responses were compared to the students' entry qualifications there was an even split of which areas had been found the most difficult and neither group had shown a uniform selection of any category.

The final question asked students about final career aspirations (see Figure 6.15) and a final separate question asked whether these had changed during their time at University.

**Figure 6. 15: Student aspirations upon completion**



The results showed clearly that, at the time that the questionnaire was completed, the majority of students were committed to undertaking a PGCE course and becoming teachers.

The final question was designed to find out if this had always been the students' intentions (begging the question as to why they would elect for a degree in Educational Studies, rather than an initial teacher training degree) or whether their ambitions had changed during their

undergraduate studies. Thirteen students stated that their ambitions had changed whilst at University; of these eight were A-Level entrants and five were vocational entrants.

### Summary

The quantitative response data collected in this research have been presented within this chapter. The data were obtained from the whole cohort of 34 respondents and provided demographic information about the full group. The sample was too small to provide any firm generalisable conclusions but was sufficient to provide evidence of trends, for example as to the students' age and gender profiles, their reasons for choosing the University of Hull, their entry scores, ultimate performance on the degree and eventual ambitions.

In the next chapter the qualitative data obtained from a sub-group of this larger cohort will be presented in an attempt to gain more in-depth evidence towards answering the question as to how the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background.

## **Chapter 7: Results – The Qualitative Data**

This chapter will present the key data from the qualitative phase of the research, introducing the six respondents chosen for interview and presenting those of their responses which have a direct impact in answering the key questions in a series of pen portraits. This chapter does not discuss or analyse the results as this will be undertaken in Chapter 8.

### The qualitative data

Six students were identified for interview following their graduation from university. They were interviewed a year after graduation and again three years after graduation. The six students, Misses A – F, were selected because:

- a) Three of them (Misses A, B and C) were A-Level entrants and three (Misses D, E and F) were vocational entrants
- b) Their degree results profiles were very similar
- c) They were the same age +/- two years.

They were asked five questions in the first interview and 20 questions in the second interview. See Appendix 2 (page 211) for full list of questions with links to literature and the key research questions

In presenting the interview data, some additional data from initial UCAS forms have been included to provide a context for the interview data. The responses are presented as a series

of six ‘pen portraits’, one for each candidate, ordered in relation to the seven key research questions which themselves were designed to address the overarching research question ‘How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background’.

- 1. What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 2. Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 3. Whom do Hull University admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?*
- 4. How do these students perform on the degree?*
- 5. Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?*
- 6. What are the students’ eventual ambitions? Do these change, or stay the same? If they change, what leads to this?*
- 7. How beneficial have the students’ pre-University experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study/work?*

### Miss A

Miss A was the first respondent to be interviewed and, in relation to the first three research questions, the following data were obtained. Miss A had entered university at the age of 18 as a traditional A-Level candidate with three A-Level passes in French, German and General Studies, all at Grade C. She also had qualifications in dancing and choreography and had worked part-time as a volunteer in a primary school and as an assistant dance instructor. Miss A’s UCAS application contained an excellent personal statement and an outstanding reference from her headteacher. What was clear from the application was the strength of her

personality and her energy and dedication. She claimed in her personal statement that she was “*a friendly, optimistic person with high aspirations for the future and I feel I would be an asset to the university. I am polite with good social skills and a great hunger for life*”. This positive portrait was mirrored in her reference which claimed that she was an “*outstanding young lady whose teachers all praise her enthusiastic and pleasant nature*”. These descriptions were found to be accurate by staff on the B.A. Educational Studies degree at university where she was highly regarded by staff and her fellow students, to some extent for her reliability and hard work but mostly for her positivity and happy temperament. Miss A had chosen the University of Hull so that she could remain at home and maintain her part-time work. She had rejected the idea of applying to a more prestigious university because “*I don’t think I would have stuck it out at a more prestigious university... I mean I had a great bunch of lecturers who were all very close to the group that I was with and I think that massively contributed to how much I enjoyed university ... if I’d have gone for one of the more prestigious ones like Oxford or Cambridge... I don’t honestly know if I’d have stuck it out*”.

In investigating how she had performed on the degree, Miss A had graduated with a 2:1 which was a good reflection of her overall progress as an undergraduate. She was aware that her background had helped her in this respect but felt that this was not exceptional, saying of two of her peers who had had less fortunate backgrounds “*.... they were two of my best friends at university and they had a completely different (sic) from the upbringing that I’d had and yet we all ended up being the best of friends really ...*” Miss A then went on to say that whilst her own background had helped her, it had not seemed to her to be a factor in the success or otherwise of her peers. On being questioned about the language of university her answer reflected the impact of her own background, even though she was the first person in

the family to enter higher education *“I don’t know if it sounds a bit ... I don’t know ... a bit snobby ... I don’t mean it to but my ... you know ... the typical idea of university ... that your lecturers are well educated people and they have a wider vocabulary than perhaps you would have in everyday life but my parents ... you know ... my dad being a policeman ... we’ve already sort of grown up with uniformed people around us and my granddad was quite high up in the fire service ... we’ve always grown up with knowing how to speak in certain situations and how to be ... how is appropriate”*.

When asked about her ambitions and how these had either remained constant or changed, Miss A was clear that the three years of study on her degree course had caused her to change direction completely. As she said in her first interview: *“I was one of those who when we started the degree I put my hand up and said that I wanted to do a PGCE for Primary and be a primary school teacher and it’s not turned out anything like that to be honest”*. She told how she had developed a new interest in the subject of psychology on the course, and had therefore not applied to do a PGCE upon gaining her degree but had decided to take some time to consider what options were available to her. Whilst considering possible options she had had the opportunity to take up a post as a Fire Service Educational Liaison Officer which she was clearly enjoying, saying *“I’m loving it actually.....yeah....I’m really enjoying it ....fantastic....really good job”*. When asked about how far her original ambitions had been shaped by her studies prior to entering university, Miss A said that they had not helped her at all to be aware of different opportunities. It was her degree studies which had made her aware of the range of possible career routes, pathways and options and these had led her to change direction upon graduation from her original plans. In the second interview Miss A had moved on from the fire service and was now working as a Pastoral Care Manager in a large

secondary school, a job which she described as being almost entirely about promoting good behaviour.

In the second interview Miss A provided responses relating to the benefits of her background and experiences in shaping her educational journey. She said that she thought that background was still important in Britain today because it determined “*whether people are recommended towards education or they’re deterred from it ... some are for certain type of jobs ... the home has a large impact on prejudices perhaps ... on what sort of jobs people should or shouldn’t be going for ... so I think it sort of forms the basis in peoples later life*”. She describes her own background as “*fairly well off*” adding “*you know we had a nice house and I was never really denied anything ... I wasn’t spoilt but I did have quite an expensive hobby that my parents funded that turned out to be ..... ended up towards my career as well*”. Although she was the first person in her family to go to university she knew that her parents always expected her to go “*... I was quite academic at school and obviously the teachers always just sort of said you know at parents evening ..... **when** she goes to university ... it wasn’t you know ... **if** she chooses to ... .. I think it was sort of just assumed that I would*”. Miss A went on to talk about her parents’ support, citing the example of how she wanted to do P.E. at GCSE but the school could not accommodate her so her parents agreed with the school that her father would teach her the syllabus at home and she would sit the exam at school “*.... the school provided us with the text books and ... you know ... set assignments ... a rough guideline of what we should be covering and we just sat at home and studied through it for two years*”

She reported that because her teachers expected her to go to university they encouraged her “*completely*”. They encouraged her to take A-Levels with this in mind, persuading her to do

three 'academic' subjects rather than the one in performance which she had favoured "*I was looking much more down that performance route and I must admit my teachers at school were very much pushing me back into towards an academic group*". When asked about how far her school studies had helped her at university she felt that they had helped in general terms but not in relation to anything specific "*it wasn't the actual subjects that I did that helped me at university because I didn't have health and social care or psychology or sociology or any of that background that a lot of the other girls did on the course but ... English obviously helped for academic writing, ... so that helped and presentation skills 'cos obviously you talk a lot in French and German so ... giving presentations ... I think that helped me ... but the actual subjects .. no*". Asked whether the A-Levels had been useful when she entered the world of work Miss A said "*you can always use languages ... again the English helped with the writing style and presentation and all that sort of stuff but the French and German I did find helped ... you know ... we had foreign families that would be having issues or difficulties ... I would be able to offer some form of translation and that sort of thing*"

In exploring how far her undergraduate study had benefitted her in her postgraduate life Miss A said that, for her, the purpose of education was to "*understand better*" and "*to allow people to understand the world or what they're trying to cope with better*". She felt that the government encouraged people into higher education in order to have a more highly skilled workforce for the country but was ambivalent about the effects; whilst she believed that it was a good thing she was also concerned that it "*....devalued the degree for a certain amount of time because so many people were getting them and it meant that you had to go to a Masters or a PhD to actually stand out from the crowd in the workplace anymore*". From a personal point of view, Miss A felt that university allowed her to develop into the adult she



has become *“I really grew up at university and managed to find my areas of interest and what I wanted to do rather than what my teachers thought I would do or it was assumed that I would do because I was bright”*. In addition she was convinced that it allowed her to access a good career, saying of her degree that it was *“definitely”* useful in getting a job. She feels that her university experience was thoroughly positive *“I must admit I absolutely loved university”* and her only regret is that she did not stay on for a fourth year to gain a Master’s degree *“...if I could change anything I genuinely think I would have stayed for a fourth year ... I think I would have stayed and done a Master’s”*.

In summary, Miss A was an academically able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with three A-Levels and an excellent UCAS reference. Her original ambition was to complete the degree, follow it with a PGCE and become a teacher but during her time as an undergraduate her ambitions changed. Despite the fact that her family had no history of anyone entering higher education she had had excellent parental support and her teachers always stressed that she was expected to go to university. Miss A had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it was her local higher education institution and allowed her to continue with her many extra-curricular activities and part-time jobs. She had had no problems with the work or language on the degree, had graduated with a 2:1, and was now successfully building a career as a Pastoral Care Manager in a secondary school. Reflecting on her time at university Miss A felt that it had been a positive experience which had provided her with a high level of personal fulfilment.

### Miss B

The initial three research questions ask about the sort of student who applies to, and is accepted by, the University of Hull to the B.A. Educational Studies degree. In these areas Miss B presents a different set of skills and attributes from Miss A. She too entered university

with academic qualifications, but Miss B had a combination of a traditional A-Level and an AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education) in Health and Social Care. This latter qualification is essentially an academic A-Level with a vocational focus designed to attract 6<sup>th</sup> form students who know the area of work into which they wish to go but are unsure of which traditional subject-based qualifications to follow. The AVCE had allowed Miss B to access a short work placement in a nursery but her broader work experience was limited to shop work. Her UCAS application personal statement was very positive about her commitment to hard work and her determination to succeed but was honest about how hard she found it to access new ideas, especially those with a high academic content. Her reference likewise used phrases such as “*it is a testament to her perseverance that she has achieved so well thus far*” and “*I still believe that she will struggle at degree level and that she should hope to achieve an HND which would be a great achievement for her*”. Despite these rather negative comments the reference also said “*she is a super girl with common sense and a superb work ethic*” and “*I wish all students had her capacity for hard work and perseverance*”. In the event, Miss B was offered a conditional place and achieved 240 UCAS points with her combined A-Level and AVCE scores. When asked about her decision to come to the University of Hull she reiterated that she had wanted to stay close to home and had therefore only applied to local institutions. In the event she had had offers from Hull and from Doncaster College (where she was offered a HND and top-up route). She chose Hull because “*...at Doncaster it was just gonna be a HND*”. In the second interview, Miss B said that she was now unsure if this had been a good decision because moving away would possibly have helped her to get a better job, not because of the greater prestige of other institutions but because “*I’m in my home town and everything ... it’s a bit hard ... there’s not as many jobs ...*”.

In relation to her performance Miss B showed how hard she was prepared to work at her degree studies and gained a creditable 2:2 degree. When she was asked about the significance of people's background at university she was definite that there was a dividing line between different groups "... *I would say there were differences between people that had come from academic A levels and people that had come from like a different route ... I'd say maybe the ones that had come from the proper academic background seemed more confident in themselves... I would say the academic ones were always a bit more sure of themselves and confident*". She felt that she not had any difficulty with the language used by her lecturers or by the content of the degree programme.

When questioned about her ambitions, in her first interview Miss B talked of how she had entered university with a clear idea that she would complete her B.A., follow this with a PGCE and then become a primary teacher. Like Miss A the degree had changed her mind about this as she had become aware of the wider range of options available to her in the broader field of education and had therefore abandoned her idea of a PGCE. She reported in the interview: "*I think when I started the degree it just opened up all different routes to go on apart from teaching that I hadn't really thought about*" She also mentioned, however, that this decision was influenced to some extent by her inability to gain a Mathematics GCSE at C or above (a national requirement for teacher training). At the time of the first interview Miss B was working as "*a nursery nurse*" in a Children's Nursery. Miss B, in fact, was working as an unqualified nursery assistant but seemed to be unaware of the distinction between this and a level 3 qualified nursery nurse), although she freely admitted in the interview that she did not have the practical skills training that the other staff in her workplace had learned during their education. She saw her future very much as a worker who specializes in early years and hypothesized that she might look in the future towards a management position in an early

years setting but by the time of the second interview she had not moved on in her career and was still employed at the same nursery in the same position.

The interviews then further explored the final research question to see whether Miss B's background and experience had been beneficial to her as an undergraduate. She described herself as working class and explained that she was the first person in her family to enter higher education. She thinks that background is no longer an issue in people's lives in Britain because it is such a diverse nation "*we've got quite a diverse different culture now so ... well I would say that it's important but in different ways really 'cos it's so diverse and there's all different cultures and everything*" She reported that her family never expected her to go to university and said of her parents' reaction to her ambitions "*I wouldn't say they encouraged me ...but obviously when they knew I was going they were happy*". When asked about her teachers' reactions to her decision and whether they had encouraged her to apply to university she said "*No not really ... not ... maybe for certain people that were doing more like targeted ... do you know like if they were doing maths ... physics and actual subjects but because it was like... AVCE Health and Social Care it didn't seem as important ... was pushed on people that were doing subjects that are considered sort of more academic if you know what I mean*". Miss B went on to say that she received little advice about what to do after her GCSEs "*... it was just something I decided I wanted to do off my own back really*"

Miss B was clear about what she and her parents saw as the reason for university "*...to better myself and try and get a better job; I think parents probably think ... oh well ... you know ... they'll get a good job sort of thing at the end of it ...*" She thought that teachers "*might think differently*" but was unsure of how this would manifest itself. She had not considered what the governmental view might be but in answer to the question thought that perhaps it was

*“...linked back to the economy and everything... trying to increase like the jobs and everything ...”* but she went on to say (with a tone of some disappointment evident in her voice) *“I think they encouraged it too much personally ‘cos there’s no guarantee that when you get the degree that you’re gonna get a good job at the end of it really”*.

Extending the questioning to include her postgraduate life as well as her undergraduate studies, Miss B responded that the content of her AVCE Health and Social Care and A-Level studies had helped her at university because much of the content of the modules was building on previous knowledge, but they had not helped her at work *“No ... I wouldn’t say so really ... it’s very theoretical isn’t it and work’s practical and ... hands on ...”* She did, however, feel that university had been of personal benefit and that she had changed as a result of her undergraduate experience because it *“makes you look at things differently”*. She would not change her decision to go to university with hindsight despite the fact that *“...it hasn’t led to as much jobs as what I thought it would”*. If she had to make the decision again she thinks she would *“...maybe do something else that there was more chance of getting a job in”*. When this was probed further she said *“...it was hard coming out because although I’d got a degree I hadn’t really had that much experience and I suppose I could have helped ... you know ... maybe volunteered or done more ... but you don’t think about that at the time”*. She went on to explain that she now had a young baby and her life was very full despite the lack of a true graduate job but she thought that in the future *“I think a few years down the line when I’ve had more experience and stuff I might start looking for something more ... that I’d use my degree for”*.

In summary, Miss B was an able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with an AVCE Health and Social Care (A-Level equivalent), two A-Levels and a

UCAS reference which praised her ability to work hard but was more negative about her academic abilities. Her original ambition was to complete the degree, follow it with a PGCE and become a teacher, but she never achieved the required mathematics GCSE at C so was unable to move on to a PGCE. She had had parental support although there was no original expectation that she would go to university and there was no family history of higher education. Her teachers had not stressed higher education to her as an option. Miss D had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it was her local higher education institution and allowed her to continue to live at home. She had had no problems with the work or language on the degree and graduated with a 2:2. She had had some difficulty in finding a graduate-level job and was still working at a non-graduate level job three years after graduation. She had found her degree to be personally fulfilling but regretted that it had not given her more work experience to help with job seeking after graduation.

### Miss C

In relation to the first three research questions Miss C falls into the same broad category as Misses A and B, entering university with a traditional A-Level profile. She had gained three Grade C passes at A2 level to add to an impressive cluster of GCSE grades which were predominantly A or A\*. Like Miss A she had had some practical experience of working with children prior to entry to university; in her case it was as a Junior Leader in a Church Youth Group and as an organizer of younger children's leisure activities for her school. A deeply committed Christian, Miss C led an extremely busy life whilst at school, playing the violin and piano, singing in a choir; being involved in charitable events and church events, appearing in amateur dramatic productions and playing in the school netball team. Her reference from school was glowing in its praise for her ability to undertake a large range of

activities and do so with cheerfulness and good organisation. Miss C reported that she chose an Educational Studies degree because she wanted to keep her options open but knew she wished to work with children. In the second interview she went on to explain why she had chosen the University of Hull, saying that she had considered more prestigious universities but had visited Hull first and *“fell in love with it...”*.

Miss C’s performance on the degree was good throughout the three years and she attained a 2:1 degree. She felt that her background had helped her to make good progress through the degree and was aware that some of her peers had come from different backgrounds, saying *“university was the first time really that you did meet a real mix of people”*. She went on, however, to say, like Miss A that she did not think that anyone’s background had affected their progress to any great extent, hypothesising that *“within like my cohort actually on the course I felt like that we all were genuinely interested in the subject and so because of the nature of the degree I guess we all were quite similar because we were all interested in people”*. She had been undaunted by the language at university although she had found the academic *“step up”* from school an initial challenge.

Miss C had not come to university with any clear ambition in mind but as the degree progressed she began to consider undertaking a PGCE and becoming a teacher, but decided against it when she graduated and was offered an “apprenticeship” at the church attached to the university parish wherein she worked with young people in a counselling and support role. The work was voluntary but carried a small bursary to cover living expenses. She reported that it was voluntary work in a community centre in a deprived area of Hull which finally persuaded her of the direction she wished to take. Of this work she said that it *“...really helped me to see I was interested in doing that [social work]”* As a consequence

she was then, at the time of the first interview, moving on to begin an M.A. in Social Work saying *“I’m definitely interested in working with children and families”*. She had achieved this ambition by the time of the second interview having completed her social work qualification and was newly embarking on a career working with young mothers who were in prison with their babies and toddlers.

When asked about how her background and experiences prior to entry to university had been of benefit during her undergraduate and postgraduate life, she began by defining her own background as *“ ... a loving one ... I’d say we’re probably upper lower class/lower middle class ... that sort of bracket ...”*. Her mother is a graduate and all her siblings had been to university and she reported that there was a natural expectation that she too would enter higher education *“I just felt like university was the next thing that I did”*. She reported that her parents were very supportive *“they encouraged me to go to school and getting a good education was really important and...they supported me through the application process and things”*. Likewise her teachers were encouraging and informative *“... we had lots of sort of talks on going to university ... I remember it being encouraged from the front”*

Reflecting on her experience as an undergraduate, Miss C said *“I think I’ve thought more about why it was important than when I went into it initially so I feel like I did go into it just thinking that’s what you did ... you went and did a degree ..... but since ... I just think it’s been really vital in helping me to understand people better”* She thought that her parents and teachers may have had more pragmatic reasons for supporting her to go to university, related to getting a good job, *“I guess to get the best the job I could”*. Asked about why she thought the government promoted higher education Miss C answered *“Well I’d hope that their purpose was that they wanted to make education ... like higher education.... accessible for*



*everyone and not make it something that's elitist for those that can afford it or those that have the means to go; that it was more accessible for everyone ... so that everyone has that opportunity if they wanted to", but also said when asked if she thought this was the case "I'm not sure ... you can never be sure with politicians".*

When asked if she thought that she had changed as a result of going to university Miss C said that she had done so "a lot" but admitted that it was hard to tell if this was because of university or simply because of her gaining maturity "Well it's hard to know as well 'cos it's just that I'm getting older isn't it but ..... I think that ... I've changed in the amount of knowledge I have and it's made me think about more things as well".

Miss C had a very traditional route to university and felt that her A-Level studies (although she did not enjoy them) were useful when she became an undergraduate "they were all essay based really so I guess that helped me to form analytical skills although I didn't really realise that it was what I was doing at the time and have helped me to write things in short amounts of time as well which came in useful at university" but she did not feel they had had any long-term benefit in the world of work "I don't really feel that they've helped me that much long term ... they just seem to be a bit more of a means to an end ... getting the results to get to university ...".

Looking back on her time as an undergraduate Miss C feels that she made the right choices and would not change anything if she were to have the time again. She had not enjoyed the A-Level route to university "I absolutely hated my A levels" but would not change them with hindsight because "even the difficult A levels ... I still wouldn't change it because ... they got me into university and that's made me who I am".

In summary, Miss C was an academically able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with three A-Levels and an excellent UCAS reference. She had not had any firm original ambition except that she favoured some form of community work with families; at one point during her undergraduate studies she did consider primary teaching but changed her mind again and returned to her original idea of community work, eventually undertaking an M.A. in Social Work. Miss C's parents were both graduates and she had had excellent parental support and her teachers always stressed that she was expected to go to university. Miss C had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it appealed to her during a pre-visit, and during her studies there she was involved in many extra-curricular activities and voluntary jobs. She had had no problems with the work or language on the degree, had graduated with a 2:1, and was now successfully building a career as a social worker. Reflecting on her time at university Miss C felt that it had allowed her to mature and had given her a sense of personal fulfilment.

#### Miss D

Research questions 1, 2 and 3 ask about who is accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull and why they have made this choice of course and institution. In relation to this Miss D was the first respondent to have undertaken a purely vocational route prior to entry to university, coming to the programme with a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years which meant that she was a qualified nursery nurse with a licence to practice. After obtaining her BTEC National Diploma, Miss D had worked in a nursery as a nursery nurse for a short while before making a late decision to apply to the course. She chose to apply to Hull because it was close to home and because she felt that she could not

apply to a more prestigious establishment because “... *I don't think that would have been something I would have done ... I would have felt that ... you know ... I couldn't do that*”

In relation to her progress at university, Miss D did well throughout the course and gained a 2:1 degree. When she arrived at university she had found the language a challenge “*I definitely thought university was intimidating and I thought the university lecturers compared to college lecturers were operating at a totally different level. I felt that was quite intimidating when I did start*”. She did not feel that the backgrounds of anyone on the course had been significant in their progress because, in her perception, they were all very similar in background and outlook, “*the majority of people who did our course I would say were from ...like working class or middle class backgrounds so I don't think there was really ..... there was differences there*”

The sixth research question asks about students' ambitions and whether or not they have changed. Miss D's decision to go to university was based upon a firm career ambition, formulated as she worked as a nursery nurse, to become a primary teacher. She therefore took the decision to study for an Educational Studies degree and follow this with an Early Years PGCE to obtain qualified teacher status. During her first interview Miss D revealed that she had never wavered in her original decision and had gone on, immediately after graduation, to study for a PGCE. After three months she had felt that she had made a wrong choice and withdrew from the course, returning to Hull and taking up employment again as a nursery nurse whilst she considered her options. In early 2008 she had obtained a post in a local children's centre as an Early Years Practitioner, working with children and families on a one-to-one basis providing support and play opportunities. By the time of the second interview Miss D had been in receipt of several internal promotions and was now a designated Family

Support Worker specialising in providing programmes of study to young families on positive parenting. Miss D had come to university with the clear intention of going on to do a PGCE and become a teacher. Her ambitions had changed as a consequence of being unhappy on the PGCE but by the time of her second interview she had turned away from this rather negative rationale and was keen to stress that her current job was utilising all the skills she had gained before university and during her time as an undergraduate. This response led on to an examination of the final research question, focusing on the benefits of Miss D's background and pre-university studies to her undergraduate and postgraduate life.

In response to questions on these benefits, Miss D reported in her second interview that her degree had helped her to gain the job and that her pre-entry studies and her university studies now combined to help her to do her new job well, the practical skills coming from her BTEC Diploma, the research skills from her degree course. As she said in her interview: *"...we get lots of referrals...just really random things ...so obviously having a degree helps me to be able to sort of find information....sort of research and stuff..."* In response to a question about how useful her BTEC National Diploma had been she said *"I think it was a help because it did definitely help me when I came to university .... probably the main element would be like writing assignments....on the BTEC we did quite a lot of that is I think that definitely helped me"*.

She reported that she was from a good home background saying that her home background was *"quite stable"* and that *"my parents have always supported me in whatever I've wanted to do"*. Her parents had themselves had not been to university, nor had any of her siblings but she had clearly received support from home saying *"when I was at school my dad was always able to support me with my schoolwork and you know that carried on into college and then*

*university as well.*” When asked if her father worked in education she said “*No he works as a fitter at British Gas but he's had lots of training and things himself; it's not something that I think he feels confident in doing but he's been really supportive with me and I would class him as being an intelligent man*”. When asked about her teachers and how they had supported her Miss D reported that she had gone to a “*good school*”, reiterating the phrase four times to emphasise its importance, and her teachers had supported her to go to college to do a BTEC National Diploma suggesting that this was a good route into teacher training.

When asked about the purpose of education Miss D reported that she and her parents all felt it was “*to get a good job to progress into the career that I wanted*” but that her teachers thought differently. She believes that they thought it was “*sort of get your GCSEs and then move on to the next level I can't really explain it but it was about progressing yourself.... how you can use it in your job and how you can carry on learning being a learner as you go through life*”. When asked about the governmental view of education Miss D was hesitant but she thought it was probably “*just looking at giving everybody an equal chance to go to university so that it wasn't just middle-class people from a middle-class background.... making sure that people had something else*”. When asked if she had changed as a result of going to university Miss D felt it had had a big impact on her life. At the time of applying she said that she had thought that university was about “*the need to pass the exams* ”in order to get the job which you want, whereas now she sees university “*as more of a lifelong thing.... you're constantly learning and upgrading your skills and it's about learning what you do for yourself*”. She thinks that she has changed since going to university and got more confidence. The issue of confidence was also one which Miss D reported when looking at the prestige of a particular university. She felt that university had been good for her in that it had helped her to get a job

in the city, however she felt that if she had gone to a more prestigious university she “*would have had even more confidence and perhaps would have applied for better jobs or jobs at a higher level*”.

When asked whether she would change anything with hindsight she responded “*I think probably.... looking more in depth at the course I was doing .... it was like pick a course, pick a degree but I think now I want to look into it a bit more*”. Despite this, she went on to say “*I'm definitely glad that I made the choice to go to university. I think that going to Hull University was a good decision*”.

In summary, Miss D was an able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years and a good UCAS reference. Her original ambition was to complete the degree, follow it with a PGCE and become a teacher, but she was unhappy on the PGCE and left before completion. She had had good parental support although there was no original expectation that she would go to university. There was, however, good support from her teachers and she was keen to stress that she had been to a good school. Miss D had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it was her local higher education institution and allowed her to continue to live at home and keep her part-time job as a nursery nurse. She had had no problems with the work on the degree graduating with a 2:1, but had found the language a challenge. She was now successfully working as an Early Years Practitioner with families and children in a local children's centre and felt that her degree studies had given her both a fulfilling experience at a personal level and the ability to see new perspectives on the world.

## Miss E

Miss E had also entered university with a vocational qualification, a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years, for which she received an overall Merit grade. Miss E had had very mediocre GCSE grades from her fifth form days at school (5 C grades, 4 D grades and an EE grade for double science) but had re-taken Mathematics and Science alongside her BTEC course and finally achieved C grades in both.

Miss E's UCAS statement reveals much about her personality and practical strengths. Her personal statement describes how she works as a volunteer in a primary school, and as a prison play-worker for children who are visiting parents in prison alongside a part-time job in a nursery. Her reference says of her "*She has a lovely caring nature with the children and they have a lot of respect for her*". The reference goes on to say "*She never ceases to amaze me how she can work, do voluntary work at weekends, as well as attending college....and fit in a busy social life as well*". . In her first interview Miss E reported that she had considered several universities but had finally decided on Hull on financial grounds as it allowed her to continue to live at home. When asked whether she would have considered a more prestigious university Miss E responded by saying that she would not and continued "*I feel proud to be a graduate of Hull because I'm from Hull*".

In relation to her ambitions on entering university, in her first interview Miss E revealed that she never wavered in her original intention of becoming a primary school teacher and that her PGCE, gained in the year immediately following her degree, has now led her to a post in this role. She talked at length about how her studies helped to prepare her not only for her new working role but also in gaining a place on the PGCE course where entry was highly

competitive. In the second interview Miss E talked of her new job as a primary teacher in a school to which she has just moved, taking great pride in the fact that her teaching had just been graded as 'outstanding' by Ofsted inspectors.

Miss E made excellent progress on the B.A. Educational Studies degree, performing well academically and in relation to other activities wherein she operated as a Student Representative, helped to staff Open Days and acted as a Student Guide for Freshers' Week. She graduated with a 2:2 degree and a reference which reflected all her additional activity on the course. With reference to her peers, she did not feel that people's backgrounds had affected them during her time at university although, conversely, she did feel that her own background helped her *"because of the support I had at home"*. She struggled with the language at university saying *"I found it over my head I felt like I had to do a lot of my own research some of the language in some of the modules I'd never come across before but I think that's a good thing because then that opens your vocabulary I didn't feel it was an issue I felt maybe sometimes a bit intimidated but I'm not the type of person to be fazed by that"*.

In an examination of how far her background and pre-entry experiences had been beneficial to her, Miss E was asked in the second interview to say more about the impact of her background. She reported that *"upbringing was very important"* and described her family by saying that she was *"very disciplined early on in life but had a solid background in terms of my mum and dad wanted the best from me and always encouraged me to go for what I wanted"* She described her family as a large family and said *"we all support each other"*. Miss E went on to say that her step-sister had been to university but that there was never an expectation that she would go, however she was very determined to become a primary teacher and knew that this was the route. Despite this determination she had reservations



about her ability saying *“I always felt that I wasn't intelligent enough to go on to university”*. Despite this, her family were encouraging *“...they always said to me you can do it you can do anything you want to do as long as you got a passion for what you want to do and I always did have that”*. When questioned about why she felt she was not intelligent enough to go to university Miss E said *“When I was younger university was always seen as the thing for posh families and people that were from quite well educated backgrounds..... my mum and dad never went to university, it was seen as something that only really intelligent children went to university I think it was just one of these things that you kind of just listen to all these things going round and when I got there I realised I could do it”*. When this was further explored Miss E said *“I think it was seen ... not in the terms that if you are posh you're intelligent ...it was just because they could afford a good education. That's the way we saw it when we were younger; I don't see it like that now”* When asked if she was encouraged by her teachers Miss E said *“When I was at high school they said to my mum and dad I probably would end up there because I was so enthusiastic .... always had my head in books at home and always tried really hard I think people started to think that I would go to university”*.

Miss E felt that some aspects of her BTEC National Diploma helped her at university but said *“I feel it was a totally different ball game when you got to university ....you are at a whole different level it's kind of a shock”*. Speaking of her time on the Educational Studies programme she said: *“...it has been really influential in terms of theories that we studied and ....really helped in widening my perspective of things...”* She also talked about how her pre-entry training as a nursery nurse and had been a great help to her during her teaching practices, allowing her to use her practical skills alongside her academic knowledge to maximize her effectiveness in the classroom.

Miss E felt that the purpose of education was very clearly to provide her with a route into the job she wanted as an early years teacher. She said that her parents felt exactly the same saying *“I needed to get what I wanted and to do that was through education”*. She went on to say *“...looking back now I did it because I wanted to teach but I think it's an important process to go through to make you more worldly or for other purposes I don't know but I feel it's a good process to go through”*. Miss E thinks that government agenda to promote widening participation was probably designed in order to quash *“this whole thing that university is only for those that can afford it... I don't think it was for jobs I think it's about feedback into what you can put back into society as a whole”*.

When asked if she had changed much as a result of going to university Miss E said *“Definitely I feel myself a lot more confident; I was kind of getting my confidence through college but I was not a confident person at all school. I felt my confidence started to come through college and then when I got to university I was kind of in my element I became her who I am today and it just made me realise I'm capable of doing what I want to do really”*

Miss E is glad that she went to university because she could not have become a teacher without it; her only regret is that she could have left home and had the opportunity for more independence as a student, but she is also aware that that would have left her in debt so was able to say *“I don't think I'd change anything all the decisions I made were right”*.

In summary, Miss E was an able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years and an excellent UCAS reference. Her original ambition was to complete the degree, follow it with a PGCE and become a teacher, an ambition which she held throughout and which has now led to her working as a primary

teacher in a local school. She had had very good parental support although there was no original expectation that she would go to university; her teachers had been supportive but had not pressed her to go on to university. Miss E had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it was her local higher education institution and allowed her to continue to live at home and keep her many part-time jobs and extra-curricular activities. She had had no problems with the work on the degree graduating with a 2:2, but had found the language a challenge. Reflecting on her time at university Miss E was very positive about the experience and felt that she had gained both a good route to her chosen career and a sense of personal growth and fulfilment.

#### Miss F

In respect of research questions 1, 2 and 3, Miss F was the third respondent to have been accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree from a vocational entry route. She had applied to the university whilst studying for a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years in a local FEC. She had previously attained nine GCSE grades A-C at her secondary school. Whilst at college Miss F was working in a large supermarket as a checkout assistant. Her personal statement on the UCAS form was straightforward and factual but highlighted that she had had little idea what she wanted to do until embarking on her BTEC course at which point she began to plan in earnest for an eventual career in primary teaching. Her college reference describes her as having “*a mature approach*” and commends her performance on the BTEC course by saying “*her time on the course has been characterized by total commitment and dedication to both theoretical study and practical application*”. Miss F reported that she had stayed in Hull because “*at the time I wasn't very keen on moving and having the sort of big university life of moving out*”. Her passion was early years and so the

Educational Studies with Early Years pathway appealed to her. She said *“I had a look at other prospectuses and everything else but straight away I think I had my mind set on Hull and that was where I was going to go”*. She had not regretted her decision to go to the University of Hull and said *“I think if I'd gone to somewhere like Oxford or Cambridge I would have felt more pressure to perform to do well which would probably have lost me my grades in a way because I'd be putting too much pressure on myself to live up to the name whereas I felt very comfortable at Hull”*.

Miss F performed well on the B.A. Educational Studies course, always gaining pass marks for her assignments and ensuring that they were completed in good time. In the end she achieved a 2:2 degree and went on to undertake a PGCE Primary. When asked about the importance of background to progress on the degree, Miss F said of herself that she had had a lot of support from home; when asked about her peers and whether she had noticed issues relating to the fact that some students had come from less supportive backgrounds she said *“I wouldn't say so ... you could tell they had more of a passion to succeed and do well from their sort of background but I think everybody just seemed to be there for the same purpose”*.

Miss F had coped well at university but did say that some of the language was a struggle; she said *“with the lecturers sometimes the language they used was a bit .... there were big words that I sometimes had to go and ask dad what they meant. I learned a lot ... I know from sort of phrases that the lecturers used I've actually used some of that later on as I'm talking to people in interviews ... it was probably more beneficial to me than anything else”*.

Miss F had come to university with a clear ambition to go on to become an early years teacher. This never wavered throughout her studies and at the time of the first interview she had just obtained a post as a class teacher in the Early Years Foundation Stage in a local

primary school and hoped to eventually become an Early Years Coordinator or Key Stage Coordinator for Early Years. By the second interview she had moved to a different part of the country (to join a partner in the Royal Air Force) and was continuing to work as a primary teacher but finding it hard to obtain any permanent work so was enrolled with a range of teacher supply agencies where she was getting regular employment.

In investigating the final research question, Miss F was asked a series of questions about her background and experiences and how these had helped her, or not, in her undergraduate and postgraduate life. When asked about the importance of her home background Miss F said *“from my experience and the bringing up with my mum and dad that sort of influenced me more to go down the route that I did so I know personally my background my home life has made sort of that difference”*. She went on to say that she considers herself to be middle-class with a traditional home life of a working father and stay-at-home mother. Her father went to university as a mature student, sponsored by his employers, and continued to Masters level. He then hoped that she would go to University *“...my dad was hoping I would go to university”*. Miss F said that her father always encouraged her to go to university telling her that *“a degree would be better for me for my future career”*. Whilst at school she had been encouraged to look at the possibility of going to university but her teachers were keen for her to do modern languages whilst she was determined to study early years. This led to a lot of pressure from teachers and in the end she left to go to college to take a nursery nursing course, saying of the pressure from her schoolteachers *“I’d had enough of that”*. She went on to talk about her own motivation relating to her background saying of her relationship with her father *“there was this sort of rivalry of having a degree under our belts and everything else so wanted to succeed in doing that”*.

During her first interview Miss F revealed that she had found the PGCE to be hard work but rewarding and said that both her BTEC training and her degree studies had served her well in preparing for teacher training. When questioned about the joint value of her vocational training and her degree course as preparation she answered: *“the psychology and the theories of learning more than anything and it just gave me a really good background before getting into the classroom so I knew what was what really”*. Questioned further about the usefulness of her previous vocational studies she said that they had helped her on the PGCE because *“I knew what I was doing”* whereas others found that teaching practice was *“their first experience in an early years classroom”*. She went on to talk about how her time as a nursery nurse (the outcome of her BTEC National Diploma course) wherein she worked on a supply basis throughout her degree studies, had helped her to have a better understanding of the roles of her nursery nursing and teaching assistant colleagues in the classroom. In addition she had found her background with its mix of theory and practice to be useful in obtaining supply work, saying *“... as I’ve been looking for a job a lot of employers have been sort of impressed that I’ve got the nursery nursing side as well because I had sort of the content of the early years embedded so they’re quite impressed of me having the nursery nursing as well as the degree in early years and the PGCE in early years ... it’s given me quite a lot of experience”*. She then added that her degree studies had also had a positive impact with prospective employers saying *“it sort of covered everything that I wanted to do about early years in child development and everything else so it’s been really good and I think that comes across with employers”*.

Miss F felt that the purpose of her university education was related exclusively to the content of the degree and the things which she had learned and thought that her family felt the same way but she was not sure about this. When asked about what she thought the government

purpose was in promoting higher education she said *“sort of like my dad said.... a degree was the way to go and you would receive better employment if you had that degree under your belt”*. Miss F felt that her time at university had been most significant in allowing her to do the job she wanted but also that it had given her more confidence. She said *“I think it gave me a real confidence boost which I later took with me to go on to my PGCE and do the same there”*. When asked if she had changed as a result of going to University she again cited confidence as the big issue saying *“I think I’ve got more confidence from going to university”*. She was clear that she feels she has made the right decisions in relation to her education; with hindsight she does wish that she had realised that she could do her teacher training as an undergraduate but said that she *“didn't realise at the time I could do it”*. In the end such a route would have taken her to exactly the same position and therefore she felt that it was only a minor issue for consideration and generally was satisfied with the decision she had taken and the outcomes of her educational journey.

In summary, Miss F was an able young woman accepted on to the B.A. Educational Studies degree with a BTEC National Diploma in Early Years and a very good UCAS reference. Her original ambition was to complete the degree, follow it with a PGCE and become a teacher, an ambition which she held throughout and which has now led to her working as a primary teacher. She had had very good parental support and although there was no original expectation that she would go to university her father had been keen to promote the idea to her. Her teachers had been supportive but had not exerted any pressure on her to apply to university. Miss F had chosen to come to the University of Hull because it was her local higher education institution and allowed her to continue to live at home and keep her part-time job as a nursery nurse. She had had no problems with the work on the degree graduating with a 2:2, but had found the language a challenge. Reflecting on her time at university Miss

F was very positive about the experience and felt that she had gained both a sense of personal growth and fulfilment and had achieved her original ambition by finding a route to her chosen career.

### Summary

The response data collected have been presented within this chapter as a series of six pen portraits. This qualitative data was obtained from a small sample of six former students drawn from the initial cohort of 34 and the sample was representative of the whole group in that they reflected many areas which had emerged from the quantitative data as being in the majority; i.e. they were young, female and graduated with second class honours. In addition they provided a sample which could inform the central question of the thesis in that 3 of them were from traditional A-Level entry routes and 3 from vocational entry routes. The six former students' backgrounds formed a continuum from upper working class to lower middle class. The sample was too small to provide any firm generalisable conclusions but the interview data were sufficiently rich to suggest evidence of trends. For example, the students whose parents and families had personal experience of higher education tended to find these people to be more initially encouraging than those for whose parents and families it was an unknown experience. Teachers had tended to stress progression to university more for the group doing A-Levels than the group doing vocational level 3 qualifications. Teaching had been an ambition for all the students at some point but did not necessarily continue to be an ambition through to completion. Two trends which have emerged from the data are the importance of work experience, either paid or voluntary, in accessing graduate employment and the students' own reflections on their undergraduate experiences as being not only a route to



specific employment but an opportunity to view the world in a broader perspective, and to grow and flourish as people.

In the next chapter these data will be examined in relation to the key questions by investigating how far they can answer the overarching question “How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?”

## **Chapter 8: Interrogating the Results**

This study set out to look at the experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree course. The overarching question posed by the research asked how the performance and experience of these students related to their prior qualifications and background. This was investigated by means of seven key sub-questions which were:

- 1. What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 2. Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*
- 3. Whom do University of Hull admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?*
- 4. How do these students perform on the degree?*
- 5. Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?*
- 6. What are the students' eventual ambitions?*
  - Do these change, or stay the same?*
  - If they change, what leads to this?*
- 7. How beneficial have the students' pre-university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study/work?*

### **The findings from the research**

Table 8.2 below provides an overview of the findings from the research, using the data which are detailed within the previous chapter:

**Table 8.1: An Overview of the Findings from the Research**

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS	SOURCE
1. <i>Which students are accepted for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?</i>	<p>The majority of students are young (18-20) on entry and the majority of these are female.</p> <p>Approximately equal numbers of them have vocational entry qualifications and traditional A-Level qualifications.</p>	<p>Quantitative data</p> <p>Quantitative data</p>
2. <i>Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?</i>	<p>Most students come on the course because it is perceived as a route to their eventual career choice.</p> <p>The initial motivation for entry differs according to background and perceptions of what HE offers. Some students choose university for personal fulfillment; others choose it to get jobs.</p>	<p>Quantitative data &amp; qualitative data</p> <p>Quantitative data &amp; qualitative data</p>
3. <i>Whom do admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?</i>	<p>Hull University Educational Studies admissions staff accept applicants with vocational and academic qualifications but only those which appear on the UCAS tariff - not NVQs or apprenticeships.</p> <p>Admissions staff on Educational Studies admit academic entrants with a much wider spread of UCAS points than they do for those with vocational qualifications.</p>	<p>Quantitative data</p> <p>Quantitative data</p>
4. <i>How do these students perform on the degree?</i>	<p>Educational Studies students graduate with a normal distribution of first class, upper second class, lower second class and third class honours.</p>	<p>Quantitative data</p>

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS	SOURCE
<p>5. <i>Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?</i></p>	<p>UCAS points (whether from vocational qualifications or academic qualifications) are poor indications of eventual performance on the Educational Studies degree.</p> <p>There is no evidence that pre-entry qualifications (vocational or academic) have an impact on degree performance.</p> <p>The subject matter of the vocational qualification (for those entering with vocational qualifications) has little or no impact on eventual performance.</p> <p>There is some evidence to suggest that those from vocational entry routes can find it harder to access the language of university than those from academic routes.</p>	<p>Quantitative data</p> <p>Quantitative data</p> <p>Quantitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p>
<p>6. <i>What are the students' eventual ambitions?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Do these change, or stay the same?</i></li> <li>• <i>If they change, what leads to this?</i></li> </ul>	<p>In their first year of the course most students saw their eventual career aim as a PGCE course and on to primary teaching.</p> <p>Some students come to university with a focused ambition relating to employment.</p> <p>The data suggests that by the end of their degree academic entrants were more likely to have changed their career aspirations as a consequence of their undergraduate studies than those with vocational entry profiles.</p> <p>The change had usually been wrought by new horizons opening up as a consequence of undergraduate study.</p>	<p>Quantitative data &amp; qualitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p>

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS	SOURCE
7. <i>How beneficial have students' pre-university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study / work?</i>	<p>For both groups of students – vocational entrants and academic entrants – there had been a small number of benefits at university from their previous study but these benefits were more substantial in their postgraduate / working lives.</p> <p>For both academic entrants and vocational entrants a critical element in choice of postgraduate career, and success in obtaining it, was heavily predicated on work experience – both before and during undergraduate study.</p> <p>Overall the students had found their university studies to have had a positive and beneficial impact on their lives and saw them as having given them opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment.</p>	<p>Qualitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p> <p>Qualitative data</p>

### Question 1

*What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*

The answer to the first key question as to who was accepted on to the degree was initially ascertained through an analysis of student data relating to the research cohort. It revealed that the majority of applicants were young (18-20) and female (see Fig 6.1 p.109). The six respondents who took part in the interviews in the qualitative phase of the research were all drawn from this typical young, female group and their responses suggest that the typical

Educational Studies student who enrolls on the course does so because of an interest in children, young people and an eventual career in education.

## Question 2

### *Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?*

In relation to the second question as to why the applicants had applied to do this particular degree at the University of Hull, two issues emerged as critical. In terms of why they had chosen the discipline of Educational Studies, the questionnaire data revealed that their choice was predicated upon their eventual career aspirations and, for the majority, they initially saw it as a route into primary teaching. The quantitative data suggested that the principal reason for the choice of the university was because of its location. For the majority of students it was chosen because it was an appropriate distance from their home – either because they were local applicants from Hull itself or because Hull was within an easy bus or train journey from their home town (see Fig. 6.12 p.119).

The qualitative data provided further information in relation to this question. In previous chapters the key issues relating to students' backgrounds and their expectations and aspirations was explored. Jovchelovitch 2007 (see p.54) was cited in relation to the importance of social class in Britain and in Chapter 2 the work of Archer *et al.* (2003) suggested that students self-select their university on the basis of what they feel is an appropriate setting in relation to their social class. Of the six respondents in the qualitative phase of this research, three described themselves as middle class (Misses A, C, and F) and three as working class (Misses B, D and E). These classifications were, of course, personal

determinations and may not reflect any formal designation of social class. In fact, their descriptions of their home lives and backgrounds would suggest that they formed a continuum from upper working class to lower middle class with no extreme examples of social class difference within the sample. Despite this, there were differences in the sample and these seemed to relate most strongly to whether other members of the family, especially parents, had had access to higher education (Misses C and F), or where teachers made it clear to parents that a particular respondent was expected to go to university (Miss A). Where either of these was the case there was a stronger focus on university as a natural progression for personal growth (Misses A, C and F); where the respondent was the first person in their family to access higher education and no particular pressure from school, the purpose of university was very much focused upon employment opportunities (Misses B, D and E).

Misses A, B and C were from a traditional academic route and Misses D, E and F from a vocational route. None of the respondents made overt links between their background and their choice of university, however their responses did reflect issues raised in earlier chapters. For example, in Chapter 2 (see p. 30) Bourdieu and Passeron refer to ‘cultural capital and habitus’ as issues, what Archer *et al.* (2003) describe as feeling comfortable “with people like us”, and these were reflected in comments from Miss D in her admission that university was “*intimidating*” and from Miss E who felt that university was restricted to the children of “*posh families*”. Miss B makes an interesting observation in relation to this issue when she describes the confidence of others at university who have “*a proper academic background*”; yet Miss B herself came from an academic route albeit with an AVCE qualification. In her reference to the confidence of others she is *contrasting* these people with herself; thereby indicating that she feels that the AVCE qualification does not have the status of the more standard A-Level subjects.

In earlier chapters Archer talks about parental expectations (see pp.32-33) and Livingstone refers to teacher expectations (see p.56) and how these link to both educational aspirations and to social background, with consequences for students' choices about higher education. In the responses to the interviews all the students talk about the support they received from their parents but there is a difference in the nature of that support. For Misses A, C, and F, there was active parental support and encouragement. For Misses B, D and E, there was parental support once they had taken the decision to go into higher education, but no prior expectation that they would go to university. This shows no connection to what they have studied prior to university but mirrors whether other family members have had experience of higher education or, in the case of Miss A, where teachers have made clear that they expect progression to university. In the case of Miss D, teachers again are significant. Despite the lack of parental expectations in relation to higher education, she reported that her teachers were both supportive and encouraging. She went on to mention her school several times in the interviews and said on four occasions that she had been to a "good school", clearly feeling that this had had an impact on her decision to apply to university. For the other respondents the reactions of teachers more closely resembles the phenomenon cited in Chapter 3 (see p. 56) wherein Livingstone identifies that some teachers pre-judge the capabilities of pupils based on issues of social class and background; this might well be the case for Miss B, from perhaps the most socially disadvantaged family of all the respondents, whose teachers wrote on her UCAS form that "*an HND would be a great achievement for her*". (Miss B gained a 2:2 degree on the B.A. Educational Studies).

The six respondents had all considered other higher education establishments but they had all chosen Hull and none of them felt, with hindsight, that they should have considered a more



prestigious university. Several students cited very positive reasons for their choice such as their love of the city, a desire to stay in their home town, the possibilities of greater financial security and less debt by going to a university close to home, and (in one case) the prestige of doing a full degree at a university against doing an HND at a college. Only one of the respondents mirrored Archer *et al.*'s (2003) findings that students self-select their university on the basis of pre-determined ideas based on social class (see p. 30), Miss D with her comment that she felt that she “*couldn't*” apply to a Russell Group university, but there were some comments which suggested that this may have played a part in the decision making of others too. For example Miss F talks of how a Russell Group university would have put pressure on her to “*perform*” and Miss A talks about not being able to “*stick it out*” at a more prestigious university. This could suggest that the ideas which Archer *et al.* (2003) put forward could have had a part to play in the decisions, but it is not clearly indicated in the findings.

Wolf (2002), Archer *et al.* (2003) and Thomas (2001) are all cited in Chapter 2 as writers who have examined the issue of widening participation in higher education, drawing links to national education policy as well as to issues of personal growth and fulfilment. The six respondents in the qualitative stage of this research had different ideas as to what they felt was the government's purpose in promoting higher education. Misses C, D and E felt that it was to give everyone an equal chance in life, Misses A and B thought it was to make Britain more competitive and Miss F thought that it was to ensure that the population was equipped to tackle new jobs within the economy. Misses A and B, however, also had concerns that widening participation had led to the devaluation of a degree. The responses were distributed across the group with no connection to entry qualification, parental expectations or social background.

### Question 3

#### *Whom do admissions staff admit to an Educational Studies degree?*

The answer to the third key question, relating to admission staffs' perceptions and decisions was more complex to ascertain. In the early days of the research it was postulated that an important issue in determining who accessed the degree and who did not was predicated to some extent on the knowledge and understanding of the relevant admissions staff, as evidenced by Connor *et al.* (2006). One of the underpinning issues relating to the main thrust of the research had therefore been an examination of whether vocationally qualified students were, in fact, accessing the degree programme and, if so, in what numbers and from what areas. The numbers of students from the two routes suggested that staff were equally happy to take students from both backgrounds (see Fig. 6.2 p.110). The raw data on "how many" did not, however, tell the full story. In the first place there was the fact that the admissions team had recently been joined by a new member of staff (this research author) with a better understanding of vocational qualifications who was able to offer advice and guidance from a position of strength. In the second place there appears to be an anomaly in the students accepted from the two different entry routes. The range for A-Level candidates was 260 whereas the range for vocational candidates was 220. Within this range ten vocational candidates (over half the total number) had 200 points. No A-Level UCAS scores show this consistency of approach and this suggested that the earlier scenario wherein vocational candidates are chosen with much greater caution was a strong possibility, thus reflecting national research (Connor *et al.* 2006, Schwarz 2004). There could be several explanations for this anomaly, but one possibility which would mirror findings in two of the four core texts examined in Chapter 2 (Connor *et al.*, 2006, Thomas, 2001) is that if admissions staff felt

pressurised by university widening participation policies then one solution would be to take vocational candidates but restrict offers as far as possible to a small band of attainment scores to remain within the ‘comfort zone’ of the familiar.

#### Question 4

##### *How do these students perform on the degree?*

The results from the quantitative analysis suggest that whether students enter University to undertake a B.A. Educational Studies degree from an A-Level route or a vocational route, their chances of success are not markedly different. The data collected and shown in Fig. 6.10 (see p. 117) indicate very little difference in the final attainment of students who have entered the programme with high A-Level UCAS points or high vocational UCAS points. The UCAS points themselves are shown in this research to be poor indicators of success. Whilst it is true that, overall, students with high entry profiles (from both routes) do well on the course whilst those with weak entry profiles do less well, the difference in UCAS entry scores is not an unequivocal indicator of final success. The performance on the degree does not display a direct correlation with entry scores. Indeed, in some cases, there is a marked disparity between the two, for example the student with the lowest UCAS entry profile of just 80 points (two grade “E” scores at A-Level) went on to gain a First Class Honours degree. What are apparent from the comparison of UCAS entry scores and degree points are two things:

1. Students are accepted on the programme with a wide spread of entry profiles, ranging from 340 UCAS points to 80 UCAS points.

2. The final degree points show a remarkably even spread of marks with a normal distribution of degree classifications and the majority of students gaining a second class degree.

This would suggest two possible scenarios: either the programme succeeds in supporting students to achieve to their greatest potential and for weaker entrants there is more scope to progress as they have not maximised that potential in previous learning environments; or, the programme fails to capitalise on the achievement potential of the strongest students. Further research would be required to establish whether either of these scenarios had validity or whether other factors were at play.

The achievement of A-Level entrants differs from the achievement of vocational entrants in only one respect. Achievement on the degree is equally spread in both cases but the range of entry scores is wider for A-Level entrants than for vocational entrants. This could reflect three possibilities:

1. The UCAS scoring system for vocational applications is more likely to produce a standardised score than the scoring system for A-Level applications.
2. Admissions tutors, being less familiar with vocational entry profiles (see Appendix 3 page 217) are more cautious about accepting them unless they have a uniformly high entry profile.

3. A-Level entrants have more untapped potential to succeed than vocational entrants and the degree programme allows the weaker ones to flourish and maximise that potential.

A sample of 34 students is too small to explore these three possibilities fully but these interpretations reflect the issues raised by Connor *et al.* (2006) in Chapter 2 (see pp. 33-35) and are a suitable subject for wider investigation in future if this pattern should be repeated year on year.

#### Question 5

*Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?*

Research question 5 focused particularly on whether vocationally qualified entrants performed as well on the degree as those with traditional academic qualifications. The initial quantitative data were clear (see Fig. 6.10 p. 117); vocationally qualified applicants performed at the same levels as A-Level applicants. In neither case were the UCAS entry scores good predictors of final attainment and the students' previous qualifications had no apparent impact on their final performance. This was further reinforced when the nature of the vocational qualifications was examined (see Fig.6.9 p. 116) as it showed a random spread of results across all the qualifications undertaken: CACHE Diploma, GNVQ, AVCE, Access and BTEC. This result was surprising and, to some extent, calls into question one of the underlying assumptions within the research. It had been assumed that the mix of vocational and academic qualifications at level 3 and undergraduate level would provide a student with the best platform for achievement both on the degree and in postgraduate life. Within that idea had been a further assumption that this would only be true where the

vocational/academic mix had been within a broadly similar area, for example where a students had a pre-entry qualification in Early Years or Childhood Studies. In fact, the results show a different picture wherein the type of vocational study has little or no impact on a student's ability to succeed. The students with BTEC qualifications in Business and Art did just as well as those with Nursery Nursing or Health and Social Care. The view that vocational and academic qualifications provide a uniform platform for learning seems to remain supported, but it does not seem to be predicated upon curricular issues.

In respect of the nature of any enhanced or reduced performance there was only one key difference in attainment across the cohort, which itself did not relate to entry qualifications but to age and maturity (see Fig. 6.6 p. 113) The early withdrawals from the programme had included a disproportionately high number of mature students but those who remained to completion did better than the younger students. This raised two possibilities:

1. Mature students have a better understanding of their own capabilities and will withdraw rather than risk failure, leaving on the course only those with the potential to do well, and/or
2. Mature students are more capable of maximising their academic potential on the degree programme.

Mature students are an increasing force in full-time higher education with numbers of mature learners increasing year on year (Sutherland 1997, Thomas 2001). In addition those in work now have the opportunity to access higher education whilst still supporting their families with increasingly flexible modes of delivery such as part-time, online and evening provision which

have made degree-level study available for many mature students for the first time. Studies that have been undertaken into the performance of mature students (Wheeler and Birtle 1993) have all shown that being a mature undergraduate brings its own set of problems and pressures. The attrition rate for mature students is nationally higher than for younger students (*ibid.*) which may reflect the increased difficulties faced by those who are combining study with work and family responsibilities. Those who are retained, however, tend to perform better than their younger counterparts (Sutherland 1997, McArdle and Woodcock 1998, Baltes and Staudinger 1996) and this has been reflected in this research. A full investigation into the specific issues surrounding the entry, retention and achievement of mature students is beyond the remit of this research but could give scope for further investigation, with a larger sample, at a future date.

Whilst this question was largely answered by the quantitative data, one issue did emerge from the interviews which could be said to have had a bearing on student performance. The language of higher education emerged from the second interviews as an issue, which saw a clear division between those with academic entry qualifications and those with vocational entry qualifications. In Chapter 3 (See p. 56) language is raised as an issue in people's ability to access education, as identified by Bernstein (1979). When questioned about the language, all three academic entrants (Misses A, B and C) had not had any difficulty but all three vocational entrants (Misses D, E and F) reported that the language used by their lecturers had been a challenge. This finding was irrespective of any differences in background or parental or school expectations (in contrast to the ideas put forward by Bernstein (1979) and discussed in Chapter 3) and therefore suggests that it relates predominantly to the language used in A-Level studies and the language used in vocational studies; the former providing a better platform for the accessing of academic language than the latter.

## Question 6

*What are the students' eventual ambitions? Do these change, or stay the same?*

*If they change, what leads to this?*

This research question was one which related to postgraduate study and employment, asking about the students' eventual ambitions and whether these had changed during their undergraduate studies. Where there was a change of direction the research also wished to investigate what had led to this change of direction. The findings that provided answers to these questions were entirely predicated on the output from the qualitative part of the research and were not addressed within the quantitative analysis. Although there has been little research into the postgraduate destinations of students from B.A. Educational Studies programmes, the findings of Davies and Hogarth (2002) as outlined in Chapter 4 (see pp.79-81), did provide a small amount of statistical evidence to provide a context for this qualitative phase.

Five of the six interviewees (Misses A, B, D, E, and F) had the initial ambition, upon completion of their studies, to undertake a PGCE and become primary school teachers. During her first interview Miss A explained that the content of her degree studies, especially a newly acquired knowledge of psychology and child development, had caused her to change her future plans in favour of a career which she felt offered more scope for her personal and professional development than school teaching. She was clear that her pre-university experience had not led her to consider alternative career options but that her degree studies had made her aware of these through the wider study of Education as an academic discipline. Miss B had an academic entry profile incorporating A-Levels and AVCE Health and Social



Care and she too had an initial ambition to become a primary teacher by following her degree with a PGCE but she had never achieved a mathematics GCSE so this was a route that was closed to her. Her postgraduate career has not lived up to her expectations and the interview revealed, as much in her tone of voice as in the actual words spoken, a clear sense of disappointment that gaining a degree had not opened more opportunities. Early in the first interview she said, in a very dejected tone, that, "*I haven't got a job as such in what I was hoping to,*" and this same sense of disappointment was still evident by the time of the second interview, in which she reiterated that her degree had not led to the job opportunities she had previously expected. Miss C had not come to university with a clear ambition in mind but had considered that her eventual career would involve community work. On her original questionnaire, she had stated that she had begun to consider a career in teaching, but by the time of the second interview she had completed a Master's degree in Social Work and was employed as a social worker. She had therefore changed direction twice during her degree studies but had ended up where she had begun, seeing her career ambitions return to social and community work.

Miss D, the first of the interviewees to have come to university from a purely vocational entry route, had, like Misses A and B remained committed to training as a teacher once she had graduated. Having graduated with a 2:1 she had obtained a PGCE place and begun her training only to find that she was unhappy and left with a feeling that she had made the wrong choice. Despite being pressed, Miss D could not, or would not, say why she had been so unhappy on the PGCE but reiterated that she "*just felt it wasn't right*". By the time of the second interview, Miss D was very positive about her new career as a Family Support Worker in a children's centre and said that she was glad that her ambitions had changed. Misses E and F both came from similar backgrounds, having completed vocational level 3

qualifications prior to entry to university. Each of them went on to gain a lower second class Honours degree on the B.A. Educational Studies programme and from there went on to a PGCE primary teaching course. Each of the two students was successful on the PGCE and each had managed to obtain a post as a teacher upon gaining her qualification. By the time of the second interview both Miss E and Miss F were continuing to work as primary teachers in local schools, their ambitions having never wavered throughout their undergraduate and postgraduate studies and having always found part-time jobs through university which were in an area related to education. The interview data revealed how important these working experiences had been for them as they embarked on their postgraduate studies, especially in relation to classroom practice and the handling of interpersonal relationships with other staff and adults involved in the school setting.

Several issues and themes run through all of the interviews irrespective of the students' entry profiles, personalities or career aspirations. In all cases, teaching has been a consideration at some point; for some, it was always the ultimate goal, for some it emerged during their studies and for others it was the preferred postgraduate route. For Misses E and F, the ambition to be a primary teacher had remained through to fruition; Miss C had never had a clear idea about what she wanted to do but had been prompted by her degree studies to continue successfully into social and community work; Misses A and D had originally wanted to go on to become primary teachers but had changed direction and were successfully progressing in careers outwith teaching. By the time of the second interviews, only Miss B, who had originally wanted to be a primary teacher but had never been able to access the training, was still employed in a job that could not be described as being a graduate-level post.

The work of Archer *et al.* (2003), cited in Chapter 2 of this study, suggests that socio-economic status and family background have a major impact on students' ambitions and aspirations. They suggest that entrants to university from the lower socio-economic groups see it predominantly as a route to a better job but that these students express concern that it could make them unemployable as they could be considered over-qualified (see p. 30). When the respondents in this research were questioned about their reasons for coming to university there was no discernible difference in the stated aspirations of the two groups of academic entrants and vocational entrants. There was, however, a difference in the responses between those from a background where the family had had some experience of higher education (or where teachers had stressed to parents that higher education was a likely outcome), and those from a background in which they were the first entrant to higher education, thereby suggesting some support for the findings from Archer *et al.* (2003). Thus Misses A, C and F stressed in their interviews that going to university was "*what you did next*" (Miss C), to "*understand better*" (Miss A) and "*a degree was the way to go*" (Miss F). In contrast Misses B, D and E responded principally in relation to employment; "*try to get a better job*" (Miss B), "*to get a good job*" (Miss D) and "*because I wanted to teach*" (Miss E). Unlike Archer *et al.*'s (2003) respondents, there was no concern about being over-qualified by getting a degree but the issue was commented upon tangentially by Miss A saying that you now have to have a "*Masters or PhD to stand out from the crowd*", and by Miss B with several references to the difficulties in getting a graduate-level job in a competitive climate.

In Chapter 1, the personal beliefs which had helped to shape the journey to this research include one which argues that education is not just about employment, national economic growth or global competitiveness but also needs to be concerned with personal growth and fulfilment. In Chapter 2 these ideas found support in the work of Wolf (2002) who presents a

challenge to the notion that Britain needs more graduates to support the growth of the national economy and who expresses concern that political rhetoric relies heavily upon the economic arguments for education rather than on it for its intrinsic value. Question 6 in this research asks about students' ambitions, and it is therefore central to the work to know how the respondents and their parents and teachers saw the purpose of higher education and whether the respondents see this as a reflection of the governmental view or not, i.e. whether the policy rhetoric had an impact on their original ambitions.

Once again the responses to the second interviews showed no division between those from vocational entry routes and those from academic entry routes. However, there was a division in relation to background and familial expectations and understandings of the purpose of higher education. Misses A, C and F felt that the purpose of higher education to the individual was the promotion of understanding and personal growth; they responded with comments such as "*to allow people to understand the world better*" (Miss A), "*helping me to understand people better*" (Miss C) and "*it gave me a real confidence boost*" (Miss F). In each case the family had had an expectation that the respondent would go to university; for two of them the parents had had experience of higher education (Misses C and F) or the school had clearly directed the student towards higher education (Miss A). In contrast, the other three respondents (Misses B, D and E) saw higher education as being entirely related to employment, and simply repeated their previous comments, all of which focused upon getting a good job in their chosen field. Each of the respondents felt that their parents and teachers had mirrored their own reasons for wanting them to go to university, or accepting the decision to go, but Miss B thought that teachers may have had a different purpose in mind but she was unclear what that could be.

In relation to the government agenda for expanding higher education, as discussed in Chapter 2 by Wolf (2002) and Thomas (2001), the respondents were split in their opinions but this was neither on entry qualification lines nor related to their social background. Misses A and B felt that it related to the national economic good, Misses C, D and E felt that it was designed to promote social equality (although Miss C did add a caveat that whilst she hoped that this was the case one could “*never be sure with politicians*”). Miss F, in contrast to the others, thought that it was essentially about combining both previous viewpoints by giving better access to employment for the greatest number of people in both their interests and the interest of the country. None of the responses suggested that government policy and rhetoric had been a major motivating factor for the respondents or impacted upon their decisions to enter higher education, and all showed some hesitation in giving their opinion about the purposes behind the government’s purpose in promoting widening participation.

Asked whether they had changed as a result of going to university all of the respondents felt that this was the case and all of them answered the question with reference to personal growth and fulfilment, rather than to employment, careers or income. Miss A said that university had allowed her to “*grow up*” and to find her own personal areas of interest; Misses B and C said that it had given them the capacity to look at people and events in a “*different way*”, Miss D had learnt about herself and realised that learning was a “*lifelong thing*”, whilst Misses E and F felt that university had given them self-belief and self-confidence. These responses reflected no differences between those from vocational entry routes or those from academic entry routes, nor did they differ according to background or family expectations. None of the respondents, from any of the different backgrounds, made any reference to wages, salaries or economic prospects. This finding was a major contrast to the political rhetoric, which so often stresses the economic benefits of higher education. It is arguable that the differences

highlighted by the parental expectations, wherein some parents saw higher education as a personally fulfilling experience and others saw it primarily as the route to a well-paid job, could be predicated upon understandings which are largely influenced by the economic rhetoric. Particularly for those families where there is no experience of higher education, their perception of its benefits may be shaped by the economic arguments put forward by politicians; for those who have had personal experience of higher education, its less tangible (but equally important) benefits are understood.

#### Question 7

*How beneficial have students' pre-university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study, postgraduate study/work?*

In the first set of interviews none of the respondents was very positive that their pre-university studies had been of particular help to them during their time as an undergraduate. This was in sharp contrast to the responses in the second set of interviews when the longer time lapse had given them more time to reflect. In these second interviews the students were much more aware of the benefits which their pre-entry studies had provided. Misses A and C both reported that they now recognised that A-Levels had helped to prepare them to do presentations and formulate arguments in writing, whilst Misses B, D, E and F all felt that the content of their pre-university studies had helped them to access the content of their degree more easily. This division was interesting because Miss B was a traditional academic applicant, who differed from Misses A and C in that her A-Level qualification was an AVCE Health and Social Care, and in respect of this issue she gave a similar answer to those who had done an entirely vocational route, focusing on the content rather than the process saying

*“there were parts of it that were brought up in the degree that I’d sort of... like the theorists and things like that ... things that I’d covered while I’d done the health and social care”.*

Two of the students described their pre-university studies as necessary parts of the whole route into their chosen career (Misses E and F) and Miss C, who had “*hated*” her A-Levels also saw them in this light, but in her case the pathway was to university rather than to a chosen career.

When the questioning examined the impact of pre-university and undergraduate experiences as preparation for postgraduate study or a career, the answers were more diverse. In the first set of interviews it was clear that for those students who had had relevant work experience prior to University, Misses A, C, D, E and F, job opportunities had come more easily than for those, such as Miss B, who had had little experience in a relevant sector. Miss A was clear that her experience as a dance teacher and as a volunteer with a child with special needs had been invaluable in supporting her learning on the degree, helping her to see theory in practice and then helping her to access a graduate post. For Miss C, the experience of volunteering in a relevant sector before university and whilst an undergraduate had given her the confidence to know what she wanted to achieve and to go on to gain a Master’s degree in Social Work and access a graduate job in the field. Miss D said that she felt that her BTEC Nursery Nursing qualification was of benefit in preparing her for her undergraduate studies in that she had practical experiences to draw on to help to understand some of the theoretical aspects of subjects such as psychology and child development and that it had been invaluable now that she was in employment. For Misses E and F their work experience in childcare settings served to confirm their choice of career as well as providing them with practical knowledge to contextualise their learning as undergraduates. For both of them the practical training in

their pre-university days had been invaluable as postgraduate students undertaking a PGCE because, as Miss F said, *“I knew what I was doing”*. Miss B, who had no work experience, had not found this to be a problem when studying for her degree but had found it a serious handicap in the job market; as she said *“It was hard coming out because although I’d got a degree I hadn’t really had that much experience”*.

For all the respondents their studies at undergraduate level were proving beneficial in their working lives and all were able to cite examples where they could draw on their undergraduate learning to inform practice, for example Miss D explaining that *“we get lots of referrals....a degree helps me to be able to sort of find information...”*. The most telling responses, however, came when the respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences as undergraduates, the purpose of their higher education and see how far it had helped them in their postgraduate and working lives. At this point the focus for all six respondents changed from the practical to the philosophical; their answers were almost unequivocally about personal growth, fulfilment, lifelong learning and *“looking at things differently”*. Some respondents did also include a practical assessment insofar as they recognised that university had given them access to a particular career which they wanted to pursue, but overall their perceptions were focused on how their studies had helped them, as individuals, to see the world in a different way.

In Chapter 2 (see pp. 25-28) Thomas (2001) highlights the benefits of widening participation in higher education. When the six respondents in this research were asked to reflect on their experiences of university all of them said that they thought that their higher education had been both positive and beneficial to their lives. When asked if they would change anything with hindsight, two answered that they might have chosen different degree programmes; Miss



B saying that she would perhaps have chosen a course where “*there was more chance of getting a job*” and Miss D saying that she would have “*perhaps looked into it more*” before making a choice. Miss A felt that she should possibly have stayed on to do a Masters degree. Misses B, E and F all felt that they would not change anything.

### Summary of findings from the research

The overarching aim of this research was to investigate the experiences of a group of individuals on a B.A. Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull. The research endeavoured to see how far the students’ pre-entry qualifications and experience impacted upon their lives as undergraduates and how far the sum of their pre-entry and undergraduate educational experiences now impact upon their lives as postgraduates. Having examined the findings in relation to the key research questions, it is now possible to summarise the overall picture presented by them.

The research suggests that, for the particular cohort of Educational Studies students under investigation, their studies were felt to be relevant and interesting. Data relating to how students from different entry pathways, vocational or academic, performed on the degree showed that there was no discernible difference in the classification of degree obtained or in their ability to succeed. The only area where there was a difference between the two groups was in relation to the language used at degree level; in this case those with vocational entry qualifications had found it a greater challenge than those with traditional academic qualifications. This had not, however, had an impact on their final results or degree classifications. Likewise, in relation to the impact of pre-entry study and undergraduate study on these students’ ability to access postgraduate study or find employment and then progress

satisfactorily within it, there was little difference between those entering with vocational qualifications or traditional qualifications.

In examining whether vocationally qualified student applicants were, in fact, accessing the degree programme in similar numbers to traditional A-Level applicants and, if so, in what numbers and from what areas, it was found that there were anomalies. A-Level students could access the programme easily, as could those with well-known vocational qualifications from traditional awarding body suites of courses, for example BTEC National Diplomas and GNVQs. Those with work-based qualifications, such as NVQ qualifications, were not, however, recruited to the programme in 2004.

The data showed that there was no difference in the ultimate performance on the degree of the two groups of students and the curriculum was seen to have provided a useful platform for postgraduate study or work. What was a surprising element of this finding was that success on the degree was not only **not** dependent upon whether the students had come from a vocational entry route or a traditional academic route but that the nature of what was studied at level 3 seemed to have little or no impact on achievement at undergraduate level, whether this was the subjects studied at A-Level or the subject matter of a vocational programme.

There was little evidence from the first set of interviews, a year after graduation, that students perceived their pre-entry qualifications to have been of any discernible benefit on their undergraduate programme but, in the early years of their working lives, those with vocational entry profiles had found their pre-degree studies useful. By the time of the second interviews all the students were able to reflect on their entry qualifications and see that they had been

useful to them as undergraduates and continued to be useful in their postgraduate lives. One critical area of difference did seem to emerge, however, as relating to the students' work experience, either in relation to part-time or voluntary jobs undertaken alongside their degree, and/or as part of an earlier programme of vocational study. The students who had had the widest and most substantial work experience emerged as being better placed to access postgraduate study and complete it successfully and/or access graduate-level employment in the year immediately following graduation. There appeared to be little difference between the students in terms of these abilities in relation to their entry profiles, except that those who had previously undertaken a vocational qualification had automatically had access to relevant work experience as part of their programme of pre-university study. By the time of the second interviews this situation had become less apparent, as could be expected when the respondents had had three years after graduation, and only one (Miss B) remained in a non-graduate level post.

Another issue which emerged from the research was that, irrespective of their entry qualifications, students whose families had no experience of higher education had different reasons for choosing to come to university and initially saw different purposes in higher education than the students who came from backgrounds where there was a history of others in the family going on to higher education. These differing perceptions were mirrored in the perceptions which they felt that their parents and teachers had displayed at the time of the decision to go to university. For those from homes with a history of entry to higher education, university was about personal fulfilment, it was about following an expected progression route after school or following parents or siblings. It was about learning to learn, having the chance to see different perspectives and to achieve more intellectual maturity. For those from backgrounds where they were the first family members to access higher

education, university education was much more focused on getting a job, having better career opportunities, being able to bring personal career goals to fruition and being successful in gaining a suitable post. What formed an interesting footnote to this finding was that the respondents themselves, when questioned about how they now reflected on the purposes of higher education, they all put forward the view that it was for growth and fulfilment, for learning to learn and for seeing things in a broader perspective. Two of the respondents also said that it had been a good route into the job that they wanted to do but none of the respondents made any reference at all, in either of the interviews, to economic gain, salary or financial prospects – a sharp contrast to much of the political rhetoric surrounding widening participation and access to higher education.

In Chapter 1 the following questions were raised in relation to personal beliefs underpinning this research:

- Whether or not vocational learners could prosper as undergraduates and achieve their aspirations in their postgraduate lives with the same level of efficacy as individuals from traditional academic backgrounds.
- To what extent vocational learning could deliver personal value to the individual beyond the assumed economic benefit it gave to the nation or wider world;
- To what extent education and learning could enhance and enrich the lives of individuals irrespective of any personal economic or pragmatic outcomes such as improved career prospects or higher wages, being instead about personal growth and the enhancement of individual quality of life.

The outcomes from the research have provided some answers to these questions. The students from vocational entry routes performed no more or less well than those from traditional A-Level routes, despite a degree of bias against their initial selection wherein there was more rigorous adherence to specific higher UCAS entry scores. All of the students who were interviewed were able to cite the value to them as individuals of their learning experiences, both prior to university and during their time as undergraduates. The interviewees who had come from vocational entry routes were all able to express how helpful these had been in their postgraduate lives, helping them to cope with new work experiences. What was also apparent, however, was that all work experience (not just that which was tied to a vocational qualification) appears to have had an impact on students' ability to get graduate jobs more quickly on graduation. This suggests that the assumption that graduates who have a combination of vocational and academic learning are well placed to access fulfilling lives and careers extends beyond the scope of formal education and encompasses informal learning as well. It seems that whilst pre-entry qualifications have little impact on students' abilities to succeed on a B.A. Educational Studies course and access suitable postgraduate study and/or employment after completion, work experience, either before, during, or within the degree programme, may be an important factor and is certainly worthy of further investigation.

Interestingly none of the students made reference to income as a critical factor in their postgraduate lives, and whilst this could reflect a gender bias rather than a difference of perception as, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has been argued that women are less driven by financial considerations (Ozbilgin 2009) and the interviewees were all female, it does raise the suggestion that the emphasis which policy makers place on the improved financial status of graduates could be over-stressed. All of the respondents in the qualitative phase reflected

on their educational journey as having been of positive personal value and none had regretted their original decision to come to university. All felt that it had allowed them to grow as people and achieve a level of fulfilment.

This research began with the question: *How does the performance and experience of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree relate to their prior qualifications and background?* It investigated a single case-study cohort of students on a B.A. Educational Studies degree against a set of seven sub-questions to try to find a response. The data gathered has shown that this cohort of students chose the University of Hull and their particular programme of study for largely pragmatic reasons such as location and to meet their eventual ambitions. The ones from vocational backgrounds had to have more robust entry profiles to be accepted on the course, but once on the programme they did equally well no matter what entry route they had come from and they were able to use their time as undergraduates to build on previous learning.

The small group interviewed in the second phase of the research were divided as to the reasons behind their choice of a university education; some wanting personal fulfilment, others a specific sort of career, but these divisions did not reflect differences in their entry profiles but rather reflected the expectations which their families had for them, apparently based on parental experience of higher education, or reflected the support and expectations of their schools and teachers. Five of the six interviewees have gone on to choose careers based upon their interests and predilections, supported by a range of learning from a number of areas including informal sources such as work experience. All of the respondents reflect back positively on their educational journeys as undergraduates, not in terms of economic benefit to themselves or the country, but in terms of their personal growth and fulfilment.

## **Chapter 9: Recent Events, Limitations and Future Directions**

This research covers a period of five years from 2004 – 2010. It has used data produced from original UCAS applications prepared in 2003 relating to a student body recruited in September 2004. The quantitative data were collected in 2006 and the qualitative data in 2008 and 2010. Inevitably, given this span of time, as the research has progressed there have been new national initiatives, new national policies, new institutional policies and procedures and a gradually changing mindset relating to different qualifications as entry criteria for higher education. Likewise, the B.A. Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull, now well established with large student numbers and a more refined curriculum, has developed over the years in question. It is therefore necessary to contextualize the research contained within this work by acknowledging some of these changes and trying to assess their impact.

### **The impact of recent events**

Throughout this work a key piece of national research has been cited, that of Connor *et al.* (2006) for *Action on Access*. As discussed in Chapter 2 (see pp. 33-36) the Connor team have subsequently updated their own work (Sinclair and Connor 2008) by revisiting the institutions which had provided data for their initial report. This new Sinclair and Connor (2008) report cites changes since 2006, one of which is that there is now a growing awareness of the value of vocational qualifications. This point is reinforced in the 2008 report with examples of two veterinary courses and four medical schools which have begun to accept applicants with BTEC National Diploma qualifications since the original research in 2006. What is clear from the Sinclair and Connor report (*ibid.*) and from other sources such as two Hefce reports, one into pathways to higher education in 2007 (HEFCE 2007) and one which

provided an interim evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks in 2008 (HEFCE 2008), is that the acceptance of vocationally qualified applicants and the more general acceptance of widening participation students is growing year on year as the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses.

Of all the recent changes, the embedding of vocational qualifications within the UCAS tariff, thereby giving admissions staff a much clearer indication of parity of esteem between A-Levels and level 3 vocational qualifications, has had a substantial impact on the recruitment of students with non-traditional entry qualifications. A straightforward exercise, undertaken by a group of academic staff from across the higher education sector, employed by central government and working with UCAS, has now led to the inclusion of the more common vocational qualifications within the UCAS tariff. The result has been to allocate a point score to a much wider sweep of vocational qualifications in terms of their equivalence in breadth and depth to traditional A-Levels. This has allowed staff who are unfamiliar with vocational qualifications to feel more confident about accepting them. The other side of this, however, could be that any qualifications which are not yet on the tariff are likely to be disregarded much more readily than before. This, arguably, could lead to even further negative discrimination against those who hold NVQ or apprenticeship qualifications, which continues to present a major loss to higher education and to the potential students. One positive note in respect of this has, however, emerged more recently. In its recent white paper (DBIS 2009), the government set out agenda for change which explicitly suggest that Universities needed to pay greater attention to providing progression routes for those from the traditional work-based learning routes such as NVQs and apprenticeships. Whilst the paper relies heavily again on the contention that education is irrevocably linked to economic gain for the nation (and yet again fails to examine the possibility that education is really about individual gain in



terms of quality of life) and is unashamedly about justifying a reduction in funding for the university sector, given the significance of work experience highlighted throughout this research, its emphasis on the linkage of work-based vocational learning to higher academic learning can only be welcomed.

In the last six months of the preparation of this thesis there have been several important events which will have an impact on B.A. Educational Studies students of the future. A new government was elected in 2010 which will inevitably lead to changes in educational policy in the near future. Publication of the Browne Review, (DBIS 2010) heralding the demand full fees for undergraduates from 2012, and of the education white paper (DfE 2010), designed to change the landscape of teacher education in England, will both have an effect on the university which has provided the environment for this research. The full impact of these events is still to be seen but they will undoubtedly herald changes to the types and numbers of students recruited in the years to come on Educational Studies programmes at Hull University.

#### Limitations of the research

Throughout the research there has been an awareness of the sample size as being a substantial limitation on the generalisability of the findings. The small sample made it possible to conduct in-depth and targeted research as a lone researcher, but it inevitably has led to the results providing only a snapshot of a particular cohort, rather than a reproducible, robust set of findings which are likely to be replicated across a larger sample. Nevertheless, the study, because of its small size, has allowed certain individuals to be studied in some depth in relation to the key questions and a wide range of factors to be taken into account – pre-entry qualifications, social class background, performance on a degree programme, postgraduate

study and work and the students' own perceptions of the relative merits of their different educational opportunities.

The research has had other limitations in that it was conducted at a single university and very different results could have been obtained at a university with a different history or a different level of status. Equally, the results are clearly tied to Educational Studies students and could well not be reproducible in other curriculum areas. The cohort under investigation was predominantly female and this could also have led to results which have less value in their capacity for generalisation. The decision to remove mature students from the overall final analysis was a difficult one. On the one hand, they provided some very interesting case study data; on the other it was clear that their situation had many more factors at play than for young students, which could have made the results less robust in answering the key questions.

A final limitation was one which was largely unanticipated; this was the effect of students' decisions to intercalate, withdraw or to enter the programme at a later stage with advanced standing. It had been assumed, prior to the research that this would be a very small number of people but it became a sizeable percentage (see Chapter 5) and made the final analysis much more problematic as some interesting case study students 'disappeared' before completion of their degree whilst others, of equal interest, 'arrived' without UCAS data.

Despite these limitations, enough information has been obtained to feel confident that the research has answered the key questions that it set out to answer and has raised some interesting areas for future investigation.

### Future directions

For the cohort of students who form the group under investigation in this research, the recent changes are no longer an issue. They are now graduates with postgraduate lives and careers to follow. This work has charted their progress from before their entry to university through to graduation and has followed some of them beyond this into their working lives. This smaller group have all given their permission to continue to be contacted in future years and it is anticipated that this research will form only the first step in a longitudinal study which will draw together not only information from 16-19 pre-entry study, through to the former students' undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate lives, but will then be able to see whether any of these years of learning and study have had a longer term impact and, if so, what direction this impact has taken.

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Websites:

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BBC News 05/07/07 available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6273082.stm>

BBC News 07/05/07 available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business>

Economist The, Brains Business date 9/10/2005 Volume 376 Issue 8443

Guardian Education Supplement "FE News": Wednesday June 18, 2003

Guardian 23/02/05 available at

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/1419education/story/0,,1423733,00.html>

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Educational Studies Questionnaire

Name:	Code Number: .....
Home address:	.....  .....  .....
Term-time address:	.....  .....  .....
Telephone Number:	

Mobile Number:	
University e-mail:	
Private e-mail:	
Date of Birth:	
Age in years on 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2005:	
I understand the purposes of this research and I am prepared to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
I understand that the research is separate from my degree studies and will have no effect on my studies or my results.	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

<p>I understand that I can withdraw my support at any point in the future.</p>									
<p>Signature:</p> <p>Date:</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>								
<p>Please list all schools and colleges attended (with approximate dates if available):</p>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100%;"> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> <tr><td style="height: 40px;"></td></tr> </table>								
<p>Please list GCSE (or GCE O-level and CSE) results:</p>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; height: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="868 1711 1273 1809">Subject</th> <th data-bbox="1273 1711 1444 1809">Grade</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="868 1809 1273 1908"></td> <td data-bbox="1273 1809 1444 1908"></td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="868 1908 1273 2009"></td> <td data-bbox="1273 1908 1444 2009"></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Subject	Grade					
Subject	Grade								

Please list GCE A-Level results:	Subject	Grade

Please list any other Level 2 results (e.g. CACHE Certificate, GNVQ Intermediate, BEC First Cert and/or Dip, Level 2 NVQ, Foundation Modern Apprenticeship) excluding Key Skills:	Qualification	Grade
Please list any other Level 3 results (e.g. CACHE Diploma, NNEB, GNVQ Advanced, BTEC National Cert. and/or Dip, Level 3 NVQ, Advanced Modern Apprenticeship) excluding Key Skills:	Qualification	Grade
Please list any other Level 4 results (e.g. HNC, HND, Foundation Degree, Open University Award) excluding Key Skills:	Qualification	Grade

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Why did you choose to study Educational Studies?	It was the best degree to get to my final career choice	
	It sounded interesting	
	I thought it would be easy to get in	
	My friends had applied to do it	
	I knew someone who had done it before	
	Other: (please state what):	
Why did you choose to apply to the University of Hull?	It was close to home	
	I thought it would be easy to get in	
	I knew someone who had been there before	
	I liked it at the Open Day	
	I liked it in the prospectus	



	Other: (please state what):	
Which parts of your degree studies to date have you found easiest?	The lectures	
	The reading	
	The presentations	
	The essays	
	The exams	
	Other (Please state what):	
Which parts of your degree studies to date have you found hardest?	The lectures	
	The reading	
	The presentations	
	The essays	
	The exams	

	Other (Please state what):	
What do you hope to do when you finish your degree?	PGCE and schoolteaching	
	Adult Education/Further Education/Prison Education	
	Community Education/ Playwork	
	DipSW and Social Work	
	Don't know	
	Other (Please state):	
Have your ambitions changed whilst you have been at University?	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px 15px;">Yes</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px 15px;">No</div> </div> <p style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">.....</p>	

If "Yes" can you say why?	.....  .....
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Thank you for your help. All data from this questionnaire will be made anonymous before being used in any text.

Please return to Angela Shaw, Room 102 Loten Building, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX

Email: A.Shaw@hull.ac.uk

Tel: 01482 466945

Appendix 2: The Interview Questions

<b>INTERVIEW 1</b>		
<b>Research question</b>	<b>Issue explored and reference to literature</b>	<b>Interview question</b>
<p>Q 6) What are the students' eventual ambitions?</p> <p>. Do these change or stay the same?</p> <p>. If they change, what leads to this?</p>	<p><b>Expectations</b> Were students following a set path when they entered university or have their H.E. experiences changed their views?</p> <p>[Thomas (pp.25-28) <i>Encouraging widening participation</i>; Archer (pp.28-33) <i>student expectations</i>]</p>	<p>What are you doing now that you have left University? Are you enjoying it?</p> <p>Was this what you intended to do when you began your degree?</p> <p>If not, what made you change your mind?</p> <p>How easy/ difficult has your new postgraduate course/ job been?</p>
<p>Q 7) How beneficial had the students' pre-university and university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study/postgraduate study/work?</p>	<p><b>Achievement</b> How has university helped the students to achieve as postgraduates?</p> <p>[Wolf (pp.20-25) <i>The value of education for personal growth</i>]</p> <p><b>Pre entry route</b> What are merits of both vocational and academic entry routes to students upon graduation?</p> <p>[Archer (p. 33 ) <i>The value of vocational education</i>; Livingstone (p. 56 ) <i>Teachers' perceptions of vocational education</i>; Thomas (p.27 ) <i>HE widening participation</i>]</p>	<p>How easy/ difficult has your new postgraduate course/ job been?</p> <p>Has anything you did before (at University or somewhere else) been especially useful or not?</p>

	<p><b>Future prospects</b> Had the combination of pre-entry study and H.E. study changed students' expectations and ambitions?</p> <p>[Archer (p.32) <i>Social class, ambition and employability</i>; Thomas (pp.25-28) <i>The need for widening participation</i>]</p>	Where do you hope to be in a couple of years?
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<b>INTERVIEW 2</b>		
<b>Research question</b>	<b>Issue explored and reference to literature</b>	<b>Interview question</b>
Q 1) What kinds of students are enrolled for an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?	<p><b>Family background:</b> How does family background underpin personal educational ambition and the decision to go to a particular university?</p> <p>[Jovchelovitch 2007 (p.54) <i>Social class in Britain</i>; Bourdieu and Passeron (p.30) <i>Cultural capital and habitus</i>; Archer (p.31) <i>Parental attitudes to education linked to social class</i>]</p>	<p>Do you think a person's home background is important in Britain these days? Why/why not?</p> <p>What sort of home background would you say you were from? (To be explored through additional questions about parental education/ employment etc)</p> <p>Did your parents or any other close relatives go to University?</p>
Q 2) Why do students apply to do an Educational Studies degree at the University of Hull?	<p><b>Widening participation:</b> How does family background affect student responses to national WP initiatives?</p> <p>[Archer (pp.30-33) <i>Social class links to parental</i></p>	<p>Did your family expect you to go? Why do you think that was?</p> <p>How did they encourage/discourage you?</p>

	<p><i>expectations;</i></p> <p>Thomas (pp.25-28) &amp; Archer (pp.29-32) <i>WP for national economic growth or personal fulfilment;</i></p> <p>Abrams (p.45) Halsey (p.44) Kearney (p.47) <i>Historical links between educational aspirations and social background]</i></p> <p><b>School influences:</b> How far do teachers have pre-determined ideas about which courses suit working class/middle class pupils?</p> <p>[Livingstone (p.56) <i>Teachers discouraging working class children from high ambitions]</i></p> <p><b>Choice of university:</b> How far does family background affect university choices for students? [Archer (p.32) <i>Working class perceptions re hierarchy of universities]</i></p>	<p>What do you think that your parents and teachers would say was the purpose of higher education?</p> <p>Did your teachers encourage you to go to university?</p> <p>How did they advise you after GCSEs?</p> <p>Did you consider lots of Universities when you were making your choice? Were some of them very prestigious Universities? If so, why did you not apply there? How did you make your choice in the end?</p>
<p>Q5) Do students with different entry profiles perform differently on the degree?</p>	<p><b>Social Class:</b> [Jovchelovitch (p.54) <i>Social class in Britain and links to education</i></p> <p>Bernstein (p56) <i>Elaborate and restricted codes of language]</i></p>	<p>Have you come across issues relating to people's background at university? If yes, can you give an example?</p> <p>How did you find the language used by your lecturers at University? Was it the same as language at home, or was it different? Did you ever feel that the</p>

		language used was a challenge? If yes, can you give an example?
<p>Q 6) What are the students' eventual ambitions?  . Do these change or stay the same?  . If they change, what leads to this?</p>	<p><b>Family background:</b>  How does family background affect ambition, progress and achievement in higher education and beyond it?</p> <p><b>Educational Provision:</b>  Did university change the student and their perspective on life?</p> <p>[Wolf (pp.20-24) <i>Education for national economic gain or personal growth;</i></p>	<p>Do you think your background has affected how you have progressed through your education and life in general?  If so how?</p> <p>How do you feel about the purposes of the education that you have received from your point of view and from your parents and/or teachers point of view?</p> <p>What do you think is the government's viewpoint?  Why do you think they encourage people to go to University?</p> <p>Have you changed much as a result of going to university?  If so, how?</p>
<p>Q 7) How beneficial had the students' pre-university and university experiences been in preparing them for undergraduate study/ postgraduate study/ work?</p>	<p><b>Choice of university:</b>  How do students see the benefit of education at a particular university?  Archer (p.30)  Pratt (p.51)  <i>Graduate employability – working class perceptions]</i></p> <p><b>Pre entry route:</b>  Did pre-entry study help the students in university and beyond it in postgraduate study and work?  [Archer (p.30)  <i>Vocational education as "second best" in comparison</i></p>	<p>Do you think being a graduate of the University of Hull has been useful in getting a good job?</p> <p>Would it have been easier to get a job if you were to have gone to a different University?</p> <p>If yes, can you give an example of such a University?</p> <p>What did your pre H.E. entry route prepare you for? Did it help you at University? Was it a help now that you are working?</p>

	<p><i>to an academic entry route]</i></p> <p><b>The potential outcomes of H.E.</b>  Is expansion of higher education driven by a need to meet the national interest or about personal growth?</p> <p>[Wolf (pp.20-24)  <i>National interest or personal interest?</i></p> <p>Thomas (pp.25-28)  <i>Widening participation – who benefits and how?]</i></p>	<p>In essence, can you sum up why you wanted to go to University?</p> <p>Are you glad that you made the choices that you did in terms of your education? If you could change anything now, what would it be?</p>
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Appendix 3: The University of Hull Admissions Project

This project examined the offers made to vocationally qualified applicants across the institution during a two year period. The quantitative data was provided centrally:

**Table 1: Offers made to vocationally qualified applicants**

Academic Session	Department	NVQ Lev.4 *	ONC/OND inc BTEC and SCOTVEC
2003/2004	Business School		8
	Educational Studies		5
	Criminology and Soc.Studies		5
	Biological Sciences		4
	Computer Science		3
	Engineering	1	5
	Geography		1
	Modern Languages		1
	Physical Sciences		6
	Psychology		2
	Sport, Health and Exercise	2	7
	Health and Soc. Care	2	10
	Humanities		3
Scarborough School of Arts		12	
Grand Total		5	144

Source: University of Hull July HESA returns. Provided by the Strategic Development Unit, the University of Hull, December 2005.

Notes: \*NVQ level 4 is one level ABOVE the level required for entry by standard A-Level candidates

This data was used as base data and then Admissions Tutors were contacted individually to complete a questionnaire about their understanding of Level 3 vocational qualifications:

**Table 2: Admissions Tutors Questionnaire**

<b>Admissions at the University of Hull</b>					
Your Name:		Email:		Tel. ext:	
Faculty					
Department					
Course/s for which you are Admissions Tutor (if more than 4 please append a second questionnaire)	<u>Course 1</u>	<u>Course 2</u>	<u>Course 3</u>	<u>Course 4</u>	
<b>In the following boxes please simply delete 'Yes' or 'No' to give the correct answer</b>					
Do you accept A-Level entrants?					
Do you accept BTEC National Certificate entrants who have no other qualification?					
Do you accept BTEC National Diploma entrants who have no other qualification?					
Do you accept entrants with NVQs at level 3 or above who have no other qualification?					
Do you accept entrants with Advanced Modern Apprenticeships who have no other qualification?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining an A-Level qualification?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining a BTEC National Certificate?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining a BTEC National Diploma?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining an NVQ?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining an Advanced Modern Apprenticeship?					
Do you know what is involved in gaining Key Skills?					

Do you accept entrants with any other qualifications? If so, please could you specify what these are with an approximate indication of what percentage of the course intake they represent.		

Where anomalous results were obtained from the questionnaires this was followed up with a brief telephone interview for clarification.

The data were collected initially from the University Strategic Development Unit (Table 1) to show how many students were recruited from vocational backgrounds, as opposed to traditional A-Level backgrounds, in each department. Admissions Tutors were then contacted across the University and asked to complete a questionnaire (Table 2) to try to establish their level of knowledge and understanding about different vocational qualifications.

Significantly Table 1 does not include any information at all on NVQ 3 entrants or modern apprentices, despite the fact that these two routes have large numbers of potential applicants within them. When asked why these groups were not within the statistics the answer from the Strategic Development Unit was that it was assumed that they were “too insignificantly small to count”. As the presented data contain several columns in which only one entrant is shown, this suggests that for NVQ and modern apprenticeship entrants the figure is less than one person. This was despite the fact that in the year in which the data was collected there were 255,000 apprentices training in England (Petrie 2006) which represents a huge untapped pool of adequately qualified people who are not currently accessing higher education.

Initially all 43 Admissions Tutors of undergraduate programmes, identified by the Admissions Office, were approached to ask for a response to the questionnaire. One Tutor refused to do so on the grounds that the research itself was spurious as there were no opportunities for Admissions Tutors to make independent judgements, explaining that the admissions process at the university is entirely procedural with well publicised criteria being applied and no room for arbitrary personal judgement. This point was well made and was further investigated by telephoning several Admissions Tutors about the reality of the application of the procedure to see if the Tutor who would not participate was correct. The reality that was revealed in these conversations was that the majority of Admissions Tutors made daily judgements about applications based largely upon their own knowledge and understanding of vocational qualifications, rather than strictly via the published criteria.

The published criteria were then examined and it was found that in many cases they were either vague or covered such a wide range that even within them there was a lot of room for personal judgement. Nevertheless it needs to be acknowledged that one department refused to be represented in the data collected. In the end ten questionnaires were returned, representing 52 degree programmes in all the faculties across the University other than the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences was unique in that it had a single Admissions Tutor for all its 170 degree courses and this Tutor was well versed in understanding a very wide range of qualifications. After discussions with the Admissions Tutor for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences it was decided to leave them out of the analysis as such a high figure would either provide over-representation or under-representation of any data and would make it impossible to reach any meaningful conclusions.

The responses to the questionnaires showed some interesting anomalies. A-Levels were universally accepted as may be expected. The data for BTEC qualifications, however, was surprising as it showed that BTEC National Certificate and BTEC National Diploma qualifications were accepted equally. This raised an interesting question as the former is equivalent to two A-Levels and the latter to three A-Levels. At a staff development event at the University in 2006 some Admissions Tutors were unaware that the BTEC National Certificate could be studied as a full-time one year course and had all presumed that it was only available as a part-time qualification for those in work (whilst this is indeed its primary function, more and more colleges are now offering the National Certificate as a full-time option). The exact match of the data for the two forms of BTEC level 3 qualification does beg the question, then, as to whether some staff were unaware of the difference between the qualifications. The most interesting data collected, however, related to the finding that more Admissions Tutors said that they would accept NVQ 3 than would accept an Advanced Modern Apprenticeship. As the NVQ 3 forms a part of an Advanced Modern Apprenticeship, and is inevitably embedded within it, this was a serious misconception. In addition to this anomaly the responses overall suggested that the natural bias afforded to those holding apprenticeship qualifications (Shaw 2007) was still operative.

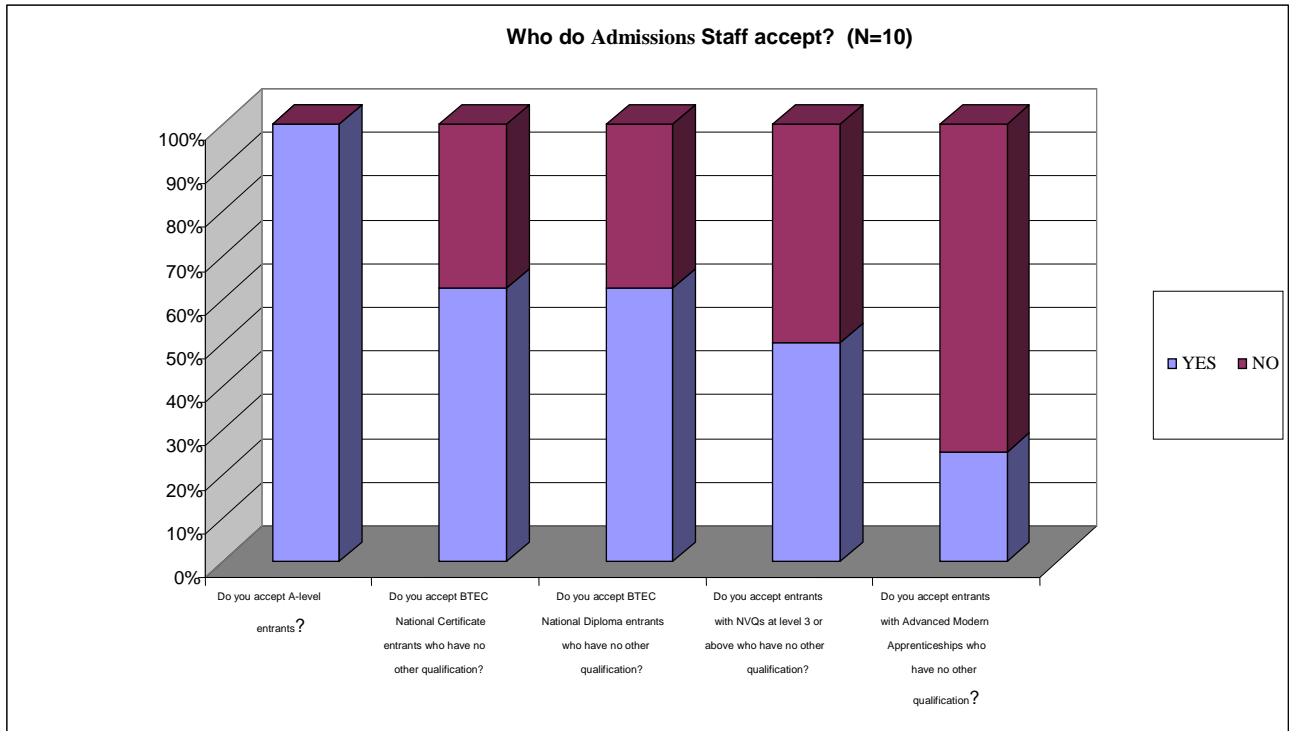
The data provided showing which qualifications Admissions Tutors felt most confident about were most interesting when considered alongside those which they most readily accept for entry to their programmes. There is a clear match between those qualifications which Admissions Tutors feel that they understand and those that they will most readily accept, thus bearing out what Connor *et al.* (2006) identified as a key problem, namely that there is a vicious circle of admissions processes wherein Admissions Tutors have almost always entered higher education themselves via an academic route (and almost never via NVQs or an

Apprenticeship) and are therefore much more inclined to accept these qualifications with which they are more familiar. The final question to Admissions Tutors related to their knowledge about Key Skills as this is the area which many Modern Apprentices fail when undertaking their apprenticeship (an Advanced Modern Apprenticeship demands that students complete an NVQ 3 and their Key Skills and, often, a Technical Certificate as well) (Shaw 2007, Wolf 2002) This question was included in order to see how far Admissions Tutors at Hull were aware of the demands of Key Skills in the light of their readiness to accept A-Levels, which do not demand Key Skill attainment, and their reluctance to accept Modern Apprenticeships which do demand key Skill attainment. The data showed that only a small minority of Admissions Tutors knew anything about Key Skills and this could perhaps be significant in the overall picture of their reluctance to accept Modern Apprentices to higher education.

The outcome of the project was that whilst in some areas there was a reasonable understanding of some vocational qualifications, for example BTEC Nationals, in other areas there was almost no understanding of non-traditional entry routes.

In terms of which qualifications were accepted, the data shown in Figure. 1 were obtained:

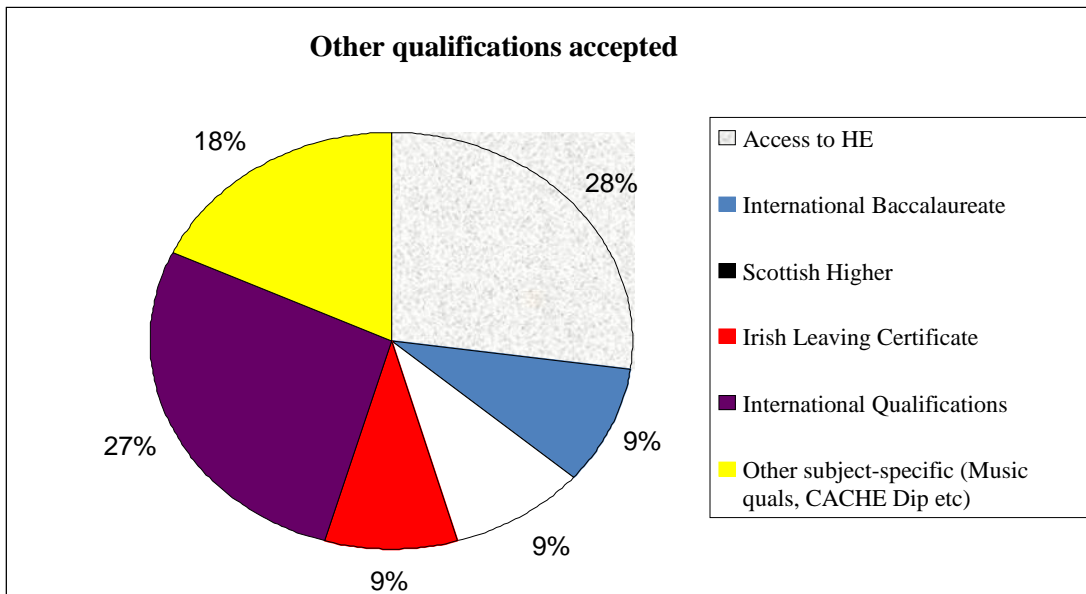
**Figure 1: Entrants accepted by Admissions Tutors:**



The questionnaire asked Admissions Tutors for a breakdown of “other qualifications” which they would accept. The results (Figure 2) show that Access to Higher Education (HE) programmes are the most widely accepted at 28%, with international qualifications also figuring highly at 27%.

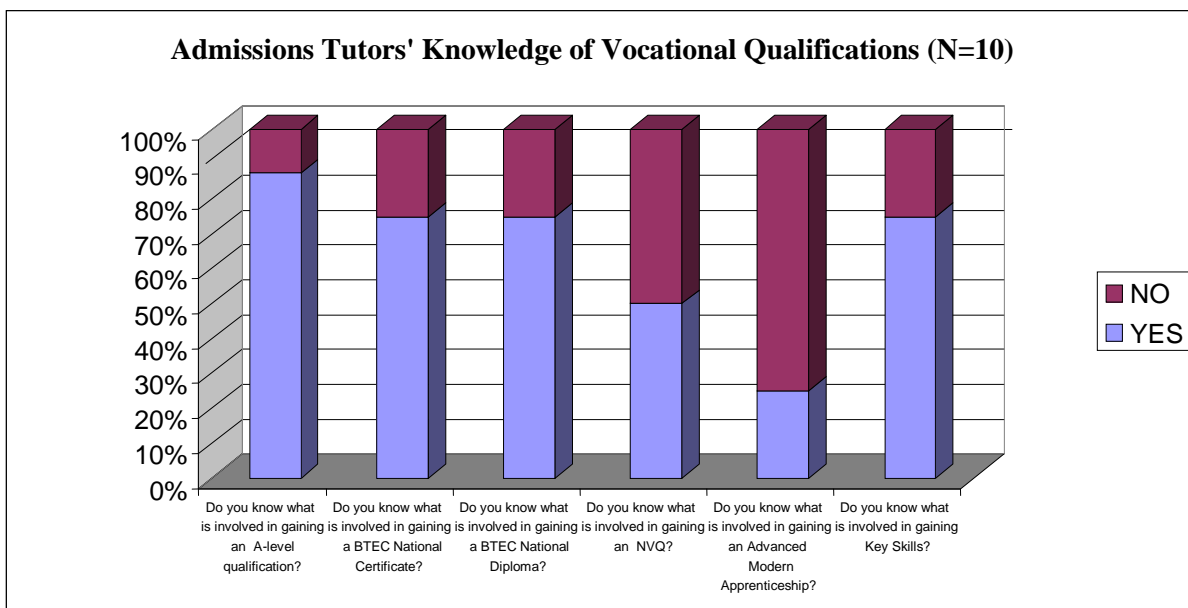


**Figure 2: Other qualifications accepted**



Finally, the data relating to Admissions Tutors' knowledge of what is involved in qualifications demanded for entry was investigated and the results are shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Admissions Tutors' knowledge of Vocational Qualifications**



The resultant data suggests that there is a widespread lack of understanding amongst Admissions Tutors at the University of Hull about the content and nature of vocational qualifications. Of greatest concern is the lack of knowledge of apprenticeships with eight out of ten Admissions Tutors admitting that they knew nothing about them. As these eight Admissions Tutors control admissions to over 30 different degree programmes with several hundred applicants per programme, this is an area of considerable concern.

### References

Connor H. Sinclair E. Banerji N. (2006) *Progressing to Higher Education: Vocational Qualifications and Admissions* Action on Access, Ormskirk, UK

Petrie S (2006) *Apprenticeships and Work Based Learning* Learning and Skills Council, Coventry

Shaw, A. (2007) *What Price Plumbing? Popular perceptions and misperceptions affecting vocational education* Journal of Access Policy and Practice Vol.4,(2). pp157-172,

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* Penguin, London

#### Appendix 4: The Aim Higher Project

The Aim higher Project was focused on Motor Vehicle Apprentices studying at level 3 at a FEC in the county adjoining the University of Hull. The project identified 12 young people who wished to continue into HE, at the University of Hull, when they completed their Level 3 apprenticeship.

The project interviewed apprentices who were about to complete their training, their employers and their tutors; it also liaised with the Motor Vehicle Sector Skills Council to ascertain the national view. The responses were very clear and what emerged from the project findings was the enthusiasm of the Apprentices, their employers and their tutors for them to continue but when their responses were examined some key factors emerged in relation to the promotion of higher education as a goal for vocational learners, their ability to access a suitable programme of study and the University's assumptions about them as a group.

In the first instance only 57% of employers were aware of Foundation Degrees or their apprentices' ability to access them. A lack of marketing to employers and their apprentices was based on the assumption that the employers would not want them to continue into HE, yet when questioned they responded with comments such as "I want him to do the course, he is very capable, every capable person should get the chance of University" (McAndrew and Shaw 2006 Annex 1). Any doubts that Apprentices would find the prospect of study at undergraduate level unattractive were dispelled by the answers given by the young men surveyed; with responses such as: "I am up for any kind of studying, anything that means I can progress" and "It sounds ace" (*ibid.* Annex 2) What did emerge clearly from the

responses was that many of the Apprentices were keen to progress, their employers were equally keen for them to progress but they needed information about possible options and a programme of study which was flexible enough to meet both industry needs and individual needs.

Reference:

McAndrew J. and Shaw A. (2006) Developing Progression Routes from work-based learning into Higher Education *The development of a Pilot higher level Apprenticeship Scheme in Automotive Technologies: A Report on the work of the Project for the University of Hull*