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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON
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**A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DROP-OUT
IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION CONTEXT**

by

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Doctor of Philosophy

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy

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by M.G. Page

This research represents a systematic investigation and analysis of student drop-out in a college of Further Education. Traditionally, this aspect of post-compulsory education has been under-researched. Colleges are beginning to recognise the benefits of curriculum research. While there remains a certain amount of hostility towards such non-traditional activity, such research resistance, in its institutional context forms part of the discussion within the thesis.

Student drop-out has been defined as premature withdrawal from a course of study. The investigation focused on the experiences of drop-outs while they attended college, their school history, their family relationships and their personal explanations for leaving College. A multiple strategy method (loose triangulation) was used to gather information about drop-outs and these data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Further Education, and especially the recent changes brought about by 'incorporation' of Colleges under the aegis of 'market forces' has formed the context for the research field. The research identified several significant factors relative to student retention. The most significant being the mismatch between the prior expectations of prospective students with the reality encountered once their course commences. Other barriers to successful completion were also identified, the most significant of which was the attitude of teachers at the drop-out's previous school. Family relationships were also found to be instrumental in student completion.

Four types of drop-out have been identified:

1. the **early drop-out**, who enrolled on the wrong course,
2. the **opportunist drop-out**, who came to College because they had nothing better to do at the time,
3. the **consumer drop-out**, who buys a course (usually skills based) and leaves when they are satisfied that they have learnt enough,
4. the **life crisis drop-out**, who is the victim of accident, ill health or misfortune.

The empirical evidence collected during this research contradicts the commonly accepted view that drop-outs are a 'drain' on society. It is shown that the word 'drop-out' has developed a power of its own and is employed in the social control of students.

The research concludes that student retention can be improved and course completion rates increase. When monitoring procedures adequately reflect the real number of students dropping out, coupled with prevention methods which recognise the need for better pre-enrolment guidance, and meaningful intervention to reclaim these lost students and re-direct their studies, drop-out could become a phenomenon of the past.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

A/AS	General Certificate of Education, advanced and advanced supplementary examinations
AE	Adult Education
ALBSU	Adult literacy and basic skills unit
APL	Assessment of prior achievement/learning
BPCFE	Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CGLI	City and Guilds of London Institute
CQI	Continuous quality improvement
CRE	Commission for Racial Equality
D of E	Department of the Environment
DASH	Dorset Association of Secondary Heads
DCC	Dorset County Council
DE	Department of Employment
DEBP	Dorset Education Business Partnership
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education (previously known as DES)
DLE	Demand led element
DSS	Department of Social Security
EC/EU	European Community/European Union
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELS	English language support
EOC	Equal Opportunities Commission
EPOC	Employers perception of college
ERA	Education Reform Act 1988
ESL	English as a second language
ET	Employment training
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FERA	Further Education Research Association
FEU	Further Education Unit (now FEDA, Further Education Development Agency)

Flexistudy	A self study course supported by tutorial
FT	Full-time
FTE	Full-time equivalent
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
GES sample	General Education and Science sample
HE	Higher Education
HMI	Her Majesties Inspectorate
HoD	Head of Department
HRD	Human Resource Development
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
ISR	Individualised Student Record
IT	Information Technology
LLMI	Local Labour Market Intelligence
LMI	Labour Market Information
MEd	Master of Education
MOA	Mode of Attendance
MSC	Manpower Services Commission. A Body Established Under the Employment and Training Act 1973, now known as TEED
NACETT	National Advisory Council for Education and Training
NATFHE	National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
NTET	National targets for education and training
NUS	National Union of Students
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
OTSOG	On the Shoulders of Giants
OU	Open University
PI	Performance Indicator
PISA	Publication of information about student achievement
PT	Part-time
PTR	Pupil teacher ratio
QA	Quality assurance
RBL	Resource based learning

ROA	Record of achievement
RSA	Royal Society of Arts
SEN	Special educational needs
SIXTH form	Schools concentrating on pupils aged 16-19
SL	Senior Lecturer
SPOC	Student perception of College
SSR	Student-staff ratio
SSS	Snap shot sample, from all vocational departments
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
TES	Times Educational Supplement
THES	Times Higher Educational Supplement
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative
TVEX	Technical and Vocational Education Extension
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WEA	Workers' Educational Association

INTRODUCTION

1. This study comprises a research investigation and analysis of the characteristics, form and meaning of student drop-out in a College of Further Education.

Student drop-out is a ubiquitous problem, identified as a source of wastage from educational institutions all around the world. Although statistics vary considerably from one country to another, due mainly to differences in the way drop-out has been defined, it is a persistent phenomenon which in Britain accounts for between 30-80% of all post-compulsory student outcomes. Such alarmingly high non-completion rates cannot be ignored any longer, and the new post-incorporation Colleges are having to address the issues of student retention, in a way they have never before been required to do.

2. Colleges of Further Education form just one segment of the post-compulsory education sector, there are also school sixth forms and many independent training providers. Colleges, especially the one at the centre of this study, can offer a breadth of educational opportunity matched by no other school or training institution. Their very size and accumulation of expertise situates them most favourably in the newly competitive world of education where students have become customers, learning the product, and everyone has to be given choices. The philosophy of 'market' forces which now propels education has generated considerable competition between the various providers of learning within the community.
3. One result of this competition is that more students are being recruited, while simultaneously teaching resources have decreased in relative terms. The projected increase in student numbers for the College in this study is 25% over three years, accompanied by a 12% increase in resources. Inevitably, this results in a per capita decrease in funding.
4. This study has no evidence to link drop-out directly with funding, but there is some tangential evidence which suggests that there is an age-related homeostatic

mechanism at work within the College which limits the number of students in any given age range. This finding may be class-size related.

5. The new identity of Further Education Colleges since incorporation remains unclear. Employers, school teachers and to some extent the general public, have unrealistic expectations of what Further Education Colleges can now provide. The old image of the 'technical' college where non-academic youngsters went to train for jobs based on the needs of local industry has not yet been supplanted by the reality that Further Education Colleges provide courses ranging in most subjects from academic studies including GCSE and A level through a full range of vocational training up to undergraduate courses run in association with the local University.
6. This study has highlighted evidence which suggests that for drop-outs, prior expectations about College and the learning experience are incorrect. This mismatch of expectation with the reality encountered by the student when they start their course was the most consistent feature reported upon in this study and shows the need for improved information and guidance for all prospective students.
7. Drop-out can be defined in many different ways; for the purposes of this investigation a drop-out will be defined as any student who enrolled on a course at the College, for which they were deemed to be suitably qualified, who subsequently leaves before the course is completed.
8. The research design involved a loose form of triangulation which effectively overcame the shortcomings inherent to each separate method. Two drop-out populations were identified. These were the GES and SSS samples. Two other corroborating data sets were also identified. The 'oblique' sample comprised respondents who knew drop-outs but were not one themselves, such as parents, lecturers, teachers. These people provided insightful information relating to the drop-out experience, producing a rich source of data. The 'supplementary' data set was collected from documentary sources such as internal College publications, DFE papers and FEFC circulars, news items and other media sources.

9. (i) The complete research design can be summarised as follows:
- (a) A self-administered questionnaire was sent to the two drop-out populations.
 - (b) A telephone follow-up interview was used to interrogate a self-selected sample of respondents from the first survey.
 - (c) Non-respondents were identified and indexed. This index was used to select a sub-sample for 'conversion'. These individuals were telephoned and interviewed.
 - (d) Face-to-face interviews were conducted with respondents from the 'oblique' sample.
 - (e) Relevant 'supplementary' data was collected from documentary sources.
- (ii) These five separate methods yielded a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data which were used in a reciprocal, complementary manner to inform praxis. Numeric data was analysed statistically. Narrative data was subjected to a search for meaning which emerged under three separate conditions: immediate understanding, prompted understanding and translated understanding.
- (iii) A Structural analysis provided a 'map' pin-pointing the areas which could most fruitfully become the focus of the investigation. Functional analysis provided a language which formed the classification terminology. These data were sub-divided using cladistics as a method of organising different narratives into clades with similar properties. Rigour was ensured by the representativeness and replicability of these data, not in the purely scientific understanding of these terms but in their social usage, where replicability was determined by the saturation point of these data and representativeness was determined by the narratives giving a sufficiently complete explanation for the purposes of this study.
- (iv) The use of narrative (qualitative) data supported by numeric (quantitative) information helped overcome the difficulty inherent in a scientific study of people which is necessarily subjective. This objective-subjective dilemma

became problematic for two reasons. Firstly, my own background as a scientist, trained me to reject subjectivity as being akin to falsehood. This generated an internal struggle. The battle was won when I acknowledged that my understanding of student withdrawal was constructed by me, and only catalysed by the drop-outs. I was as much a part of the research process as they were. The second part of the dilemma was presented by the novelty of education (particularly FE) as a research field.

10. Education has no well established paradigms to govern its research processes. Every new research undertaking necessarily then, has to discover and justify its own methods. Without a guiding tradition, this research accepted the inevitability of a subjective analysis and was able to justify this as a logical and acceptable formula, within the given context.
11. Traditionally, Further Education has been an under-researched area. This is beginning to change as post-incorporation Colleges recognise the potential value of research activities. Market and funding driven research have at present more forceful claims than curriculum enhancement. The competitive nature of education today has resulted in the supremacy of re-active research over pro-active research: this goes some way towards explaining the lag in curriculum enhancement investigations.
12. Some staff felt threatened by this research. This was exacerbated by the dual aspects of my polyvalent position within the College hierarchy and my being a woman. Polyvalent occupations are relatively new, but not uncommon; they involve taking on several quite different yet equally demanding tasks at one time.
13. Women have a gendered consciousness. This study therefore was conducted from a feminist point of view, because it was impossible for me to disavow my own womanhood. The prevailing management style in the College is highly competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal. Equality measures have allowed women to participate and all explicit barriers to equality have been demolished, except that barrier constructed by social expectations of gender roles. These role expectations dictate that women are not scientists and they are not researchers. Against this

backdrop it is not difficult to understand that the environment in which this research was undertaken was hostile. Fortunately, support was provided from colleagues without whose encouragement this work would never have been completed.

14. In spite of the hostility, this research generated a lot of interest in College. The purpose of the study was to frame theory which would explain student drop-out. When the work was started, this was an item of curiosity, but immediately after incorporation it became an imperative. Student retention was suddenly a performance indicator upon which Colleges would be funded. This research therefore has been written for a multiple audience and, as such, audience demand has to be acknowledged because it influences not only the way in which the work was written but also to some extent the way in which the work was conducted.
15. Part of this research was also written for the drop-outs themselves, as my token of the expectations implicit to "potlatch" [an archaic form of exchange in which the gift of the donor is exceeded by the gifts of the recipient]. For all those respondents who talked to me I have allowed them to speak through me, to others, especially those in authority. By bringing their stories, their narratives to the attention of those who would normally never have the opportunity to listen, I have kept my part of the "potlatch" bargain. I trust I have represented their case convincingly and without distortion.
16. The empirical evidence in this study contradicts the commonly accepted notions that link drop-out with criminal behaviour, unemployment and a drain on the resources of society. It has shown that the word "drop-out" has a power of its own and that the word is used as a deterrent to encourage other students to persist with their studies, building upon the fear of being labelled deviant.
17. Four different kinds of drop-out have been identified. The first is the early drop-out who enrolled on the wrong course. The second is the opportunist drop-out, who came to College because they had nothing better to do and were waiting for some opportunity to present itself; as soon as it does, they leave. The third type of drop-out never engages with the College in a student role. They are the

consumer drop-out. When they enrol on a course they are buying a product. They leave their course when in their terms, they are satisfied and consider their learning to be complete. This consumer values competence above certification, and therefore has no need to stay until the end or to sit a final examination. The fourth type of drop-out is the most difficult to predict and almost impossible to prevent, it is the life crisis drop-out. These people are the victims of accidents or ill-health or misfortune.

18. The evidence which gave rise to these four theories of student drop-out has been given both a feminist and a Christian reading. The feminist reading identified the tensions inherent to the organisation within which the research took place. The Christian reading has shown a way forward, through reconciliation; the vertical integration strategy. This involves uniting administrators and academics in an effort to combine the disparate activities of enrolment, teaching, and examination entry, involving as they do all the subsidiary activities associated with student recruitment and learning support.
19. Other barriers to successful completion were also identified during this research, the most prominent of which was the effect of the drop-out's previous school. Some schools were found to produce disproportionately large numbers of College drop-outs and the investigations revealed that in such cases staff at these schools had little or no knowledge about College, nor did they value what Colleges could offer; in such cases these schools were deemed to be dysfunctional.
20. Family relationships were also found to be instrumental in student outcome. Two significant but puzzling findings emerged; none of the drop-outs in this study was an only child, and most of the mature drop-outs lived with their parents in the family home. Divorce was the only family characteristic recognised as a dysfunctional feature presented by the evidence. In many cases drop-outs had the full support of their families when they made their decision to leave College, suggesting that there was a latent function operating, perhaps in its static form, prior to withdrawal.
21. Student retention will be improved when its underlying causes have been

recognised and removed. While College staff continue to believe in the 'deficit model' of student drop-out, they will also continue to place the full responsibility for leaving on the student. Current practice grossly under-estimates the true scale of the problem and completely ignores the reasons for students' withdrawal. Meaningful intervention is required at all levels, beginning with prevention. Student goals and ambitions, their reasons for enrolment, must be taken into account when they are being guided into courses. Their decisions should be based on sound information, accurately portrayed through the College's marketing material. Intervention and recovery are also crucial to retention. Personal tutors and lecturers are the pivot on which the dissatisfied student can turn their learning in a more favourable direction. Finally, if drop-outs could be identified earlier, they could be retrieved, not just given a return ticket to the course they left, but carefully counselled and encouraged to explore all their options, including the right to leave College.

CHAPTER ONE
STUDENT DROP-OUT: THE BIG PICTURE

"they yearn for facts, they search for their meanings, they want the 'big picture' in which they can believe and within which they can come to understand themselves"

[Wright Mills, 1966 p.17]

1. The Design

This study is an investigation of student drop-out in the post-compulsory education sector. The study centred on one particular College of FE situated on the South Coast of England: The Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education. It commenced in 1991, and the data gathering process was completed in 1995. During this research period FE experienced some highly significant changes, not least of which was incorporation. At the outset, the design was both comprehensive and systematic, although the true scale of the phenomenon had never been measured. The purpose of the investigation was to produce a theoretical framework for the understanding of student drop-out which could be used to inform future strategic planning, retaining more students and ultimately improving learning outcomes.

2. The Definition

A College drop-out is any student who has enrolled on a course, for which they were suitably qualified, who then leaves before the completion of that course.

It is usual for FE courses to have final examinations, especially in the academic areas of GCSE, AS and A-level. This picture has changed somewhat during the course of this research with the implementation of NVQ programmes which are assessed on performance indicators either evidenced in the workplace or in a simulated working environment, some NVQ's still carry a final examination, but most of the credits accumulate as a result of continuous assessment. Because it is difficult to define when an NVQ student withdraws or fails, simply because there is no time limit on these qualifications, it has made defining

NVQ drop-out difficult. An NVQ student may appear to have dropped-out, but may suddenly re-emerge some time later and successfully complete; there is nothing in the regulations currently, which prevents them from doing this.

GNVQ's comprise a mixture of the two regimes, continuous assessment and terminal examination. There is a time limit on GNVQ courses (nominally, five years but in practice, two) which makes drop-out identification a little simpler.

Other courses, especially those which are internally assessed, may not have any NVQ or equivalent attached, these are usually skills based courses, and students qualify on attendance and skills performance. These courses are especially problematic in relation to drop-out identification, since a student who enrolls to learn a specific skill, and does so in less time than the duration of the course, may then choose to leave, having accomplished what they set out to achieve. Should they be classified as a drop-out?

3. The Terminology

The terminology is problematic. Throughout this study I will use the term 'drop-out' exactly as it has been defined. However, other terms are currently in use and their meanings have subtle differences which need to be examined. 'Withdrawn', 'early leaver', 'absentee', 'non-completion', these terms suggest that students have deliberately removed themselves from College, while 'excluded', 'rejected', 'asked to leave', suggest that students have been lacking in some respect and have been advised to go. Other authors have also encountered this ambiguous terminology, eg Barber and McClellan (1987). There are other words ascribed to drop-outs such as 'disaffected', 'disengaged', 'alienated' and 'at-risk' (Finn 1991), which attempt to encapsulate the causes of drop-out. The one thing that all these terms have in common is their negativity.

FEFC has defined a measure which is both precise and non-judgemental, it refers to 'Exit' by a drop-out student and is defined as :-

"before a student has completed his or her scheduled education and training and before achieving the qualification aim of the programme".

[FEFC 1992, p.18]

This definition begins to answer the previous question, is a student to be classified as a drop-out, if they have gained the skills on offer in a course and then leave prior to it ending. If they have achieved their qualification aim, then they are not a drop-out. Qualifying the terminology and defining the qualification aim in terms that would satisfy both the student and the funding bodies has not yet been resolved, because qualification 'aim' is still defined in terms of certification rather than competence.

Lanier (1949, p.205) defined drop-out as "any student dropped from the roll and terminating his schooling for that semester on his own volition". This definition deliberately excludes people who have moved away or who have experienced crisis such as ill health or injury. This early definition is so value-laden that it could not usefully be adopted for this research, but never-the-less it does provide a reflective aid to the consideration of the way in which drop-out is discussed. Two obstacles were identified, one was the pre-supposition that drop-out was self motivated the other was the exclusion of life crisis/change drop-outs. In this study the latter categories of people have given valuable insights into the more general phenomenon of student drop-out without centering the study on the personal disposition of the individuals concerned.

Finally, another 'loose' definition of a drop-out has been provided by BTEC (Smith and Bailey 1992, p.1) which says that "Although it is not usual for (students) to leave a programme with nothing to show for their work - some students do leave before the end for a variety of reasons".

This is an interesting definition, especially the term 'with nothing to show'. Once again the emphasis is on certification, in terms of completed modules of work. It is difficult to imagine any student coming to College, for however brief a time, not gaining something from that experience. Measuring the 'something' although difficult, is a feature of this research.

4. Drop-out: On a Global Scale

Globally, estimates of student drop-out vary from 12% to over 80% depending on the country of origin for the statistics. The US Census Bureau estimates drop-out in America

to be 27% (Woodring 1989) or 25% (Hess 1986, Kunisawa 1988), while in India the estimated figure for student drop-out is 76% (Pangotra 1986), in rural China the drop-out rate is 12% (Weizhi and Benxiang 1989), while the African drop-out rate has been estimated by UNESCO as 40% (Wood, Swan and Wood 1986).

None of these figures say much about the drop-outs, they are simply a measure of the phenomenon. The manner of their collection, the definitions used and the precision achieved vary enormously from one data set to another. This inherent ambiguity casts doubt upon the findings, effectively preventing comparative analysis. However, they do show the problem to be ubiquitous and sufficiently large to be taken seriously.

Other studies have shown that drop-out tends to vary according to ethnicity (Hess 1986, Georgeoff 1989), gender (Mann 1986), academic ability (Cook 1956, Lloyd 1976), and socio-economic status (Mann 1986).

One study suggested that a large percentage of gifted students drop-out (Green 1962). Green gives this figure as 18% but this is questioned by Irvine (1987) who says :-

"In spite of the prevalence of the 18% figure, there seems to have been little effort to verify it ... therefore the question remains: how many school drop-outs are gifted?"

The term 'gifted' is ambiguous today, many psychometric and IQ tests have been discredited while raw examination scores are also thought to be an inadequate representation of ability. Despite these difficulties, this study took previous examination achievement as an ability indicator, because this was easily accessible, accurate information, from these data it will be possible to gauge the percentage of well qualified (if not gifted) students who drop-out of College.

Other anomalies appear in the literature on drop-out. Pregnancy, especially among young teenagers is a common feature, Kunisawa (1988, p.61) says that "87% of pregnant teenagers are high school drop-outs" while Roosa (1986) quantifies the problem (in America) as 500 000 births to adolescent Mothers annually.

Unemployment is addressed as a consequence of dropping-out, again Kunisawa (1988)

points out that 52% of all American drop-outs are currently either unemployed or in receipt of welfare benefits.

National reports vary considerably, and focus upon different problems each according to their predominant (usually economic) needs. The World's population is rapidly increasing and education will have to expand to meet this increase. Wood et al (1986) predict that the large-scale expansion of education will not keep pace with predicted population growth, particularly in the developing Countries of the World, simply because educational resources are limited. Given this outlook, drop-out becomes an economic issue rather than a personal decision. Conrath (1986, p.46) takes this market economics approach to its logical consumerism conclusion when he says "30% of our (students) have sampled the product and have rejected it".

5. Drop-out: On a National Scale

The AUDIT Commission (1993, p.2) in its report on student drop-out from post-compulsory education said that "non-completion of courses is a source of significant waste in 16-19 education. Non-completion rates average about 13% for A-level courses and 18% for vocational courses, but on some individual courses in particular institutions, non-completion reaches as high as 80%". They go on to explain that the cost to the Nation is approximately £500 million per year. The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, while not exactly contradicting these figures, give a much higher 30% as the A-level drop-out rate (Dearing 1994).

Adult student data agrees with these statistics. Roberts and Webb (1980) found that the drop-out rate for adult vocational classes ranged from 30-80%. While non-vocational adult classes had drop-out rates of between 11% and 26%. Bale and Parkin (1989) found similar drop-out rates in their study of part-time FE courses.

Two very early statistics on drop-out rates come from MacLennan (1948) who records it as 33% and Boyce (1958) who found rates of between 30% and 80%. More recently, Medway and Penney (1994) found a drop-out rate of 33% in their study of a College on the Isle of Wight. It is hardly surprising that information of this sort is difficult to come

by. Colleges cannot produce the statistics, and even when they can, they have a vested interest in not making it publicly available. Medway and Penney (1994, p.35) say "The college information system was unable to provide reliable data on either noncompletion or un-successful completion". The PISA returns now required by the DFE for the compilation of the 'league tables' are so ambiguously worded that most Colleges produce data suggesting that 75%-95% of all students are successful¹. The BPCFE successful qualification for the same period is listed in the league tables as 80%, while the Isle of Wight students achieved a pass rate of 76%.

British drop-outs can be categorised according to gender, socio-economic status, disability and ethnicity, just as any other nationalities' drop outs. Medway and Penney (1994) found no ethnicity or disability factors effecting drop-out, but gender and age were shown to have an effect. [This was probably more to do with the socio-geographical location of the study and factors particular to the Isle of Wight]. Roberts and Webb (1980) found gender to be significant and surprisingly, the day of the week on which the classes occurred. Drop-out rates were found to be much higher at the beginning of the week and decreased through to Friday, when very few classes took place and the measure broke down. They also found the drop-out rate peaked in November with a second, smaller peak in February. A similar finding occurred in a more recent study of vocational drop-outs but the second peak was at the end of January, (Page 1995). These slight differences could have been produced by the information gathering processes rather than the activities of the people dropping-out, but these similarities are interesting and will be investigated further.

Cormack et al (1994) in their study of early leavers from Stockport College found, surprisingly, that travel difficulties were the most common reason given for dropping-out.

Roberts and Webb (1980) say that "no relationship between class size and drop-out rate was found for any type of class". This statement is supported by a more recent report from FEFC (1992) which suggests that there is no obvious relationship between the resources a student has available to them and their learning outcome, over and above a threshold of resources required by each syllabus. These findings are counter-intuitive and require further research as suggested by Hodgetts (1995) who says that:-

¹ Data from League tables p.VI. The Independent, Tuesday 22 November.

"The debate on the effect of class size is hampered ... by the lack of conclusive research ... however, it is not going to be undertaken now because there is no indication that anyone is prepared to fund it ... a group of eight is more likely to lead to better learning and understanding than a group of thirty ... all these things are well known to teachers and pupils ... the argument, as everyone knows is not really about class size but about money. If a piece of research were to be published tomorrow showing that small classes were better ... the Government would ... be commissioning another piece of research to contradict the first."

Teachers 'know' that smaller classes generate more successful students. The Government wants further education to expand by 25% over the next three years, (1993-6). The amount of money in the education budget is £2.5 billion. On April 1st, 1993 Colleges became independent (incorporation)². What actually happened to class sizes after incorporation? Inevitably the projected increases in student numbers were met by fewer teachers, in the same old classrooms with the same amount of equipment.

Boswell (1994) the Secretary of State for FE and HE acknowledged that drop-out rates were unacceptably high in FE, but confirmed his view that "there was no simple correlation between drop-out rates and finances", and hence, resources and class sizes.

Simple correlation is too precise a measure and therefore inapplicable to such a complex situation. Complex Matrix analysis however, could provide a different answer. Whatever the outcome of such investigations, the assumption that there is no relationship between drop-out, class size and classroom activity is both naive and dangerous because it will lead to decreasing unit funding. 'Market forces', mechanisms which work well in commerce, may not work so efficiently in education. Schools and Colleges are competing for limited funds. The local, national and global labour market has a requirement from the education system that it provides the labour force of tomorrow, complete with the appropriate skills suitable for the next century. The implication of all this competition in an uncertain and unpredictable market place, is that unit costs are eroded. The result of this erosion is that more and more students will enter Colleges of education and receive less and less.

²

William Stubbs, Chief Executive, FEFC. 22nd December 1992 Forward to Funding Learning.

There is already a growing bank of data on Britain's declining educational status, not only among other European countries but globally as well. Britain ranks lower than the US, Australia, New Zealand, France, Greece and Spain in its participation rates in post-compulsory education (Hughes 1995).

A recent summary of labour market trends (1995/6) said "as we enter the second half of the 1990's, talk of planning for the skills we will need in the year 2000 and beyond is no longer mere rhetoric or crystal ball gazing. It is hard reality ... those planning vocational education and training need to produce skills that will be wanted ... into the 21st Century".

Predicting future skills requirements may not be that simple but from the evidence already available it would appear that the growth areas are in new technologies, international trade, and the higher or professional levels of occupation. In 1993 35% of total employment was at the higher professional level. It is anticipated that in 2001 "almost 1.7 million extra managerial, professional and technician level jobs"³ will appear. Where are these workers going to come from if drop-out rates continue at their present, high levels?

Employees also have an increasing skills requirement, often referred to as 'up-skilling'. A survey in 1994 found that 63% of employers wanted to increase the skills of their average employee. So if employers choose courses incorrectly for these employees, dissatisfaction may result in financial wastage, lost productivity and student drop-out.

From these data it would appear that the work force of the future will need to be adaptable, especially to rapidly changing technologies. They will need frequent 'up-skilling' to be competitive in a shrinking global market place. As competition increases for jobs, with the population explosion and the increasing levels of education attained by people who are spending longer and longer in education and training, (currently the official school leaving age is sixteen, but all sixteen to eighteen year olds either have to be in education or in a training scheme, thereby effectively raising the end of 'official' education for young people to eighteen) levels of required competence will automatically be raised. The inevitable consequence of this is that more people will not have access to paid employment, although they may have equivalent occupations. This

³ Skills and Enterprise Network PP47/20082/295/14. Nottingham.

trend can already be seen in the growing numbers of people who retire early and remain active in the work sector, while not necessarily deriving an income from these activities. Some young people grow up 'knowing' that they will never work, they often come from families where unemployment has gone into its third generation. Their whole life experience is based on people who do not work for a living. This aspect may continue to increase if basic skills are not addressed and large numbers of people are allowed to complete their education with inadequate life skills training. The unskilled and poorly skilled will find most difficulty in obtaining work in the future, because mechanisation and technology will replace the mundane tasks that such people used to be required to do.

How does this forecast effect drop-out? A recent labour market report noted that "raising educational attainment together with reduced job opportunities ... has contributed to increased staying on rates"⁴.

The implication that many young people are staying on in College because they have no job opportunities raises new questions about the best use of human resources. Adults are also attracted into training/education programmes for similar reasons; they are currently induced with monetary incentives to take up courses, which simultaneously reduces the unemployment statistics. Some adult students can continue to claim benefits plus an additional £10 training allowance.

Why is education being promoted in its present form? Are people being encouraged to learn because they will ultimately become the highly skilled and adaptable work force of the future, or are they being placed in learning establishments to get them off the streets and out of the 'dole' queue? Further to these questions, we have to ask how such promotion is received by the students, can they see before them a brighter future and better job prospects as a result of gaining an education, or are they looking at two or three years of having to endure the daily round of boring lectures and learning activities which are irrelevant to their future plans?

If there is ambiguity in student attitudes, what about the staff? How do Colleges see their role in the promotion of education? In the new, competitive 'market place', Colleges owe their existence to the continued enrolment of students, even if they have to be 'captured'

⁴ Skills and Enterprise Network PP47/20082/295/14. Nottingham.

from competitors. Incentives, lures, and aggressive marketing have all been employed to ensure the continued existence of these organisations. The extent to which staff understand and condone the underlying principles governing such competitive strategies is questionable.

National targets for vocational achievement 'blur' this ambiguity further. Colleges will be funded by achieving Nationally set targets. For 1997 a target of 80% of students reaching NVQ II, 50% reaching NVQ III, has been recommended by NACETT (National Advisory Council for Education and Training). Organisations must meet these targets or their funding will be reduced, when this is translated into jobs lost and redundancy, there is suddenly a clarification about staff attitudes to the promotion of education. The continued success of the organisation can be equated with the prosperity of individual members of staff and not necessarily with the future well-being of society or individual students.

This dilemma is composed of decreasing capitation unit funding on the one hand and the challenge imposed by government and society to provide a competitive workforce capable of meeting Britain's future needs, on the other. The result is what Lyotard (1979 p.15) refers to as "*La mercantilisation du savoir*". How has this process become legitimate? Economic and political forces have ensured its legitimacy by imposing stringent financial burdens on any organisation or individual who chooses not to comply with the new rules. The result of these new rules and the new ideology is not yet predictable but Lyotard (1979 pp.79-80) suggests that

*"La transmission des savoirs n'apparait plus comme destinee a former une elite capable de guider la nation dans son emancipation, elle fournit au systeme les joueurs capables d'assurer convivablement leur role aux postes pragmatiques dont les institutions ont besoin"*⁵

The vehicle of change and legitimation has been language. When students became "Customers" and learning became a "product" (Crequer, 1992) terms endorsed by the DFE, the commercialisation of education was complete. College Charters proliferated, college administrators worried about their legal obligations to deliver quality, and students

⁵ Translation: "*The transmission of knowledge is no longer meant for the development of an elite capable of guiding the nation's emancipation, but to form a system of players capable of happily performing their pragmatic roles as required by institutions*".

were empowered to take their custom wherever they chose, and if organisations wished to continue operating, they had to do so in a tightening financial climate. The result, inevitably, was that some were forced to close while most 'tightened their belts', reduced staffing levels, thus redundancy became commonplace in a sector where once it was thought inconceivable.

6. Drop-out: On a Local Level

The County of Dorset is situated on the South coast of Britain. It comprises both large urban populations and many, rural agricultural communities. The BPCFE has a catchment area which extends from Weymouth in the West to Lymington in the East, and as far North as Dorchester. Some students come from further afield, and live in temporary student accommodation during their time in College, but primarily, the College serves the local resident community. There is a significant and growing number of international students as well.

Dorset has an ageing population due in part to its favourable climate and beautiful scenery, both of which make it a prime choice for people in retirement. Retired individuals may have educational needs which can be met by the College (there is one example in this study) but there are also flourishing adult education classes specifically aimed at this age group and a University of the Third Age, in the area.

There are no dominant industries within the locality, the engineering, chemical and manufacturing industries which once were based here have declined during the recession. The port of Poole is thriving as a tourist attraction and cross-channel ferry terminal, as well as a cargo port of limited importance. Bournemouth clings to its Victorian watering place image as a tourist resort of buckets, spades and amenity gardens. The economic activities within this area are predominantly tourism and care of the elderly. The College reflects these local needs.

A recent survey⁶ pointed out that the number of pupils continuing their education in Dorset peaked in 1993 with 76.6% staying on in post-compulsory education, with the majority staying at school. Recently the proportion of young people entering further education colleges in Dorset has increased by 1.8%. Partly these changes can be accounted for by the 'demographic time bomb' which resulted from the post-war baby boom growing up and having children of their own, but this seems to be an incomplete answer.

There has also been a slight increase in the number of year 11 pupils who leave education and go straight into employment. Fortunately the local unemployment figures have been dropping since 1991, and are officially at 23 499 (1995 figures). The employment department also furnished the following data, 7.8% of the total workforce is unemployed. Youth unemployment is 12.2% while long term unemployment locally is 34.7%. The fall in unemployment has been accounted for by an increase in jobs in the service sector, predominantly in business administration and catering.

Against these findings is the even more baffling statistic that 40% of Dorset job vacancies proved "hard to fill". (source: labour force survey, Summer, 1994). The demographic imbalance produced by the large proportion of elderly people in the County creates two significant economic problems, it reduces the per-capita spending in the community and long term, it also decreases the number of people available to work. This decrease is due to deaths out-numbering births with a shortfall of approximately 2 000 people per year.

This demographic picture of Dorset reveals an aging population where adult unemployment is centred around people who have inadequate skills to perform those jobs which are on offer. The inevitable result is that people from outside the area will be attracted to take up these employment opportunities with the added bonus of their new job being situated in a beautiful part of Britain. Youth unemployment while still unacceptably high, at least shows that the majority of young people remain within education or training. Provided that these young people qualify, jobs will be available to them at the turn of the century, but if they remain underskilled then their economic prospects seem bleak.

⁶ The Dorset Economy. Labour Market Quarterly Report. March 1995. Dorset Careers Service.

7. The College: History and Culture

The College emerged as a result of the amalgamation of the Bournemouth College of Technology and the Poole College of Technology in 1977 (Hall 1991). At the time of this amalgamation, all the HE activities of the two Colleges went to the Dorset Institute, which is now Bournemouth University. There is also a Bournemouth College of Art and Design, a separate HE establishment.

The FE College acquired, as a result of the amalgamation, many antiquated buildings, spread out over a radius of five miles. Some of these buildings are listed monuments, and today, are not conducive to modern teaching methods or modern office requirements. Some new building work has augmented the estate and allowed new conference facilities and library provision to be made available, but many classes are conducted in some very old, dilapidated and poorly transformed buildings,

The multi-site nature of the College also makes it difficult for the public to recognise that it is one establishment, they commonly talk of Poole College or Bournemouth College as if they were still separate. The staff have similar problems, especially if they are based totally on one site. Staff form working relationships with their immediate colleagues on their site, and this relationship can become isolating, especially for those people who never have the opportunity to visit or work with other people on other sites. Controlling staff movement around the College and reducing the costs incurred by inter-site travel compound the isolation, yet it is widely recognised that getting staff to meet others is beneficial in that it generates new ideas and cultivates better working practice. There is a dilemma here which requires much more detailed examination and evaluation of the cost benefits of isolation versus the benefits of wider communication.

The College has tried to unify its image by using devices such as a logo and colour schemes throughout the organisation. It has published its stated goals as a set of intentions in its 'mission statement' and more recently in its student Charter and handbook, these have been widely distributed to both staff and students.

The bureaucratic structure of the College is hierarchically organised with power centred at the top, vested in the principal and his executive and devolved downwards through heads

of department and their teams of senior managers.

Interwoven into this hierarchy are specialists with expertise in their own particular occupational fields; activities such as information systems, financial control and personnel are all conducted by such 'experts'. These activities are centralised and managed as an integral part of the hierarchy. Teaching is a diffuse activity, occurring in almost all parts of the organisation; partly due to its decentralisation and partly due to the very large numbers of part-time staff involved in teaching, it is not highly valued and is perceived as of less significance to the organisation than many other functional roles, such as administration and income generating activities. It should be noted that less than half the full time staff are currently engaged in teaching activities.

"Organisational inertia is the characteristic which has given large organisations a bad name ... it appears to be largely a function of the age of the organisation ... large organisations appear most susceptible to this condition", (Glaser et al 1983 p.109). Undoubtedly, BPCFE is a very large organisation, with some 18 000 students and 1 000 staff offering a diversity of provision to all sectors of the community. It also exhibits inertia, any innovative suggestion can take several years from conception, through analysis to implementation. Regulations, control procedures, custom and practice, routines and habits all stand in the way of new proposals, even if there is a weight of evidence supporting the new way forward. Compound these problems with the difficulties of communication across a large bureaucracy, and one begins to get the measure of complexity of this organisation and its workings.

It is at the communication level that so much of the power structure is manifest. Decisions made at the 'top' are enforced, often without staff understanding why these changes have been made. Decisions made anywhere else in the hierarchy have to fight on their own merit to gain recognition, and even then, staff may still be unclear about the underlying rationale. Participatory decision making forms a small part of this overall picture and is entirely dependant upon the management style of various individuals and role holders.

The bureaucratic characteristics of this organisation are that the Executive has been given its power and authority by the governors. In turn some of this power has been devolved

to HOD's and their designated staff. Where expertise is valued, it has been centralised and rewarded (in terms of status and salary), where expertise is simply expected (ie. as of teachers) it is decentralised and not valued or rewarded. Parents, employers and students are consulted regularly, but their influence is minimal. The political climate in which this organisation now operates is one which is imposing very rapid changes. The inbuilt inertia of an organisation of this size exacerbates the implementation of these changes. The age of the organisation, and the longevity of many of its role holders is also detrimental to this process (a significant proportion of the staff have been in post for more than twenty years, a feature commented on during the College's last inspection, FEFC 1993/4). The whole 'organism' is resistant to change at a time when change is both rapid and inevitable: the result is conflict and chaos.

To overcome the incipient chaos, the management style has gradually changed since incorporation. It has become more aggressive, decisive and authoritarian. There has been a shift away from participatory decision making towards autocratic leadership. BPCFE is not alone in shifting its management style, Whitehead (1995) in his study of FE colleges in Britain has found "the new culture is ... much more threatening now" because it is a 'hard macho management by 'imposition'.

8. The Students

The College places a lot of emphasis on enrolling students. Once they are in, the emphasis changes to one focused on achievement rather than retention. Most of the activity is designed to maximise student achievement, teaching being an obvious example, but also the learner support systems, the curriculum materials unit, the learning resources centres and the many support staff who back-up all the learning that goes on in the institution. Historically, this was all that was deemed to be necessary, since drop-out was totally unimportant, everyone's efforts went into teaching those that remained so that they would qualify at the end of the academic year. Retention is a new issue; it existed before, but it did not matter before. There is still considerable confusion amongst staff between issues of retention and progression. Many managers and lecturers believe that initiatives designed to improve the quality of teaching/delivery/progression will automatically improve retention rates. These beliefs are based on a complete misunderstanding of the

drop-out phenomenon.

While staff continue to believe that drop-outs as individuals are solely responsible for their decision to withdraw, they will not entertain strategies which suggest that the causes are not a default mechanism in the psychological make-up of these particular students. This creates an impasse which prevents open discussion and impedes adoption of remedial action.

Before leaping to the end of the story, the dropping-out, it might be better to consider why a student chooses to come to College in the first place.

"What is in some senses remarkable is how little research has been carried out in this area (further education) ... that stands so nervously between the world of school and the work place".

[Dickinson and Erben 1984, p.49]

Education is now deeply influenced by market forces, driven by 'League tables' and the notion of choice. Prospective students are offered a wide choice of vocational and academic options by FE Colleges, they are also offered alternative types of study, they can come full time, part time, evenings, day or block released or study using flexible learning techniques, whenever and wherever they wish. Schools and sixth forms can rarely match this diversity of provision, this is the market strength of FE.

The information that parents, students both young and mature and employers are given by media coverage of league tables suggests very strongly that if you are 16 years old and academic, your best chances lie within a conventional school sixth form. Everyone else can be serviced by the FE sector, especially those individuals who have no-where else to go, such as those who want to join an evening class or fit their learning around their shift work. The implication of this type of media coverage is that it influences choice and consequently distorts the intake. The Secretary of State requires that parents be given information about performance, but can your local FE College have its results compared to those of Eton? If parents are finding it difficult to make decisions about FE, there is some evidence to suggest that employers are also in the same muddle, which is highly significant since it is the province of the FE sector to provide the vocational education supposedly demanded by employers. Utley (1993) said that "employers find the term

(FE) ambiguous and remain largely ignorant of the opportunities presented by the newly independent sector" in a report based on a study of FE by Smithers and Robinson. This all builds up into an alarming picture which suggests that the 'consumer' is very confused, and the world of FE remains 'nervous'.

With more young people staying on in post-compulsory education and greater numbers of mature students returning to education, Colleges are bursting at the seams with students, BPCFE is no exception.

Some of these students are going to drop-out. This is where the 'deficit model' of a drop-out comes into being. The student in this model, becomes disaffected, alienated, disengaged, they choose to leave. Frequently staff believe that it is the individual's will to withdraw, thus the 'deficit model' tacitly reinforces the belief that strenuous efforts must be directed at improving the classroom experience. The last inspection report reinforced this notion when it stated that "examination results and attendance figures ... should be improved", (FEFC Inspection report 1994) implying that there is a link between the two.

There is little scope for a lecturer to rescue a potential drop-out; lecturer attention focusses on classroom activity, and by definition, a dropout is already elsewhere. Glossy handouts in class, inter-active videos and colour over-head projection transparencies may make the learning experience more interesting but they are not going to promote retention. For the really dissatisfied consumer, the damage has already been done; the advice and guidance were inadequate, the marketing material inaccurate, the preconceptions about the course and college life collided with the reality and were found wanting. The widespread nature of the problem suggests that it is significant and that when dissatisfaction reaches its critical level, dropout is inevitable.

9. Ethical Issues

While this research study contained an over-view of the ethical issues germane to the investigation, some areas threw open ethical problems which had not been anticipated. Broadly, the study ensured the anonymity of all the respondents who confided information and gave publicity to those respondents who particularly wanted to be identified. This

task was relatively simple, respondents were asked, and un-surprisingly, those who had something good to 'boast' about, wanted some acknowledgement, while in general, most respondents preferred to remain anonymous.

Burgess (1989 p.1) says that "there are few examples of educational researchers discussing the ethical questions associated with their research experience".

I too would have remained silent on these problems, had I not been challenged by some of the difficult issues which materialised during the course of this study. Difficulties which confronted my own ethical, moral and political thinking.

Reaves (1992 p.40) defines ethics as a "system of morals, beliefs about what is right and wrong that are held in common by a group of people".

Further defining the rights and wrongs of research is problematic. This study did not seek to cause harm to any person: respondent privacy was respected, their confidentiality assured. All respondents were asked to give 'informed consent' prior to participation in the study. No deception was ever deliberately used. However, even the concept of 'informed consent' requires some analysis since it implies that each respondent understands fully the nature of all the risks that may befall them as a consequence of participating in this study. The ambiguity lies in understanding that I could not predict or explain all the consequences, and only outlined a 'common sense' understanding of what was to be involved in the exercise.

The drop-outs in this study, having given their consent, gave me their information. I never contacted them again, nor did they ever question me further, although it would have been easy for them to do so. The other respondents in the study, some of whom were College staff, school teachers, heads or deputies at local schools; these respondents were all sent a transcription of our conversations and asked to verify or amend as appropriate. I also gave them the option to delete anything they had 'second thoughts' or misgivings about, but no-one availed themselves of this opportunity. I did not deem it necessary to provide them with my analysis of these conversations. Can this be construed as deception? Reaves (1992 p.49) includes "passive" (being unaware) deception as ethically wrong.

Already it would appear that the research protocol has been broken.

Invasion of privacy is another problem I had to confront. With self administered questionnaires there is no problem, people are free to choose between answering the questions or throwing the whole thing away, excepting the initial intrusion. But, what about the telephone interviews? People could 'hang up' but no-one did, I called several potential respondents, introduced myself and my purposes and they all agreed to participate. Was this an invasion of privacy? At the risk of sounding vague, I have to fall back on the rather unsatisfactory position that these people were ultimately free to say or withhold anything, they were not pressured or coerced into making personal disclosures which later they might regret.

Some personal disclosures which respondents made, were alarming, in that they not only jarred against my own morality, they also pertained to activities which were illegal. The discomfort which this predicament caused cannot be overlooked, however, having guaranteed all respondents complete anonymity, I was forced into reconciling my own disquiet with the need to use these data for the furtherance of the research project. Which brings me to the same conclusion brought up by Usher and Bryant (1989 p.180) who point out that "practical knowledge has a necessary ethical dimension ... since it is concerned with appropriate action in the world, (it) must consider the rightness of the action ... which inevitably involve values".

10. OTSOG

"start with something small and fascinating (furry and friendly) and then move ever outward, linking important generalities to that concrete beginning, I am ... a mere dwarf standing firmly on the ground, and looking up at OTSOG".

[Gould, 1990, p.35]

On the Shoulders of Giants, OTSOG is a reference to a comment once attributed to Isaac Newton (1642 - 1727) when he explained that his scientific achievement was built upon the work of his predecessors, and he went on to say that if he could see further, it was simply because 'he stood on the shoulders of giants': these giants were Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo.

Russel (1946, p.520) says that "Newton achieved the final and complete triumph " because these three giants " had prepared the way".

Three hundred years later modern giants have prepared the way for this study, which has reached a better understanding of its topic because others have shown the possible routes forward.

Gould's advice to take something small and fascinating is what prompted the research to begin. At the outset, my perception of student drop-out was naive in that I assumed it to be both small scale and personal. The proximate question - why was I losing some of my students - to the ultimate question, - why was drop-out a question worthy of investigation - required travelling a long and difficult path to understanding: understanding the asking of the original questions, before attempting answers to subsequent questions. The dual concepts of proximate and ultimate questions I owe to Diamond (1991), who recognises that we tend to focus on the proximate questions, because they are small, immediately relevant and right there in front of us, while the 'big', ultimate questions, the ones about causality, these tend to be left unspoken and therefore, unanswered.

From the small starting point, with its proximate questioning, I travelled outward, looking for all those important generalities which eventually led me to the ultimate questions, providing the concrete beginning for which I was searching, my position changed from - why do I have drop-outs - to why drop-out?

Thus OTSOG provides a link between starting this research and the 'big picture'.

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CHAPTER TWO
METHOD 1: THE QUANTITATIVE METHOD
AND UNDERPINNING METHODOLOGY

"to err is human, to forgive divine - but to include errors in your design is statistical". (Kish 1978, p.2)

1. Defining the Sample Frame

The universal population for this study included all the students, both full-time and part-time, at the Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education. Over the four years during which data was collected, the student population increased from fifteen thousand to over seventeen thousand, of whom approximately five thousand were full-time. From this very large student body, drop-outs were identified, forming the sample frame.

The identification of a drop-out followed specific criteria. For the purpose of this study, a drop-out is anyone who has enrolled on a course for which College staff deemed them to be acceptable, and then withdrew, before completion of the course. This inevitably includes those students who changed courses, and those who withdrew partially from a course.

Identification was problematic, since very few drop-outs notify the College of their intention to leave. Therefore, to overcome such short-falls, official records were supplemented by a 'trawl' through class registers, persistent non-attenders who 'looked as if' they might be a drop-out were identified and added to the sample; in practice this system worked well.

The College's administrative systems record student withdrawal by using proforma BP63 [see Appendix P(i)]. Theoretically, it is the responsibility of a student's tutor to complete this form when they have evidence of a student's withdrawal from College. In practice, many tutors are reluctant to generate unnecessary paperwork and therefore avoid using the

BP63 until they receive written confirmation from the ex-student. For part-time students, the picture becomes even more complicated, since very few of them have a tutor, therefore the completion of the form depends upon the attitude of their teachers/lecturers.

A Senior lecturer commented that "if they (the student) have paid the fees, they are legally entitled to come back if they want, therefore, I've no right to exclude them".

Unfortunately, he seems to have missed the point of these forms; any student recorded as having withdrawn, still has the right to be reinstated, the completion of a BP63 does not exclude them, it simply informs the administrative systems of drop-out.

Attitudes to form-filling and other management devices for keeping track of students could generate a study of their own; they have been commented upon by others, who seem to have encountered similar problems in other Educational establishments, Sudman (1967) and LeCompte and Goebel (1987). The bureaucratic systems which confronted this research were not un-helpful, but they were severely limited in that they recorded, inadequately, the cohort of people I wanted to study.

Faced by the problem that the population of interest was inadequately described, I set about obtaining more accurate information. Reasoning that the best people to tell me about student drop-outs would be the lecturers themselves, I sent out a memorandum [see Appendix p(ii)] asking all staff to give me the names, enrolment numbers and course codes for any students who they thought had dropped out of College. I fully realised that I was imposing upon the good will of my colleagues, and that some of them would refuse and/or ignore my request. Inevitably this creates a possible information short-fall. In order to avoid alienating the staff I did not burden them with my definition of a drop-out, but simply used the term and left them to decide who to include, accepting the risks of misclassification which would later need correction. Securing cooperation was at this stage more important than the adoption of my research criteria, and I felt that there was a real risk of non-cooperation if I over-burdened these lecturers with yet another, onerous and seemingly unimportant form to fill in.

Some staff did not cooperate with the request, and either did not complete it at all or, as in one instance, the memorandum was returned to me, on the next day with this comment

*"it is not my job to look through registers or fill out **** forms, so I have done exactly as you asked, and returned it as soon as possible - you'll notice that it's blank".*

Such opposition was not unexpected; fortunately, most people replied in a much more positive spirit, "Estranged" lecturers, as Bernstein (1975, p.48) would call them, are probably to be found in many large colleges, and their attitudes have to be taken into account, since they appear to have little commitment to the values of the organisation, even though they may be very good at their subject. I will explore this idea further in Chapter Five (the FE context). Such un-cooperative attitudes could threaten the research strategy. While it has not been possible to accurately measure the loss of potential respondents, the final frame was sufficiently large and unified that this loss was not materially destructive. Missing data values can be calculated from the data matrix, based on outcome information it orientates the study and allows estimation of data shortfall.

Similar data collection problems have been observed by Yost (1988), McKillip and Garberg (1986), Danzberger et. al., (1987), Barber and McClellan (1987), Brown (1986), Cibulka (1986) and Mess (1986). Dalecki et. al., (1988, p.53) noted that "errors in compiling population lists can result in omitting population members from the sampling frame". Some omission is inevitable due to the drop-out population being generally ill defined. Orchard and Woodbury (1972, p.697) say that:-

"Obviously the best way to treat missing information problems is not to have them"

and they align missing data to some sort of unavoidable 'accident' within the research. Their solution to the problem relies upon the missing data being random. In this study, randomness may not be the case and therefore the solutions need to be treated with caution.

At this stage it is preferable to admit the non-random nature of the sample rather than distort the findings by assuming that it is. Huff (1977, p.24) referring to the Kinsey reports says that:

"Splendid ground breakers though they have proved to be, they are cursed by sampling that is distressingly far from random"

Non-random samples require careful statistical treatment and even more careful interpretation.

Kengeles et al (1969) suggest that if the whole sample cannot be obtained then it is possible to weight the sample that is available, according to the characteristics of the people who are under-represented, based on forming an estimate of the relative size of the sub-group. While this is a valid statistical method, I have rejected its use in this study. Weighting results inevitably introduces bias. An alternative, un-biased method had to be found, this involved 'conversion', and will be explained later.

2. The Three Samples: GES, SSS and Oblique

The selection model chosen to define the sample frame resulted in three populations being identified. The first two were exclusively drop-outs, selected from official records and lecturers' identification lists. The first of these two groups was the GES sample, all the drop-outs identified within the largest department in the College. Originally it was intended to be the only sample in this study, however, grounded upon the unexpected nature of the replies received, the study was extended. The second sample was the SSS sample, this group of people were identified as a random sub-sample of all the drop-outs in the other departments of the College. Cross-tabulation of the GES and SSS results will identify whether these form one population or two discrete populations.

The third population provided secondary data, usually retrospectively. This population, while not being College drop-outs themselves, were able to provide information and insightful comments about drop-outs that they had known. They were school teachers, lecturers, parents and sometimes friends of known drop-outs. This population became the 'oblique' sample. Such privileged information was valuable in complementing the findings of this research.

3. The Supplementary Data

Other sources of information have also been used to corroborate the findings of this study, for instance, newspaper articles, educational documents and other official records. This became the 'supplementary' data collection and was formed from diverse sources, but notably, local newspapers, and the College's own publications and records.

4. Representativeness

Is the sample frame and the chosen population universally representative?

Representativeness is influenced by six criteria.

1. The selection criteria used by the College administration process.
2. The selection criteria used by staff in listing their own drop-outs.
3. The availability of selected people for sampling.
4. The use of substitution procedures for people who were un-available.
5. Non-response and refusal.
6. Corroboration from external sources.

[Adapted from Dillman 1978]

At first glance it would appear that no control can be exercised over any of the criteria listed. Conceding this to be true of 1 and 2, it should be noted that persistence can be applied to 3. Survey response rates of 40% or less are not uncommon today, but some researchers have reported response rates of 97.6% (Coombs and Freedman 1964) which they explain, were achieved by sheer persistence. Fowler (1984, p.49) warns that "mail surveys with low response rates almost invariably will be biased significantly in ways that are related directly to the purposes of the research".

Criterion 4, involving the use of substitution is more problematic. Dillman (1978) does not recommend substitutions to be made as they may lead to bias. If a substitution is made it may reinforce what is already known, and artificially increase the power of the findings; it constitutes biased data. Groves et al (1988 p.209) also have concerns about

sample bias caused by substitution, pointing out that "if the efforts to reduce non-response affect different sample persons differently, it is possible that overall non-response error might increase with higher response rates". The problem that both Dillman and Groves have identified is simply that the researcher does not know and cannot ever find out if bias has been created by the re-selection of another population.

To overcome this problem, information about respondents who are not available will be sought from the supplementary data. For example, if a survey questionnaire is returned because the respondent has moved from the area, or if a parent writes to explain that their daughter or son is ill in hospital, or any other third party offers information about the drop-out, then this will constitute valuable information even though it is not primary data.

Non-response and refusal need to be dealt with in much more detail, but before examining these two issues it may be helpful to have an over-view of the sample frame. The following diagram illustrates the threats to accuracy embedded in choosing a particular sample of people to participate in any study, given that errors can arise from the selection procedures. The elimination of observation/interpretation errors will be dealt with in Method 11.

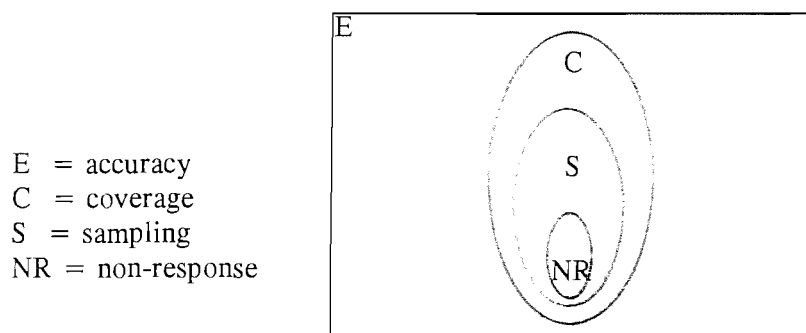


Figure 2.1. Set diagram. Model of non-observational errors

From this diagram it can be seen that errors of misclassification will form a constant. Increasing coverage within the frame can to some extent compensate, however, in this case, the number of drop-outs available is finite, therefore coverage cannot be extended. This immediately raises the more serious difficulty of increasing subset NR, non-response; this threat to validity is not under the direct control of the researcher. Two solutions are possible, either the subset S is increased, ignoring the drawback of increasing respondent

bias, or the subset NR is decreased. The latter solution was chosen as the most productive method of generating unbiased data.

The sample size will ultimately define the sensitivity of the findings, (Robson 1973, p.132). The minimum number of subjects within the sample needs to be at least thirty to ensure valid statistical manipulation, but what is the optimum size needed?

Brown (1986) has suggested a formula for calculating adequate sample size. Using his calculation and an estimate that, in any academic year the number of drop-outs is approximately 3000 people, the optimum sample is 350 people, of whom half will respond. The following table summarises the confidence limits and expected response rates from a population of this size.

Table 2.1 Selecting the sample size

Population	Response Rate	Sample Size	Confidence Limit
3000	50%	350	±5%

Between the minimum number needed for validity and the optimum number needed for complete confidence at 0.5 probability, lies the actual number of respondents who took part in this study. From this table it is possible to calculate the error limit and consequently predict its "generalizability and usefulness" (Brown 1986, p.32).

5. The Instrument of Enquiry

The initial instrument of enquiry was a self administered postal questionnaire, sent to every person listed within the sample frames, GES and SSS. The questionnaire was designed with reference to the relevant literature on student drop-out, and also a smaller drop-out survey undertaken in 1991 at the same College (Page 1991).

[For a complete questionnaire and coding refer to Appendix pp(iii) and (iv)]

While acknowledging that questionnaires lack adaptability (Mason and Bramble 1978) when compared to interviews, they are useful for accessing information from populations

who would be difficult to capture by any other method. Drop-outs, by virtue of no longer being in College, are inherently a difficult population to locate.

The format of the questionnaire was kept relatively simple, included was a letter of introduction, explaining the purpose of the study, and thanking the respondent for their participation. The College Logo was printed on the questionnaire, lending it some measure of authority, because as Sudman and Bradburn (1982 p.231) say "the appearance of a mail or self-administered questionnaire has an important impact on response". No attempt was made to personalise the communication as this helped to keep administrative costs down. This is in keeping with work done by Shale (1987), Simon (1967) and Andreason (1970) who all reported no improvement on response rates when survey letters were personalised. Confidentiality was assured, explicitly, as recommended by Bradburn and Sudman (1979) both as a courtesy and as a way of helping reluctant respondents to comply.

The questions were structured in such a way that the relatively simple ones came first, asking for straight-forward, factual information. These were followed by others which required opinions, and later, the form of the questions became more open, requiring respondents to answer in their own words. A careful balance being achieved, between giving the respondent easy questions and tick box categories with predetermined options, and looser, open ended questions, where the respondent is free of researcher influence. Schuman and Presser (1978) suggest that the use of open questions reduces the risk of respondents answering in terms which have been set by the researcher.

No matter how 'fool proof' the instrument, a questionnaire survey will only be successful if respondents are sufficiently well motivated to answer, with accuracy, the questions posed.

Dillman (1978, p.75) questions the accuracy of mail survey answers, suggesting that respondents will answer accurately if the questionnaire is not too long or complex, he says that "allowable length and allowable complexity" are medium in range, there is also an element of giving socially acceptable answers, especially if other people are present during the completion of the questions. Turk and Kerns (1985) made similar findings.

Surveys may have their 'pit falls' but they are a readily available method for collecting statistically useful amounts of information which otherwise would require a much more complex research design. Marsh (1982, p.147) says that "surveys have a lot to offer...[when] experimentation cannot be used to investigate...there is often no alternative..."

The supplementary and oblique data will corroborate individual respondent's answers. By introducing such a check on the system, utilising a loose form of triangulation, (Giddens 1989) it is anticipated that the accuracy of individual statements can be measured.

6. Non-response

Surveys have been used to gather information since the ancient Egyptians, the Romans and the Chinese Ming dynasty. Marsh (1982) points out that there are no records of the response rates to these ancient surveys, but today's response rates seem to vary from the very low returns experienced in market research to the relatively high rates of persistent researchers who can achieve 90% or more. Usually, in an Education setting a response rate of around 30 - 40% is normal (Goyder 1987).

Stopher (1981) suggests that if non-response is inevitable, then attempts must be made to measure it, both quantitatively and qualitatively, because it begs the question - are non-respondents different?

If non-respondents are different the inherent discrepancy is potentially a cause of data bias. If attempts to overcome non-response affect the sample differently, Groves et al. (1988, p.209) say that too, may increase bias, for this reason "some understanding of the characteristics of non-respondents and reluctant respondents are needed to choose correctly the survey design features affecting non-response".

If high response rates have been achieved simply by increasing the sample with no attempt being made to deduce the characteristics of the non-respondents, the result will simply increase the data already collected from other respondents and the bias will increase proportionally. Groves (1989) suggests that a theory is developed which will account for

both participation and non-response. Goyder (1987, p.156) stresses the need to incorporate an analysis of respondent "values". Until we can furnish some understanding of why people, voluntarily choose to complete questionnaires we will not be able to theorise non-response.

Several theories have been suggested to account for response, these have ranged from social exchange as put forward by Dillman (1978) through to what Goyder (1987, p.158) describes as "behavioural modelling of response decisions". Humanists such as Thibaut and Kelley (1959) and Blau (1964) will argue that respondents are rewarded with 'positive regard'; while behaviourists such as Freedman and Fraser (1966), Snyder and Cunningham (1975) would favour the notion of 'compliance' as a learnt response to filling in previous questionnaires.

Whichever stance is correct, I question what these particular respondents thought they might get from answering my questions? Given the nature of student drop-out, one possible reason is that I have given them a 'voice'. Perhaps for the first time, these people were given a chance to speak, and make their opinions known.

There are other possibilities operating here, Groves (1989) suggests that if questionnaires are a novelty, then the completion exercise will be valued. Alternatively, it may be a social 'norm' to complete questionnaires.

I do not know why my respondents complied; they did, and many of them gave me full accounts, and wrote at great length of their experiences and their reasons for leaving College. I am both grateful to them and mystified by them. I owe them the reward of opening this debate. This relationship will be returned to in Chapters three and five.

There are costs attached to compliance. It takes time to complete a questionnaire, it takes even more time and effort to remember to post it. Perhaps some of the questions proved difficult to answer, perhaps some of them awakened memories the respondents would prefer to leave dormant. Non-respondents may not like questionnaires, they may have strong objections to receiving them, they may object to having been selected because they themselves do not identify with the sample frame. Maybe they just thought it was boring. This patchwork of a non-compliance theory takes us some small way forward in

understanding non-response.

Evidence on perception and attitudes to surveys has been collected in the past by the "survey on surveys" method, (Stinchcombe et al. 1981) but inherent to this method is the problem that people who dislike surveys are unlikely to complete one, telling us why. Goyder (1987, p.132) goes on to say that:-

"the epistemological limitation to survey on surveys is, however, self-evident; employing an instrument to measure its own performance becomes immediately contradictory. To assess attitudes toward the survey via attitude surveys is not unlike seeking to comprehend the mechanics of a camera from photographs".

It is extremely difficult to judge the impact of a questionnaire upon the respondent, however, the respondent's behaviour, manifest towards the instrument, has to be based upon their own past experience of other questionnaires and their understanding of this one. This behaviour can be measured, and an estimate of rapport gauged. If rapport is sufficiently high between the instrument (as generated by the researcher to be 'in tune' with respondent needs) and the respondent, they will be more inclined to act altruistically, and complete the questionnaire, no matter how onerous or time consuming the task may seem.

7. Conversion

In order to resolve the non-response problem, two strategies were employed. Firstly, data was collected on non-respondents, this constituted names, gender, age, course, and address. From this non-respondent profile a sub-sample was chosen for conversion. This sub-sample was then compared with the respondents to see if the two populations were intrinsically similar.

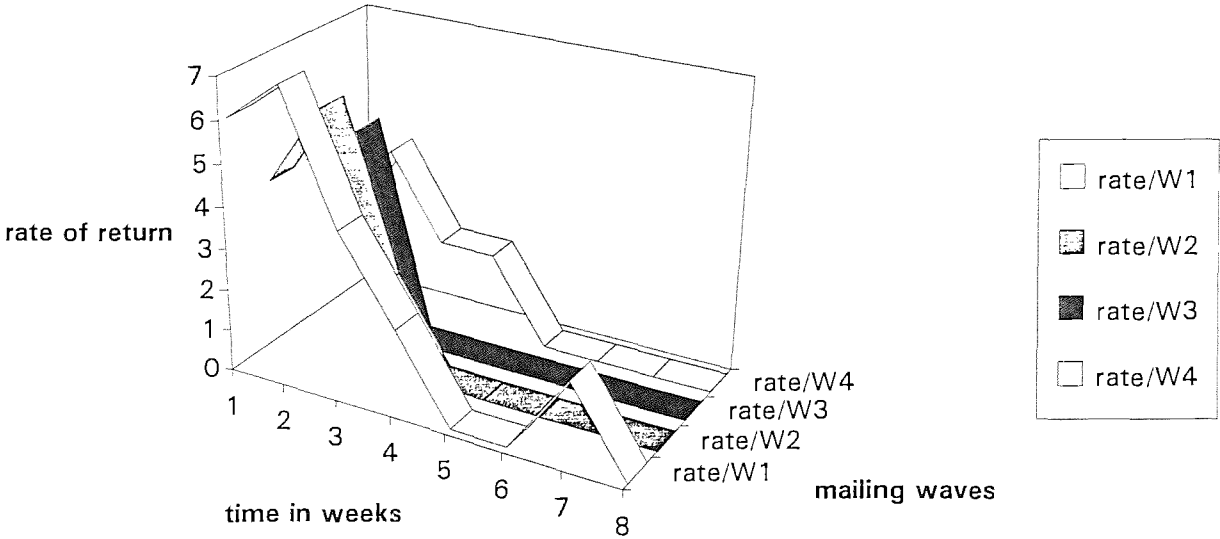
Accepting persistence to be instrumental in achieving high returns, how persistent should one be, in order to maximise returns and simultaneously, hold down administrative costs?

Dillman's (1978) Total Design Method recommends sending a follow-up post card to all the people in the sample, firstly to thank them and secondly to remind them that they may

not yet have returned their questionnaires. Other researchers have also had success using this method, Smith and Bers (1987), Hartman et al. (1985). But Alwin (1978, p.84) demonstrates

"that the pattern of response to mailed questionnaires can be statistically described by the gamma distribution...and...this would contribute to the solution of budgeting and timing in mail surveys".

Keeping these two, differing proposals in mind, I posted out the questionnaires in waves and monitored the return rates, for the first wave, a personalised thank you post-card was sent out, as recommended by Dillman's Total Design Method, but in subsequent mailings this was discontinued, since the return rate in this survey came close to a gamma distribution as predicted by Alwin.



Graph 2.1. Questionnaire returns

From this graph, it was possible to calculate the point at which no more returns could be

expected. The non-respondent sub-sample was telephoned in order to 'convert' them into respondents. The interview schedule (see appendix: Instrument of conversion and coding p(v)) was designed not only to get at information which would have been given had they completed the first questionnaire, but also to discover their reasons for not responding in the first place.

Lavrakas (1987 p.9) explains that:-

"Prior to 1960, the proportion of households...with telephones was too low to justify the use of the telephone as a sampling medium. As such, telephone survey methods are relatively new and still developing science and craft. The primary advantage afforded by...telephone surveys...is the opportunity to monitor and control closely the quality of data collection as it occurs. Currently there are no social or physical barriers that automatically rule out consideration of telephone surveys, and in many instances they are the most cost-effective approach to gathering survey data".

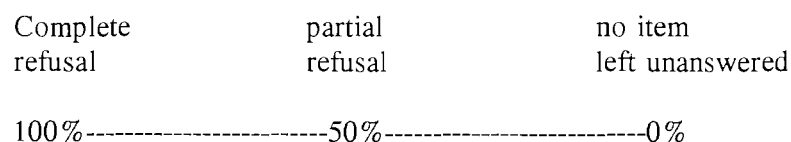
Sudman (1967, p.58) suggests that

"telephone interviewing...has much to recommend it...it eliminates travel, costs are substantially reduced, and it is possible to make unlimited call backs if respondents are un-available...the interviewer is more at ease...while the respondent is more candid"

Although this method automatically excludes anyone without a telephone from the frame, telephone interviewing was selected as the method for conversion of non-respondents.

Non-response is not a discrete variable relative to response. It is a continuous variable, in that non-response may be partial, some questions being too difficult or uncomfortable for a prospective respondent to answer fully. The following diagram illustrates this point.

Figure 2.2 Response behaviour as a continuous variable.

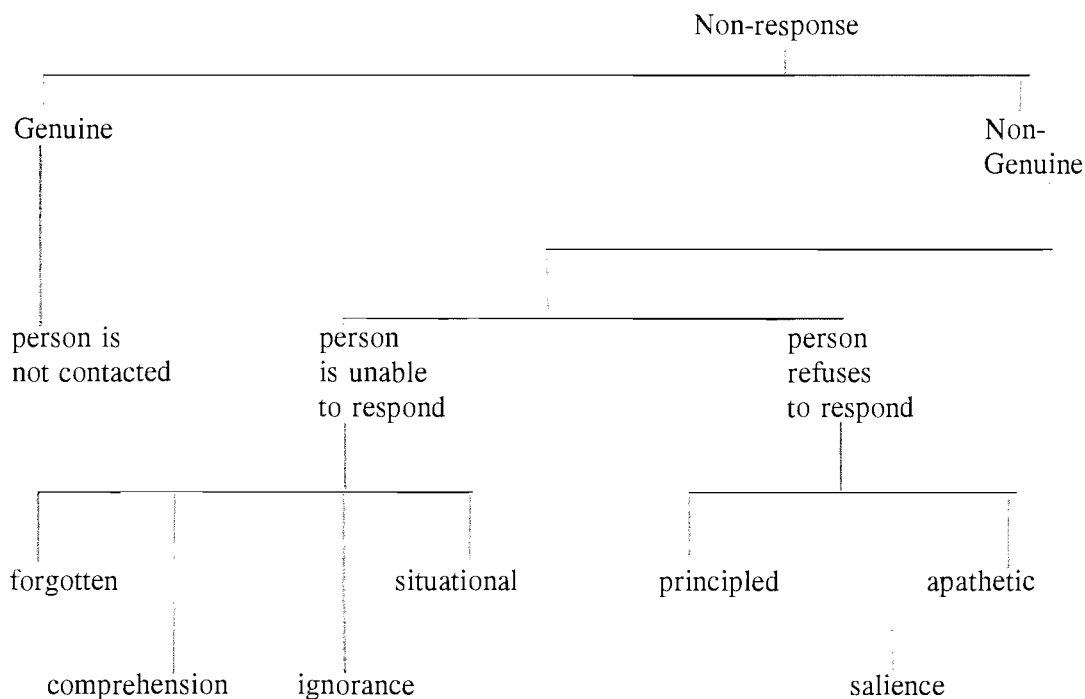


The significance of viewing non-response as a linear, continuous variable is that item non-response can be made good by mathematical extrapolation from data already collected and

that total non-response can be recognised and compensated for by conversion.

Examining the reasons for complete non-response reveals that sometimes it may be due to the researcher failing to contact a respondent. Alternatively the respondent may be in control and decides not to answer. The former is considered 'Genuine' non-response, while the latter is termed 'Non-genuine'. The following diagram illustrates the possible relationships between the various types of non-responses.

Figure 2.3. Model of non-response



This model shows eight possible reasons for non-response. Failure to contact a respondent is an ongoing problem, and unless a questionnaire has been returned by someone else with comments, it is not possible to qualify this type of non-response even though it can be quantified. Of the non-genuine responses, a person may choose not to reply, on principle, i.e. they never answer questionnaires; or they may be too apathetic to complete the questions. Goyder (1987, p.156) has found evidence which suggests that a person is more likely to refuse to answer if they have previously refused to answer another questionnaire, saying "it is those most unfavourable toward the survey method who most frequently report a history of refusing surveys". His evidence also suggests that the objection is a principled objection rather than a manifestation of apathetic or deviant

behaviour. Whatever their reason, it would be pertinent to question the principle for their objection. The apathetic refusal concerns a person who 'can't be bothered' or is 'too busy' to comply. Upon contact it might be valuable to discover their reasons: was it a bad time of day? Or the wrong day of the week? Were things particularly pressured at work or at home when the survey arrived? etc. Myers (1969) however, found that people tended to evade questions rather than give outright refusals, and such evasion could distort the findings; in his study of men in Puerto Rico, he attributed 32% loss of his data to evasion.

A respondent may find the questionnaire irrelevant. If they cannot identify with the subject matter, they will dismiss the whole thing as irrelevant; the survey will lack salience for them.

The other reasons for non-response concern the inability of a respondent to comply, rather than their unwillingness. The easiest way to understand such behaviour is that these people have forgotten. Sudman and Bradburn (1974, p.68) say that:-

"A substantial literature in experimental psychology suggests that at least short term and intermediate memory decays exponentially with time".

They then go on to examine two kinds of memory failure, the first they describe as "omission", where the respondent completely forgets what happened: the second kind of memory failure they refer to as "telescoping" where the event is remembered but it is brought forward in time, and it is supposed to have occurred far more recently than it did. This second type of memory lapse may cause data bias, since events which occurred in reality far apart, may be telescoped to converge, and the meanings given to these separate events may also be forced to converge, influencing each other, creating a sort of 'time leakage' in the mind.

Alternatively, the respondent may not know the answer, because the information has never been available to them.

Comprehension, and the meaning of the words used may also be a problem, not only to those for whom English is a second language, but also to those who ascribe alternative meanings to words used by the researcher. Reading errors and errors of understanding

are complex, a word may have no meaning to a respondent, or it may have multiple meanings or an alternative meaning as suggested by Groves (1989). Sudman and Bradburn (1982, p.1) say that "the importance of the exact wording of the questions seems obvious...the fact that seemingly small changes in wording can cause large differences in responses has been well known to survey practitioners since the early days of surveys". To eliminate any ambiguity in the questions the instrument was trialed amongst colleagues and willing students who all commented freely and suggested improvements.

Multi-lingual respondents are a particular case which can give rise to potential distortions, both of their understanding the questions and the researcher's understanding the answers given. Tyson et al (1988, p.413) investigated discrepancies in bilingual responses which revealed a complex "psycho linguistic occurrence" presumed to be the result of the way English was acquired by the respondent. The bilingual proficiency revealed by some respondents in this research, has to be admired, potentially it offers a vast arena for investigation, but is beyond the scope of the present study.

By keeping the language clear and simple, the respondent will not be confronted by ambiguity: by leaving a 'don't know' option, the respondent will not be forced into an unsuitable category of answer. Keeping the questions short may help motivate response, by maintaining the balance between the cost and the benefits of completion.

8. Respondent Context

The situation or context in which a respondent answers is also relevant. For the self-administered questionnaire, the researcher has no control over where the form is filled in, and once returned, no real contextual data, unless the stained ring of a tea cup provides some clue. For telephone interviews, the context can be ascertained, from two sources. Firstly, the respondent can be asked, secondly, by listening carefully, background noises can reveal what is going on, a television that is playing or a child crying for instance will help disclose the context. Although this does not eliminate 'respondent uneasiness' as Bradburn and Sudman (1979) would call it, it does take it into account.

9. The Follow up Interviews

When respondents completed their questionnaires, the last question asked them to tick a box if they did not want to be included in a follow-up interview. This somewhat devious method to elicit acquiescence may have induced some otherwise reluctant respondents to accept a follow-up interview by mistake (in practice no-one made such a comment, so I must conclude that the deception was transparent). The follow-up interview was conducted over the telephone, using the 'foot-in-the-door' method, as developed by Snyder and Cunningham (1975). This allowed me to engage the respondent relatively quickly in conversation, by firstly introducing myself and then rapidly explaining that they had already given me permission to telephone them and conduct this part of the survey.

I favoured the use of the telephone as a data collection tool for several reasons. Firstly, it was convenient, particularly for me, and also, for the respondent. Secondly, there were no travelling costs, time, too, was saved, since travelling to other peoples homes, requires not only the journey, but also locating the house, entering it, making enough social introductory 'chat' to be accepted, perhaps the need also to separate the respondent from other people as they may not be alone; the 'multiple audience' problem. Dillman (1978) refers to such "contamination" as a problem, because the researcher is confronted by opinions voiced by the respondent, but 'coloured' by others present in the household. All of this can simply be got out of the way, when the conversation is conducted between two people over the telephone. Thirdly, by conferring a degree of anonymity, Dillman (1978) suggests that people tend to give much better answers, particularly to open ended questions: for many people it is easier to answer an open-ended question verbally. Added to this is the advantage that can be gained by a persistent interviewer, who can 'sense' that a respondent is having difficulty, and can therefore 'probe' to get at an answer. Bradburn and Sudman (1979) found that giving feed back to respondents would encourage them to talk. Similar findings have been recorded by Kegeles et al (1974), Ibsen and Ballweg (1974), Payne (1956), Mitchell and Rodgers (1958) and Schmiedeskamp (1962).

There may be some drawbacks associated with using the telephone as an interview medium, rather than face-to-face interviewing; undoubtedly, some people will not be questioned because they do not have a telephone, Groves and Kahn (1979, p.154) estimate about 7% of households do not have a telephone. It is much easier to discontinue or refuse to converse,

by hanging-up the receiver. Ball (1968) describes the telephone as the "irresistible intruder", and many people feel an urgent need to answer a ringing telephone, only when they have ascertained who their caller is, will they then decide whether or not they wish to continue the conversation. From the research point of view, I knew that I had to persuade the respondents fairly quickly to engage in conversation with me, as I feared they would hang-up. My fears were completely unfounded, no-one refused an interview and no-one terminated the conversation prematurely.

Groves and Kahn (1979) undertook a comparison of telephone and personal survey methods, and found that people tended to favour the method being used at the time, i.e., those favouring face-to-face interviews were being interviewed by that method, while those who had a preference for telephone interviewing, were being questioned over the telephone. These rather inconclusive results add to the confusion over the adequacy of the various methods. As they (1979, p.90) point out "the feelings of respondents about the interview experience as a whole may depend on the mode used".

Clouding this issue still further are the findings of Kormendi et al. (1986), and Sykes and Collins (1988) that people tend to be quicker answering questions over the telephone. Will this greater speed of answering lead to lost data? To overcome this problem, the interview schedule was precoded, with likely answers. This precoding facilitated data recording. As the respondent talked, I was able to ring the significant code and added extra details as the respondent divulged them. This made accurate recording fairly simple, and enabled verbatim accounts to be transcribed.

Finally, there has been no conclusive evidence to suggest that there is any difference between these methods, furthermore, responses in both face-to-face and telephone surveys seem to produce the same data.

10. Goyder's Recommendation Enacted

Goyder (1987, p.78) recommended "a fully convincing research design" which took into account the attitudes of respondents to the methods used. The design of this study incorporates a dual-frame, in that it comprises a self-administered postal questionnaire,

followed by a telephone survey of a sub-sample of self-selected respondents. Rapport was measured, subjectively, at the end of each interview. The non-respondents in the survey were also identified and a sub-sample of these were telephoned. These 'converts' were interviewed using a modified schedule, to discover their reason for refusal; again a measure of rapport was gauged, subjectively, at the end of each interview.

Attitude is difficult to measure. Attitude is often referred to in social and psychological research, however, the definition is broad, and requires a more precise meaning if it is to be useful (Allport 1935).

Accepting that attitude is a value judgement, which may be rational or affective and emotional, (Guilford 1954 and Katz 1966) any attempt to measure attitude will have to account for apparent ambiguity, since it is unlikely that a researcher can discover how the attitude developed in the respondent. The raw data provided by the respondents, the ease of conversation and the interaction itself, viewed holistically, will provide the ingredients for an attitude measurement. This ensures that the research will not confine itself to examining the manifest responses of the interviewees but will also look at their understanding and emotional responses, as recommended by Baker et al. (1980).

11. Survey Measures

The history of the Social survey as a method, has provided the methodology with certain rules; rules which date back to earlier this century when Rowntree and Brownley (1915) independently arrived at the need for standardised questions and definitions applied by rigorous techniques. Student (1908) [W S Gosset] pioneered the small scale survey, at Guinness, to determine a measure for quality control, and these methods were easily adapted to fit social situations. The use of computers to display and analyse data allows today's surveys to be conducted on a much larger scale. As Marsh (1982, p.47) says, today's technology "reduces costs dramatically...and the sophisticated software can handle complex data structures". We now have easy access to very powerful data processing equipment which enables copious amounts of input to be analysed.

However, the predictions of opinion polls, particularly prior to an election can be spectacularly wrong. For example, during the parliamentary elections in 1992, the polls suggested there would be a hung parliament since there appeared to be "a swing from both the Conservative and Labour parties to the Liberal Democrats" (Bevins 1992). These polls were not based on a single, isolated survey, but as Kellner (1992) elaborates, the size of the error "against the actual result (made) the pollsters' final predictions look terrible: NOP-Harris-MORI-ICM-and Gallup---never before has every single poll strayed so far from reality" and he explains that "a series of biases all worked in the same direction, and seduced the pollsters into a cumulative error". What lessons can be learnt from this failure? Firstly, the quota sampling method may have been misapplied, therefore, lesson number one, is to choose, carefully, the sample frame. Secondly, the polls seem to have missed the tendency of the public towards a 'late swing'. The second lesson, then, is not to assume that what has been discovered today, is going to hold true tomorrow, although, it might. Thirdly, there may have been a 'differential turnout' of voters, this may correspond to my 'conversion' of non-respondents. If pollsters had paid more attention to non-response in their polls, they would have been able to quantify their margin of error. There was a 'silent' 20% who refused to respond, and they compounded the differential turnout figures.

Marsh (1982, p.147) concludes that "the scholarly study of these political attitudes faces many difficulties, the most severe of which are the problems of measurement". If the 1992 poll statistics were so far out in their measures, how can I be sure that my measures are valid?

The 'loose triangulation' already mentioned provides a solution. Comparison of the survey data set with information from the 'oblique' sample and the supplementary data will either corroborate or throw into question the findings from this study. Dillman (1978) also recommends a compensatory approach to overcome methodological shortfalls. The sum total of these data sets will strengthen the confidence limits in the findings of this study.

12. The Complete Design

1. Self administered postal questionnaire to GES and SSS samples.
2. Telephone Follow-up to self selected sample.
3. Telephone Conversion Interview with sample of non-respondents.
4. Face-to-face interviews with 'oblique' sample.
5. Collection of relevant material for the 'supplementary' data.

13. The 'Oblique' Sampling Methods

This sample was collected in a rather *ad hoc* manner. Some people volunteered to participate, others were selected specifically because of their role in relation to student drop-out. One respondent, insisted on inclusion because they felt they were instrumental, and had been overlooked.

Sometimes, when I telephoned the home of a drop-out, I was unable to converse with them, but parents, other relatives or friends were willing to engage in a conversation about the drop-out. This was valuable, secondary data, it gave me an alternative perspective which I could transpose. The major element of this part of the research can be summed up as, flexibility. I did not reject anything at this stage; bad data can always be eliminated during the analysis process, but data cannot be retrieved if ever it is missed.

The nature of this data collection process was much less formally structured than in the preceding surveys. Firstly, when telephone conversations were initiated with the family or friends of a drop-out, I was not able to predict this occurrence, and therefore, I was forced to change tactics, and gather information, ad-libbing, so to speak, in order to engage the person in a relevant conversation. This was a different way of 'knowing' about student drop-out, and I allowed the interaction to proceed, directed more or less, by the person I was talking to.

Secondly, this sample included school teachers and lecturers who knew drop-outs. These people were selected, in the first instance, because I knew them personally or professionally and because I was confident in their co-operation. Later, after the

publication of the first 'League Tables' I was able to choose schools that I thought were either particularly good, and did not produce any College drop-outs, and those who were particularly bad, and produced a lot of College drop-outs. The data collection was prompted by an interview schedule (see Appendix p (vii)) which I prepared in advance of the meetings. It must be emphasised that it was adhered to very loosely, I allowed respondents to meander at will, in whatever direction they thought relevant. These interviews usually took place in the offices of the respondents, at their schools. The social context of each interview formed part of the data collected, as it was deemed to be important to an understanding of the total dynamic. Each of these interviews was tape recorded. It may be that the presence of a tape recorder intimidated some respondents; they were all asked, prior to the interview to give their permission for its use and all agreed. This made accurate transcription much easier.

Just as with the self administered questionnaires, the motivation of these respondents has to be examined. What did they hope to gain from an interview with me? The answer to this question must be placed in the rapidly changing context of education today. Reforms which heralded the implementation of the National Curriculum, changed the structure of The Careers Service, altered selection criteria and teaching methods, and imposed financial burdens on schools which brought some to the point of insolvency; all of these play a part, as does the social 'climate' of the out of school world, where teachers are not only undervalued, but now seem to be held responsible for many of today's social ills. The Nation as a whole, and politicians in particular, seem to have an unprecedented concern with education and educational values, which does nothing to enhance the role of learning and educational achievement among students.

This picture reveals a troubled background to these discussions. I suppose that these 'oblique' respondents were hoping for a larger audience; often during the interviews I was left wondering who they were actually talking to, because I was being talked at. This opens a debate about perceived power relations which merits a study dedicated entirely to this topic.

Accountability has forced some schools to think quite hard about the long-term outcomes of their pupils. I represented an opportunity to explore a salient issue with a knowledgeable colleague. For a while, they were able to suspend their normal

competitive attitude to the College, (and therefore, me) and engage in a mutually beneficial discussion concerning a common problem.

The working hypothesis motivating my questioning of these school teachers/heads/deputy-heads, was based on Wheelocks (1986, p.7) work which suggested that "it is tempting to blame dropping-out on student's economic, social or family background...but it is the school's response to students' backgrounds that determines student's success in school".

The interview schedule aimed at discovering how well the school curriculum matched that of the College, how it motivated students, and how authority was imposed inside the school. This last point also explored the authoritative relationships between staff, including the school's decision making processes.

14. 'Supplementary' Data Gathering

Triangulation will be needed to verify the data sets collected. Direct comparison of data collected by different methods, from distinctly different groups of people and by completely different means will help to overcome any weakness inherent to a particular method. Reynolds and West (1987, p.691) call for the use of "multiplist strategies", particularly when researchers find themselves restricted by systems over which they have no control.

The greatest threat to the validity of data collected in this study was its fragmentary nature. I had no reason to suspect that anyone deliberately with-held information, however, I was concerned that expedience, memory, time and rationalisation had all taken their toll. Eco (1980, p.11) says that we see the truth "through a glass darkly, and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face, we see in fragments". The supplementary data contributes more of these fragments.

The secondary sources used to gather information which would be useful, were varied and included many documents, both public and confidential. Information on schools performance criteria was analysed using the DFE League Tables, 1993 and 1992. The 1993 Tables included Colleges of FE for the first time. The League Tables, when they

were first published, attracted a lot of professional criticism: primarily because raw examination data is not an accurate marker of school performance, it does not take into account the socio-economic background or ability on entry, of the children, nor does it account for any disparity in resources. The underpinning rationale seems to be that all parents have free choice of schools for their children, therefore the results published have been scored on a level playing field!

I doubt that the field is level and have used League Table data with caution, it has helped me to identify where each new round of questioning should be directed, and it has helped place The College in perspective, comparing it to other Colleges of Further Education.

The selection of sources of supplementary data was at first *ad hoc* and fortuitous, but then became more systematic as my awareness of where to look increased. Also, other people began to send me documents that they thought might be relevant to my research.

Colleagues occasionally, would draw my attention to newspaper articles or news items on the radio or television. In this way, the supplementary data was assembled.

15. Quantitative Data Handling

All the questionnaires and interview schedules were precoded as recommended by Burroughs (1975) and Robson (1983). This strategy simplified the preliminary analysis and enabled rapid classification of data. The anticipated statistical procedures were used to inform question construction, so analysis would be simplified. Robson (1983, p.130) says "The decisions about the statistics to be used must be made as part of the design process".

The population in this study is not normal for any characteristic under investigation: this imposes certain limitations upon the analysis. Non-parametric tests will therefore be used, as recommended by Robson (1983) and Anderson and Zelditch (1971). "Using statistics" as Robson (1983, p.18) points out "is no insurance against producing rubbish. Badly used, mis-applied statistics simply allow one to produce quantitative rubbish rather than qualitative rubbish".

All drop-out data will be classified under the following headings:-

- a) Your background,
- b) Your College experience,
- c) Your future.

These three broad areas of interest will be further sub divided, as follows:-

- a) Your background.
 - i) gender
 - ii) age
 - iii) ethnicity (if known)
 - iv) location
 - v) previous examination results
 - vi) previous school experiences
 - vii) parents occupations
 - viii) parents education
 - ix) the home
- b) Your College experience
 - i) Course
 - ii) Mode of attendance
 - iii) access barriers
 - iv) friends in College
 - v) reasons for coming to College
 - vi) reasons for leaving College
 - vii) The learning experience
- c) Your future
 - i) employment status
 - ii) intentions to return to study
 - iii) opinion about decision to leave

The classification of these data follows the structure of the questionnaire. Numeric data will be displayed using descriptive statistics.

The follow-up telephone interview schedule adds to the above information, in that it enables some exploration of the answers already given. Most of this information will be dealt with as text, as it is qualitative in nature. [see Method II The qualitative analysis].

The instrument of conversion which was used on non-respondents was also pre-coded and will be classified in the same way as the first questionnaire, with the addition of one more category, exploring the reasons for refusal.

- 1) reason for refusal
- 2) previous response history
- 3) measure of rapport.

16. Comparison of Populations

In order to establish whether or not the GES, SSS, and Convert samples of drop-outs constitute a single, homogenous population, data from these samples will be cross-tabulated. If there is a significant difference, the samples will be treated as representing differing cohorts. If no significant differences are found, it will be assumed that they are a single population for the purposes of this enquiry.

17. Interpreting These Data

Statistics are simply 'tools' which researchers can use, Mood and Graybill (1963). How these tools are used is open to abuse as well as to debate. Yeomans (1968, p.11) takes up this argument and explains that:-

"The word 'statistics' conjures up different impressions to different people. It is generally recognised that figures (numerical data) are collected, arranged and presented in various forms by statisticians. It is also a

commonly accepted belief that anything can be proved or disproved with these statistics. There is some truth in these observations, but both fall short of the true purpose and approach of the subject."

To test the confidence limits of these data, we have to look at the whole process, from initial observation, through the coding process, the classification, the description of the findings and the significance testing. The inter-relationship between method design and appropriate statistics, makes possible an increase in confidence level, justifying both the method and the testing.

The main purpose in projecting quantitative analysis is to enable measurement of various characteristics under investigation and gauge their significance. It is not enough to describe what is happening, it is necessary to know how much, how often, and is it a chance occurrence or is it an on-going result of the Education process?

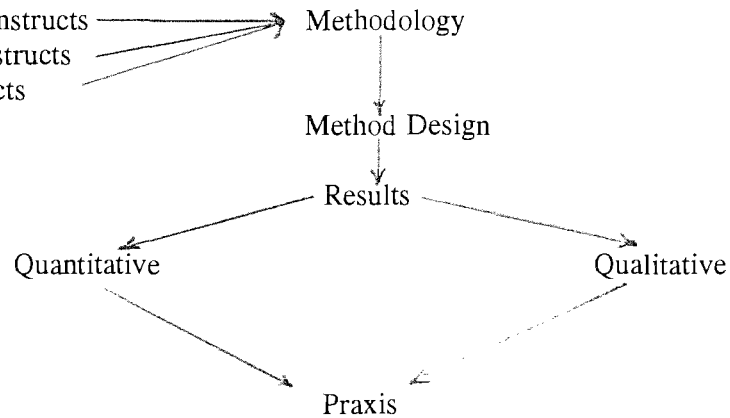
18. The Quantitative/Qualitative Relationship

Reflection has led to the construction of the following model which explains the 'shape' of this enquiry. The method has been influenced by various theoretical constructs, as explained by Usher and Bryant (1989, p.15) who say that "paradigms are located within communities of research practitioners who accept a paradigm as their own and adopt its framework of understanding and rules of investigation." From within the framework of my own understanding, data has been collected; these data take two forms, quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative data will be dealt with in Method II: the influence of one data set upon the other has to be explicitly acknowledged. It is equally apparent that both the quantitative and the qualitative methods have been influenced by my own prior frameworks of understanding. Huff (1977, p.109) says that "The fact is that, despite its mathematical base, statistics is as much an art as it is a science. A great many manipulations and even distortions are possible within the bounds of propriety."

Ultimately, both sets of data will inform praxis and improve the experience of students at this College.

The following diagram explains this complex relationship.

Fig. 2.4. Model of the Relationship Between Quantitative and Qualitative Data



Popper (1968, p.111) tried to explain the cause of the confusion raised by the subjective decisions made by individuals in their design/choice of methods by noting that "science has nothing absolute about it. Science does not rest upon a solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down...into the swamp...but not to any given base...we simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure..."

The empirical structure of this research is partially carried by a qualitative treatment of its findings and additionally supported by a quantitative analysis, since the "piles" formed by statistics require the re-enforcing "concrete" of a qualitative mode of enquiry.

Gadamer (1975, p.250-251) also recognised that we "stand always within tradition" and goes on to say that "meaning exists at the beginning of any research as well as at the end: as the choice of theme to be investigated, the awakening of the desire to investigate, as the gaining of the new problematic".

I have put forward both the popular and my own personal view of the scientific endeavour shaping the method of this enquiry. This has dwelt heavily upon the theoretical nature of method construction, less so with its historical and social configuration. The history of science cannot be accounted for in a report of this brevity, suffice it to say that its developmental history has shaped, coloured and re-enforced the beliefs in its methods. The social construction of science is currently the object of much scholarly debate, as yet

unresolved, with many opponents (Atkins 1994) and proponents (Collins, Goodwin 1994).

Reflecting upon methodology has forced recognition of scientific influence and the dangerous assumptions unknowingly made within such a "tradition". This study has not adhered strictly to the prescribed framework, which according to Reaves (1992) must include description, prediction, explanation and control. The ends of this research encompass only the first three criteria, description, prediction and explanation. Control may come about through the better understanding of the phenomenon, but it is not an initial, explicit purpose in itself.

19. Validity

It would be a circular argument to suggest that outcome ensures validity. Validity rests upon the operational features of the exercise; the statistical assumptions must not be violated, and the relationships, which have been detected, must really exist. When the quality of the measurement systems is reliable, the inferences drawn from these will be valid.

Finally, I will end with a cautionary tale from the cartoonist, Mel Calman who so wittily illustrated Huff's book

"Don't be a novelist - be a statistician, much more scope for the imagination"

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CHAPTER THREE
METHOD II: THE QUALITATIVE METHOD
AND UNDER-PINNING METHODOLOGY

1. The value of facts: "*Objectivity is dead*"

[Phillips, E., 1993, p.57]

The scientific self, which forms the greater part of my being, has struggled with the concept of a qualitative methodology and the inherent subjectivity it contains. All my previous training, and most of my working experiences have taught me to reject anything subjective, and only give credence to objective knowledge, to empirical facts. The qualitative aspects of this study have forced open a powerful argument, as powerful, if not more so, than the statistical evidence already discussed. The collection of narrative statements embodied in this research constitute the evidence which supports this study, do they also constitute a 'fact'?

The internal struggle was not so much to find meaning in these data but to find value in that meaning. Popper's (1959) warning not to create a post-hoc reconstruction of a method cannot be ignored, and yet this struggle involves either finding or creating a suitable theory to under-pin the work. The immediate risk is to surround the work with protective theories as suggested by Lakatos (1974) rather than examine the struggle itself, and the barriers, either socially or professionally constructed, which deny the emergent value of the qualitative data and the findings derived from them.

The struggle is not a conflict between the statistical findings and the narrative data, for the two are complementary, like the two faces of a coin, or the reflection of something in a mirror. The object is always the same, it is the perspective which changes. The "objects" in this study were students who had dropped out of College. The statistical evidence collected about them was obtained by recording actions; the drop-outs had little or no involvement in the collection process. The qualitative data looks at the same people, but from another point of view, and messy as this may be, it alters the whole framework of

understanding drop-out, because the people involved do not necessarily have the same understanding of their behaviour as an impartial, distanced observer would.

Objectivity becomes problematic in the field of Education research because education has not yet established a paradigm on which to base its research methods. Kuhn (1970) would argue that such a programme is still in its infancy and at the pre-science stage, where tried and tested methods are not yet available, and all practitioners are forced to develop appropriate and new methods. Consequently, each new investigation is required to justify the rigour employed, and thus the 'scientific method' is often adopted in preference to any other. Science, and in particular, the natural sciences have provided a well established empirical framework which when adopted appears to present both explicitly and implicitly a convincing and cogent argument, which reinforces the belief in its superiority and appropriateness. Tilby (1992, pp.3-4) expanded on this when she said that:

"Some scientists seem particularly vulnerable to the totalitarian spirit, the assumption that the establishment of facts obviates the need for interpretation ... they treat nature ... as an open book which needs no commentary. They are unaware that the commentary is written in their own heads. The other side of this coin is scepticism that denies that there are any facts at all ... I have been made more and more aware of the fact that there is a scientific pathology, a temperamental factor which is part of the lure of science, which both enables the task and disables the interpretation ... The consequence of this is the alienation of science from the human world".

Trapping a study within the science paradigm can be restricting, because the research questions are confined within the parameters and conventions of that paradigm, "it defines the boundaries of investigation" as Usher and Bryant (1989, p.15) explain. The consistent popularity of the scientific method rests upon the way in which science is reported in journals and the media, and the way it is understood by the general public as well as by other scientists.

The way in which science is currently reported, in journals and the media suggests that it progresses in a linear fashion, from observation through hypothesis testing to problem solving, as recommended by Popper (1959). Mulkay (1991, p.66) says that scientific research is written as a "formal communication ... written in a strict conventional style which is intended to concentrate attention on technical issues". In reality, scientific

progression is far from linear, the illusion is the result of writing in standard form (Burgess 1982). Standard form implies that all scientific discoveries are made in a well ordered, sequential and logical fashion. This fraudulent attempt to impose a post-hoc logic upon a sequence of events which occurred more as a result of intuition, mistakes, corrections and brilliant guesswork, is perpetuated by the scientific community not to convince other scientists, who know full well how the system operates, but to convince the general public and to maintain the illusion that scientific knowledge reflects truth and reality. Merton (1967, p.157) sums up this deception when he says "The investigator begins with a hunch or hypothesis, from which he draws various inferences and these, in turn are subjected to empirical test ... but this logical method fails to describe what actually occurs ... it presents a set of logical norms, not a description of the research process" Eisner (1993, p.55) points out that "What we believe, in the end, is what we ourselves create. With such a vision, the scope for method in research can be widened and the criteria for assessment made more generous".

It is immediately apparent that I have taken great pains to legitimate the use of qualitative data, while simultaneously, I have taken little trouble to justify the quantitative. In defence, it can be said that this should be taken as a reflection of the age, the time in which this study was conducted was arguably a time when numerical evidence was taken to be the essential ingredient of any legitimate study, and everything else was just 'icing on the cake'. To continue with the confection metaphor, a cake may be delicious, but it is the decoration which ensures that it appeals to the appetite. Quantitative data may 'taste good' in that it carries most weight, most power, but it is the 'icing' of the descriptive, qualitative evidence that 'speaks' to our senses and awakens understanding.

"Text has a given force or effect which is not based simply on some evaluation of whether it is 'correct' or not"

(Atkinson 1990, p.15)

It is this force which brings into being an interaction between the speaker, the researcher (who in this instance is acting as editor and interpreter of the text in question) and the reader; the three way interaction brings about understanding and in its wake, judgement. Each judgement will evaluate the correctness of the text and whether or not the editorial choice was handled with sensitivity; have the texts been allowed to speak as would the

speaker or have they been translated and decontextualised to such an extent that they can no longer convey their original meaning? This is where the 'marriage' of quantitative and qualitative data can be seen to be fruitful, because in trying to judge the 'correctness' of a text, it becomes simply a matter of checking against the statistical evidence to see if the numeric performance indicators are aligned with the narratives (Bryman, 1988).

Atkinson (1990, p.15) recommends that "the reader must be drawn into (the) frame of reference, and come to share the perspectives of the text ". Which implies that the reader is already willing to enter into such a relationship and is already open to the possibility of being drawn into the meaning of the text. Other authors such as Manen (1990) also want the reader to be persuaded, forced or drawn in (indeed, all authors would implicitly desire this), but this is not the primary objective of this study. The aim of this study is to allow all who took part to speak for themselves. With limited editorial or interpretive interference, their stories will either strike a chord which resonates with the understanding of the reader, or they will create a dissonance, and the reader will fault the analysis and devalue the text (data). Either way, it is the reader who constructs the significance, not the researcher. The words, the message, the meaning, these alone will persuade the reader, they will stimulate signification, they will draw into the frame the reader; the reluctant reader will never enter here, they will not hear what has been spoken and for them, there will be no significant meaning,

2. Understanding Practice Understanding Science

"everything we develop to explore the world should also be used to expose the way in which we do that exploration"

[Delamont 1992, p.9]

Real understanding can only be achieved when the experiences of practitioners mesh with the descriptions provided by science. If research can no longer be seen as a linear process (Burgess 1984) then questions must be raised about how new theory actually emerges from practice.

Scepticism surrounds the reliability of qualitative data and its analysis. Phillips (1993,

p.71) explains this error, suggesting that studies based on objectivity (have) the stamp of approval - (while studies which are) subjective - have not been sufficiently open to the light of reason and criticism".

The problem arises from the inconsistency of qualitative data, it is often contradictory and therefore the researcher is forced to reconcile the best of the data with the underpinning theory (Mulkay 1991). Vidich and Shapiro (1970, p.522) used qualitative and quantitative methods expressly to compare validity and concluded that "these techniques are not competitive"

If a graph could be drawn between the experience of practitioners on one axis and the scientific theories put forward by researchers on the other, the 'mess' created by contradictory and inconsistent qualitative data would be present in any part of this graph where the intersection was not perfect (a straight line). If these data were numeric, then existing systems would allow for manipulation which could improve the image of the graph and improve understanding of the matrix. However, manipulation of text in this way would seriously distort the findings and therefore there is no other alternative than to expand the theory to encompass the 'mess'; moving the data would constitute a deception. Eco (1992, p.11) hinged his philosophical novel on a similar, explanatory note when he said "the truth, before it is revealed to all ... we see in fragments in the error of the world, so we must spell out its faithful signals even when they seem obscure to us ..."

The obscurity is produced, in part, by theory, or at least by the choice of particular theory in preference to another, Mulkay and Gilbert (1984, p.152) urge "analysts ... to understand why so many different versions of events can be produced (from the same evidence) instead of imagining that there is only one genuine version that the analyst will be able to piece together, ultimately ... there is much to be gained by setting free the multitude of voices with which scientists, and other social actors, speak". Theory is united to working practice. Theories are held until such time as contradictory evidence suggests they are no-longer supportable. Whether this happens gradually throughout history as put forward by Feyerabend (1991) or dramatically by revolution as suggested by Kuhn (1970) is immaterial to this study, what matters is that theories do change and seem to do so in line with changing practices.

Fitting theory to the evidence brings with it the perennial challenge imposed by the type of evidence which is available. Eisner (1993, p.49) points out that the 'status' of all subjective data "sinks slowly into the horizon like the setting sun". Raising the value of subjective data requires the identification of the source of the problem prior to its removal. Scepticism is the problem; scepticism hinges on all areas of knowledge outside the intersection produced by science meshing with the experience of practitioners, as presented on the imaginary graph already drawn. Disciplined analysis requires that each manoeuvre be explained, and that all assumptions are made explicit.

Lyotard (1979) referred to two forms of conflicting knowledge, scientific and narrative. There is no reason for scientific knowledge to conflict with narrative knowledge; this is simply an epistemological byproduct. Why should numerical evidence carry more weight than spoken words? Both sets of data are built on assumptions that are open to errors, unless these threats to validity are scrutinized, belief in the superiority of one form over another may be based on a myth. Inherent to the myth is the limited and sometimes illogical data processing apparatus available.

Numerical data can be analysed by a variety of well documented evaluative techniques; the "rightness" of a chosen procedure being already understood. When confronted by words or text what recipe is available? Some of the mystery lies in extracting meaning from the words: fiction may provide a useful template from which to build a procedure. When we read a text by a popular author, Dickens for example, there is not much difficulty in following and understanding his stories, then stepping up in complexity, reading Shakespeare, finding the sense becomes a little more difficult, but if aided by watching talented actors perform the plays, the meaning emerges and we understand. Lastly, look at a work such as *Finnegans Wake* and where do we find meaning? Understanding seems to lodge with a privileged few, and if we are to glean anything from this text, it is only when aided by a translator. Herein lies the mystery and the complexity.

Using this fictional template it is now possible to locate the levels of meaning in this study. The drop-outs themselves have provided information, this is straight forward and like Dickens, their stories are not hard to follow. Some data has been gathered from the Information systems used to collect student performance indicators, this is like watching actors play the roles created by Shakespeare, the numbers are insufficient to give a whole,

clear picture; the stories animate the statistics . Finally, some aspects of these drop-outs' narratives are so complex and touch upon inaccessible aspects of their lives, a knowledgeable translator is required. Someone who knows and understands, who is willing to help while not re-writing the whole story. This is the realm of *Finnegans Wake* and in this study has been provided by the oblique data collection.

Words, unlike numbers, cannot be treated by rational process alone because they always engage the emotions, and in spite of the rules of grammar, there are a multitude of arrangements and a multitude of meanings available. Emotional responses differ from one person to another, and can never be completely disengaged; it would be inappropriate to proceed with analysis without firstly making explicit this engagement and secondly, setting a value on the subsequent understanding.

Perhaps if Lyotard had rephrased his comments about the forms of knowledge, and expressed them in terms of knowledge gained by rational processes and emotional processes, we would begin to see why there is conflict. Resolution depends on the acknowledgement that all our faculties have a purpose. If engaging the reader, requires hooking their emotions, then that requirement must be fulfilled, in spite of the fear that information arrays or semantic differentials are discussed with limited conviction in comparison to statistical testing.

The apparent omission of any reference to 'hard and soft' data has been deliberate; there would appear to be a strong correspondence between these and rational and emotional responses respectively. Hard data and rational, objective analysis seem to be preferable to soft data and emotional, subjective analysis, but this overlooks the obvious point; we are not machines. We make sense of the world by using all our faculties. Information comes to us in a multitude of forms, and most of the time, our judgements are appropriate.

3. The Gift

When I first read 'The Gift' by Mauss (1954) my imagination was captivated by the people and the activities described, and in particular, potlatch. What bearing could an exotic, archaic society's ceremonies possibly have on this study? The concept of potlatch

put simply is that when one group give a gift to another, the receiver reciprocates with gifts of larger magnitude.

The drop-outs and other respondents in this study gave me a gift, they gave me some of their time and they gave me their stories. In return, I feel obliged to give them a voice, magnified and empowered; thus my reciprocal gift complies to the expectations of potlatch.

4. Development of Technique

Qualitative data was obtained from all three populations as identified in Method I. [Defining the sample frame]. From the first two populations, the GES and SSS drop-outs, data was collected in two ways. Firstly, from the questionnaires, respondents often wrote at length about their experiences, and in some cases also sent letters or other documents to support their statements. These comments and stories were included, without amendment or correction, transcribed directly from the questionnaire.

Secondly, with the respondents who volunteered for a follow up telephone interview, our conversation was minuted, as accurately as possible, again, every attempt was made to adhere precisely to the respondent's own words, but because of the practical difficulty of holding a conversation and taking detailed notes, simultaneously, errors of transcription may have been included. The alternative, of using modern telephone technology to record the whole conversation was considered and rejected, since it is a legal requirement to have a 15 second 'bleeper' on at all times; this was deemed to be both intrusive and threatening. The distraction of having an intermittent 'bleep' occur throughout a conversation would have annoyed me and interfered with the flow of conversation. The sacrifice of accuracy in favour of rapport was considered unavoidable.

The third population in the study, the people who knew drop-outs but were not themselves one, the 'oblique sample' were also a source of qualitative data. This was a very rich source of information, and provided a wealth of deeply reflective narrative from people who were in advantageous positions relative to understanding student drop-out, some of the people in this sample wrote to me, but most of the respondents in this sample were

interviewed, face-to-face. During the preliminary negotiations prior to setting up each interview, I asked respondents if they would allow me to use a tape recorder to facilitate accurate transcription. Although this may have been a threatening proposal, no one denied my request, and therefore all the interviews were recorded, and transcribed, verbatim. The accuracy achieved by this method need not be questioned, but the use of technology does not overcome all data collection problems. The tape recorder may catch every word spoken, but it cannot report on non-verbal communication, the context of the interview, any interruptions that were made, or the level of rapport achieved, therefore detailed notes were made immediately after each interview.

5. Development of Theory

"Although each of us sees the world from our own point of view, we have a way of speaking about our experiences which we share with those around us".

(Cohen and Manion 1989, p.242).

The raw data under investigation here is the spoken and written word. The words come from drop-outs, a group of people who are not a group, they are individuals who for convenience have been 'lumped' together. It is at the level of classification that their 'groupness' ends; for the rest, they are individuals, with some shared characteristics and some unique features. If they speak like others around them, then we must be careful because it is quite likely that we hear like those around us. It is important not to lose sight of the author of the words spoken, easy to do when one concentrates on finding meaning, because the emphasis shifts from the words themselves to the 'knower, with the resultant loss of the 'speaker'. If the speaker is lost in the knowing then their words may change their meaning.

Many methods have been used to examine the meaning of words. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p.1) identify up to eight qualitative methods used currently in Education research. Schratz (1993, p.4) sums up the qualitative analyst's dilemma by saying that "a great deal has been written about data collecting in qualitative research, whereas less information is available providing useful help in the stage of analysis. When faced with all the collected material researchers often feel emptiness, powerlessness or even pain".

Examining the analytic tools currently available will help to alleviate some of this "pain" as a precursor to developing a theoretical mechanism.

The collection of biographical or life history data links the narrative of the speaker to the events of their life. This popular method, has many proponents, such as Hammersley (1992), Yin (1984), Cottle (1982), Manen (1990), Ricoeur (1991), Bertaux (1981), and Radford (1989).

Alternatively, there are those who favour an interpretative method, such as Denzin (1989), Majchrzak (1984), Faberman and Perinbanayagan (1985) and others who try to forge a link between the 'speaker', the 'listener' and the 'world' by analysing language as symbolic interaction. Taking this one step further, it is possible to extend the analysis to the institutions inside which interactions are occurring, Mains and Charlton (1985) Bresnen (1988), Dunkerley (1972), Bryman (1988, i) and many others have shown that this approach helps us to understand the individual within an organizational context.

Pursuing the analysis of institutions leads to an examination of bureaucracies and the community within which they operate. Durkheim urged the location of beliefs within each "collective" of people. Durkheim advocated an empirical method which involves observing social phenomena objectively, from the 'outside' (Aron 1967, Nisbet 1965). It was Talcott Parsons (1970) who attempted to reconcile the individual and their actions, with the organisation and its objectives, pointing out that all organisations have a 'structure' which can be described in terms of the prevailing culture and the roles of individuals or groups of people within the organisation. These roles constitute the 'functional' aspects of the organisation.

These notions of structure and function were also used by Merton (1949) who extended them to include dysfunction, latent and manifest functions. It was Sztompka (1968 p.27) who took the concepts of functional analysis and turned them into a language, explaining his intention of creating a "conceptual model" or framework, Sztompka (1969) recognised two more forms of functionalism, static and dynamic. All this presupposes a structure which is fixed and open to description, in which functional roles can be identified.

Organisations however are not fixed, they change through time, and today the pace of that

change seems to be faster than ever before. The addition of another axis, time, to this multi-dimensional model, is required. This automatically introduces a new problem, social-psychological evidence cannot be collected continuously, at best it can only be obtained intermittently, over a long time period. This has the effect of producing a series of 'snap-shots' of data which allow partial analysis of the structure to proceed and functional roles to be discerned. The results are an illusion produced directly by the analytic method, just as individual picture frames at the cinema produce an illusion when run together, to form a 'movie'. We can be taken in by the film, and suppose that it makes sense because we see it as a continuous moving picture, unaware of the blanks in between. In exactly the same way, we must be cautious about any temporal frame which does not allow visualisation of the gaps, because in the social world, those gaps may not be blank, they may contain knowledge which escapes verification.

How can the seemingly disparate notions of individual behaviour be reconciled with transient inter-relationships which form the structures glimpsed by this study? Levi-Strauss (1979) believed that the "collective" somehow preceded the "individual", as did Durkheim, and suggested that we look for the way in which all action is constituted by society, or as Berger and Luckman (1975, p.149) put it, that all reality is socially constructed and therefore "to be in society is to participate in its dialectic". Functional analysis alone is unsuited to this task since it concentrates primarily upon the consequences of actions rather than the intentions of the actor.

Hermeneutic analysis has gone some way towards uncovering this social dialectic by making explicit the position of the researcher in relation to the researched. Postmodernist thinking forces the acknowledgment that the researcher is as much a part of the study, and hence the same dialectic, as those who are being studied, a relationship which can enhance or damage the knowledge claims of the work dependant solely upon the relative position of the reader. Schutz (1932) in his phenomenological approach also thought that reflection on intersubjective understanding was a pre-requisite of unscrambling the social world, since other people and their behaviours are alien to us, we are forced to recognise that understanding by us of them, is not necessarily the same as understanding by them of themselves, therefore we need to be sure of our own position in this untidy relationship before we can make any claims about understanding, knowledge or truth. Delamont (1992, p.8) refers to this when she says "Research is a series of interactions, and good

research is highly tuned to the inter-relationship of the investigator with the respondents" Sartre (1943, pp.253-254) described the inter-relationship between the observer (researcher) and the other, the object of the observation or enquiry in terms of the experience of 'being' the observer while 'doing' the observation.

"The problem is precisely this: there is in everyday reality an original relation to the other which can be constantly pointed to and which consequently can be revealed to me ... In order to understand it I must question more exactly this ordinary appearance of the other in the field of my perception; since this appearance refers to that fundamental relation, the appearance must be capable of revealing to us, at least as a reality aimed at, the relation to which it refers."

Relating this to the drop-outs in this study, the ordinary relation is that they have left, they are "self-selecting failures" as a Senior lecturer once pointed out to me, and therefore my study was a waste of time, since all was already perfectly clear (to him anyway). Moving from the "ordinary" to the unknowable which is not ordinary, requires further examination; a significant part of that examination must hinge upon any reasons for making the departure from the obvious to the unknowable.

Gadamer (1975), steeped in the hermeneutic tradition insists upon a self conscious method which attempts to understand, involving the interpretation of words and actions, because for Gadamer reality is expressed through language. In *Truth and Method* (1975, p.346) he explains that "Language is the middle ground in which understanding and agreement ... takes place". The word, hermeneutics is derived from "Hermes" the messenger of the Gods, (Bleicher 1980) whose role was to translate the messages so that they could be understood by mere mortals!

Scholars adopted this translation method as a means of understanding the works of the Bible and the classics. Translation of ancient scrolls was vital since written Hebrew is not the same as the spoken word, and can be read in different ways, giving different meanings to texts. Then in 1829 Schleiermacher used hermeneutics as a philosophical tool, based on what he called "the affinity of minds". For Schleiermacher it was possible to fuse your own thoughts with those of the subject. Schutz (1932) tried to arrive at meaning through a reconstruction of events, historical and contextual. Habermas (1971) rejected this phenomenological approach and insisted that language analysis could only be conducted

through the objective criteria of the interpreter. The interaction, the subject speaking to the listener, becomes the object of reflection, it is the listener who then translates the meaning of the words, meaning has to emerge from the researcher not from the speaker, thus mis-interpretation through the application of prejudice is always a risk, Husserl (1928), Mannheim (1952). Scheler (1980), and Heidegger (1962) have all used hermeneutics to arrive at understanding.

If hermeneutics provides a method of translating meanings, why has it not been universally adopted? The problem was recognised quite early in the developmental history of the technique, by Betti (1949) who explained that we are apt to stop interpreting as soon as we think we have sufficient information upon which to base an understanding. If you think you understand perfectly, why dig deeper? Having "cut-short" the process of translation, how can we then discover whether understanding is adequate? By ensuring that the theoretical premise on which the research question is built is sufficiently explicit, other readers will be able to judge the parameters of understanding. The alternative would be to reduce the whole to ever smaller 'fractals' which according to Mandelbrot (1982) and his equations can always be reduced further still and the resultant pictures become ever more complex. Fractals have helped build a picture of the world chaotically complex. Hermeneutic circles also delve deeper in exactly the same manner, it is only the symbolism which has changed, fractals can be described mathematically, hermeneutic circles can be described verbally. The subject matter is identical, understanding can always go deeper.

After examining the various merits of collecting life stories, interpreting narratives, looking for social structures and discovering within these the functions of the role holders, and reflecting upon the adequacy of all this understanding, one begins to feel lost in a maze of conflicting theories and the pain is still embedded.

6. Developing the process

Notwithstanding the array of theoretical positions available a process had to be found that would satisfy the rigour necessary to justify the knowledge claims of this study.

By what criteria would the research questions be satisfied? The Bertauxs (1981), in their study of French bakers had found that they already had a complete explanation of the situation after one life story, but they had collected many more, before arriving at that conclusion with any confidence. They referred to it later as the 'saturation point'. Their search ended when nothing new was being found. Would the life story of just one drop-out be sufficient?

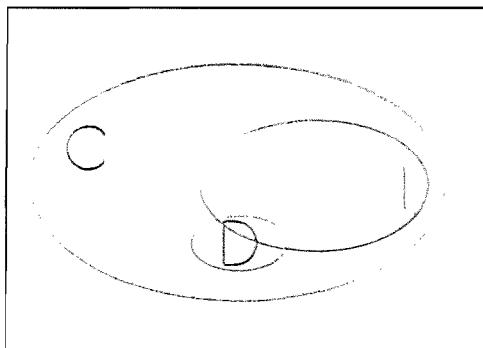
For some researchers, sufficient equals scientific, including repetition of results and verification of conclusions (Bain 1929) . Objective replication of this calibre is an ideal which cannot be operationalized in the education context; the constraints imposed by real people, real lives and the multitude of theoretical perspectives open to all observers, makes standardization of observation, in such a field, almost impossible. How can this be resolved? On the one hand, we know that saturation point may be reached on the evidence of one person, on the other, we are required to replicate the occurrence. Hammersley (1992) provides a route out of the problem by suggesting that the purpose of the exercise will define the confidence limits. Schratz (1993, p.179) echoed this by suggesting that "Educational research has to satisfy the different needs of a broad audience".

This new concept - adequacy for purpose - returns the research task to the mundane and practical. The evidence that needs to be collected has to be replicated (saturation) and representative (sufficient) in order that student drop-out can be explained and understood by Education professionals. This is not the same level of understanding that would be required for philosophers concerned with getting at the truth, or resolving the subject-object dialectic.

7. Where is This Evidence to be Found?

Structural analysis will provide an accurate description of the field of study. Mathematically represented, the populations of interest and their various interactions can then be pin-pointed. The following Venn Diagram explains this structural relationship

Figure 3.1. Venn Diagram , Structural relationships,



where: -

C = Community

I = Institution

D = Drop-out

As can be seen from the diagram, the College is but one part of the wider community, and College drop-outs are to be found in two positions, $I \cap C \cap D$, describes those students who have already dropped-out; while $I \cap C \cap D$, describes potential drop-outs.

The expression which covers all drop-outs, potential and actual is:-

$$(I \cap C \cap D) \cup (I \cap C \cap D)$$

The four intersections and one union in this structure provide the most fruitful areas for analysis, since it is at these points that drop-outs are interacting with other groups. These constitute the relationships between (1) the College and the Community, (2) the College and the two categories of drop-out, (3) the drop-out and the community, and finally the union (4), the possible interaction between potential and actual drop-outs. Janne pointed out that it is always at the margins of a structure that paradoxes become apparent (1954, p.65).

The Venn Diagram describes the structure under investigation, but communities of people and organisations are dynamic and continually change. It would be inappropriate to attach

too much importance to the structure as a structure, rather than viewing it as an analytical tool; in exactly the same way, we do not mistake a map for the place it portrays, we understand that the map is just an aid to getting around. The model provided is like a map showing precisely where drop-outs can be located.

With the "map" as a starting point, analysis can proceed. As already noted, the evidence here is the spoken and the written word. Taking Sztompka's advice and using functionalism as a language for the classification of these data, it becomes possible to order the narratives according to the type of interaction and the message they contain, and develop a classification system of themes grouped into clades. Cladistics is an arbitrary formation and does not necessarily reflect reality, but rather it pertains to the careful cataloguing of information according to criteria of similarity. It becomes substantially different from simple theme analysis because it is organised dichotomously in a structural relationship. The relativism here is purposeful since it is a reflective aid to understanding both function and position.

8. Getting at the Truth: "Signs and the Signs of Signs are Used Only When we are Lacking Things" (Eco, 1992 p.28)

How does one arrive at understanding words? Hermeneutic translation left an impossible gap between the truth and the understanding that the listener thinks they have achieved. Although such analysis proceeds in a circular fashion, with each understanding prompting the next round of questions, and so on, it still does not conform to the criteria of 'adequacy' outlined earlier, I confidently think that I do understand what I have been told by the people in this study. Polanyi (1974, p.148) expresses this with much greater clarity when he explained that we can only understand another by "indwelling" which involves understanding ourselves so that we can understand the other. He said that " we shall remain blind in theory to all that truly matters in the world so long as we do not accept indwelling as a legitimate form of knowledge". This may enable me to understand the drop-outs in this study, but it leaves the reader with two people to comprehend. How is the reader to judge me and the respondents? I think I understand what has been said to me, but another 'listener' may arrive at a different understanding, there is a serious risk that my understanding involves the creation of a fictional world of my own, where I fit

data to my own prior understandings as Ricoeur would call them (Wood, 1991). How can this paradox be avoided? One way would be to seek consensus. Lyotard (1979) rejects consensus on the grounds that it is inadequate and does not account for power relationships. While Mulkay (1991, p.89) suggests that consensus is often 'loose' and 'socially constructed'. Compensation can be made for relative power by equalising the commentary of all respondents, or weighting that from the less powerful, this may however, introduce new forms of bias.

Social bias in consensus construction may be unavoidable, given the novelty of the education field, and the lack of clear criteria upon which to base understanding. This situation can be exploited to eliminate bias by uncovering any erroneous pre-conceptions. These pre-conceptions take the form of values questioning the relative merits of the method in relation to popular notions of acceptability and confidence. Sartre (1943, p.38) said that values were "sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass". It is these values which create the bias; their demand is quite powerful. The criteria will be acceptable to all who hold similar values, those with divergent pre-conceptions and values will not have confidence in these methods and consequently will find them unacceptable.

Ricoeur (1991, p.5) said that "between giving and recounting (there is) a gap ... Life is lived, history is recounted".

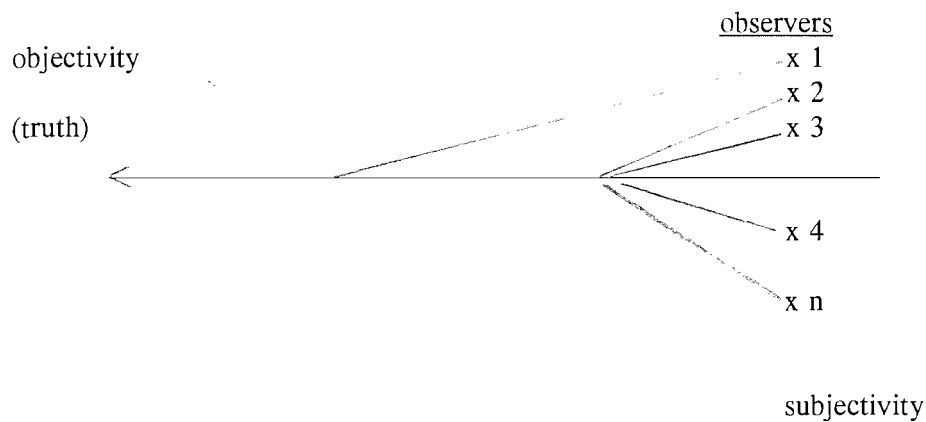
Compound this problem of re-telling a story with the re-listening to it, once it has been transformed into text and suddenly there is a confrontation of an account re-told by the actor or agent of the action to a listener (researcher) who cannot question the account, but has to apprehend the meaning, interpret, edit and then in the light of the changes that happen to that listener during the process, re-tell once more the meaning as it now stands: a relational standing, divorced from the original speaker. If I have listened carefully, I will be able to interpret what I have heard, and make the understanding my own, in line with Ricoeur's ideas. Once I try to explain that understanding to someone else, then it is my interpretation which is delivered, not the original meaning as given by the first speaker. There is room here for distortion. The solution to this problem is to deliver both the narrative and the interpretation to the scrutiny of the reader. I have accordingly, included a full account of the stories and statements which constitute the qualitative data in

this investigation. I have also interpreted this data, and clearly, have looked for, and have constructed meaning from it. In Chapter Five I deal with the position of the 'self' and give an account of my own position in the research, attempting to uncover some of my 'taken-for-granted' assumptions, so that other readers, finding themselves in disagreement with my evaluation will be able to compare their perspective with mine.

Rorty (1980, p.3) said that "to know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind". I have collected evidence rather than engineered it, but in order to represent that evidence I have to take it into my own thinking and tell it as if it were mine, therefore I have 'created' the representations in my own thoughts, but they reflect the deeds and words of others. Therefore I do have a description of that which is outside my mind, but to have any knowledge of it, I am forced to internalize that description, and then represent that which I know so that it can be understood by others. Otherwise, my knowing will have no purpose. Schleiermacher (1819) also recognised this when he said "Hermeneutics deals only with the art of understanding, not with the presentation of what has been understood".

The following measures, are a summary of the way these descriptions have been gathered, selected and edited. The analysis that they will then be subjected to will follow the arc model, recommended by Ricoeur, involving interpretation followed by explanation. That this explanation is approximating to the truth will depend upon consensus, in that it can be determined by different people, from different perspectives. Alone, I cannot make this judgement, one perspective is insufficient. The dilemma is one composed of truth and fiction, facts and falsehood, objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand we are confronted by "common sense reality" as described by Berger and Luckman (1967, p.33) and on the other is objectivity, situated on the horizon, at infinity (Manheim 1936). Viewing this as a continuum, it is possible to model adequate knowledge diagrammatically.

Fig.3.2 Representation of knowledge



Consensus will be at the point where the understanding of observers x 1 to x n converge at their maximum value, even though another observer x, may be closer to the truth than all the others. All observers x, are at a subjective position to the truth, and to each other. Adequate knowledge occurs at the consensus point.

What prevents objective truth from being fully revealed? Two theories can be put forward, either there is a barrier between the subject and the object, as suggested by Mill (1865) and Comte (1838), or the object is plainly in view but cannot be identified because of its commonality: truth is so fundamental a part of the world, it cannot be isolated and objectified. If there is a barrier, then the obstacle remains unidentified. Alternatively, the tendency to overlook the obvious, the normal, the common place, provides a much more fruitful avenue of investigation. This is an epistemological artifact, produced by models of reality colliding; the result of such collisions can produce one of two outcomes, either the two models are so different that they exaggerate each other or they are so similar, that each ignores the other. A useful analogy would be to think about interference ripples in a pond. If two stones are thrown into the water simultaneously, the ripples will radiate outwards until they meet, if the ripples have a different amplitude, they will augment each other and produce turbulence, alternatively, if the ripples correspond they will eliminate each other completely; augmentation versus elimination. If my own understanding matches that of another I risk eliminating theirs simply because they are so 'ordinary', or conversely, if they are different from me, I risk exaggerating our differences because I perceive them as alien.

9. Concordance

*"Conceive these images in air,
Wrap them in flame, they're mine:"*

[Dylan Thomas 1937, p.19]

Mannheim (1952) suggested three levels of meaning to be incorporated into a methodology of social-science, these involved the location of:-

1. objective meaning, or action,
2. expressive meaning, intention and motivation as described by the actor,
3. Documentary meaning, locating the time and the context of the action.

Time, in this sense refers to historical context (Heckman 1986, p.67).

If objective meaning corresponds to 'scientific' empirical data, then expressive meaning corresponds to the interpretation the actor has given to the act, and finally documentary meaning 'knowledge' or information about the action. These three differ from the levels of meaning previously discussed, but the overlap is clear, in that objective meaning is easily understood (Dickens); expressive meaning has to be looked at or probed for (Shakespeare) while Documentary meaning or context can be used to enhance meaning and requires translators (Finnegans Wake).

This still leaves the research with an unclear starting point. For this we must return to Gadamer (1975, p.410) who insists that all reality is expressed through language. Language provides a vehicle which conveys meaning, but where does meaning start from?

The definition of the problem relates to the words of the poem, "conceive these images in air". Is the research starting point an image created by the research process, or is there some substance more solid than air and flame? Is a drop-out real or is this an artifact produced by classification?

A drop-out is a story left behind, of that which might have been, the reality, that which is, remains unknown and untold; only the story remains to be talked about. The term, drop-out, is created by an ideology that encapsulates the myth of social mobility provided by education, with the concept of deviance for those who do not conform. Banks (1976,

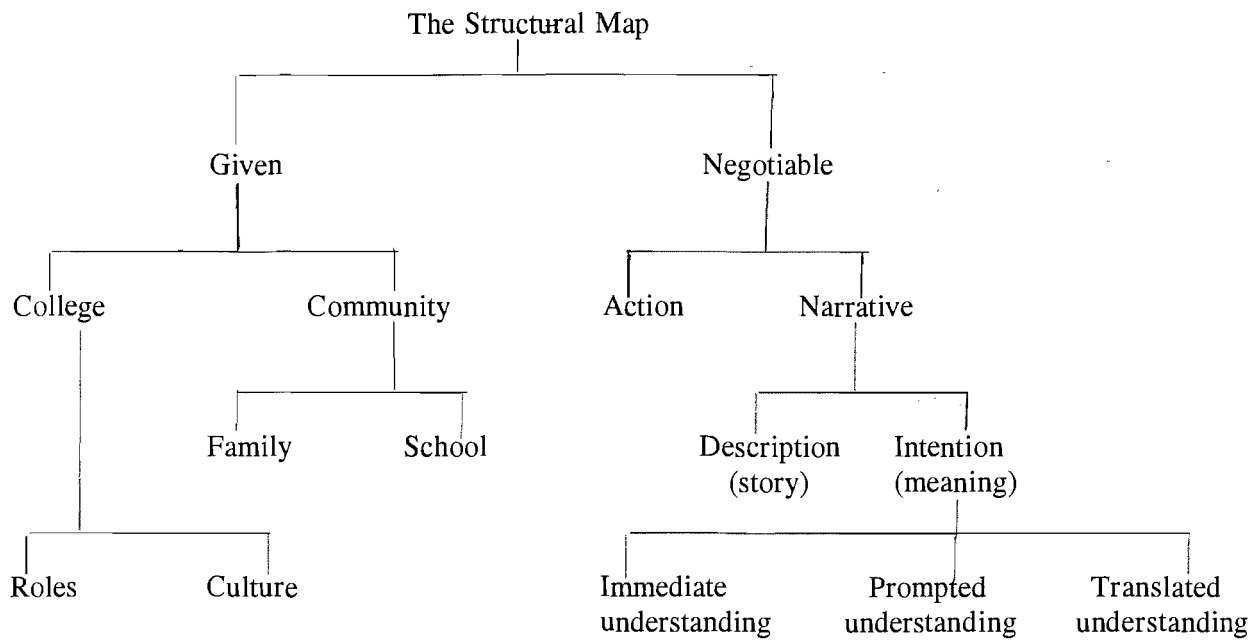
p.41) explains that there is a link between "educational qualifications and the occupational hierarchy on the one hand, and ... social stratification on the other". Anyone who does not conform to this ideology automatically gets classified as deviant.

Aquinas (1225-1274) described knowing as having both "a beginning and an end; it begins with taking in information and it ends with judgement... and judgments are most cogent when they accord with how they are defined".

If drop-out has been defined in terms of deviance, then it follows that untold stories, hearsay referencing ex-students, people who fail to complete, these stories will always fall in with the classification. The truth, that which is known only to the drop-out, known by them alone because they have not been seen or spoken to by anyone else, this is another story. Another story unclassified and therefore not bound by false parameters; when this story is told, the narrative speaks in terms of another understanding; not deviance, not failure but success.

The structural analysis provides a temporal frame which is frozen. The frame allows the multi-dimensional systems within it to be mapped and classified. Broadly speaking, the evidence can then be subdivided into that which is "given" and that which is "negotiable". Think of the situation as a garden, the climate, the soil and the biological needs of various plants are beyond the control of any gardener; they are 'given'; but the beauty of a garden depends on the skill a person applies to choosing the correct plants, planting with precision and meeting the physiological needs of the flowers; this is 'negotiable'. So too, when a student comes to College, they find around them, already in place a host of organisational and social factors over which they have no control or influence; the 'givens'. The way they decide to deal with these givens, how they relate to them, these are all negotiable. The following diagram will help to explain the analytic procedure.

Fig.3.3. Diagram of qualitative analysis procedures



The base line of understanding is derived from valuing narrative as a form of knowledge (Lyotard 1979). Of course, I may not know what the author intended me to know, (Schutz 1932), but I will have knowledge based on empathy (Radford 1989) since I have to believe that I understand, (Polanyi 1958) and will only acknowledge mis-understanding when my beliefs are made problematic by contradictory evidence (Popper 1959).

Howe (1988, p.10) points out that "it is high time to close down the quantitative versus qualitative conversation" because as he explains qualitative methods in Education research have "evolved from being scoffed at to being embraced as capable of thoroughgoing integration with quantitative methods".

This concordance brings together the quantitative and the qualitative in such an 'embrace' based on empiricism. The statistical method provides a basis for identification of the in-depth, qualitative investigation, by suggesting the most appropriate people to contact for the reflexive analysis.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE DATA COLLECTION

1. The Objective in Outline

Mass data often appears unyielding to comprehension, conflicting data even more so. As described in the preceding chapters, the following analysis will be arranged into clades so that the quantitative data can mesh with the qualitative to create a picture involving all aspects of student drop-out. While this research aimed to be comprehensive, there exists the possibility that some aspect has remained hidden and defies analysis. Occasionally, this hidden aspect hints of its being such as the presence of 'black holes' in space, but it should be acknowledged that such hints are not universal, and therefore, new ideas, new data and new understandings may emerge.

2. The Classification Order

Analysis will proceed from the individual to the global. It will start with an examination of the drop-out as a person and expand, radiating to all other units of interaction. These will include family, friends, previous school, the College and the wider community.

3. Special Needs, Learning Difficulties and Drop-out

The gender, age and ethnicity of students is relatively easy to quantify through the College's monitoring systems. Special needs, which is also monitored, has not been a feature of the drop-out data in this study; it would be premature to suggest that students do not drop-out because of difficulties associated with physical disability, but this study has no evidence to support such an argument. However, learning difficulties, which also comes in the general category of special needs provision, does occur and can be illustrated by the following comment from Stephen, an 18 year old student enrolled on a part-time course, he says:-

"I found the course too difficult. I had difficulties with reading and writing all through my school life and needed special lessons for many years, but (at College) no allowance or help was offered".

This is a particularly poignant comment, since appropriate help was available, but Stephen's teachers did not recognise his need, and he left, rather than struggle with lectures he was finding too difficult.

4. Dropout and Gender

In terms of gender, the total number of female and male students who drop-out are very similar. The following table shows these data for the academic years 1991/2, 1992/3 and 1993/4.

Table 4.1. Gender Profile of Student Drop-outs

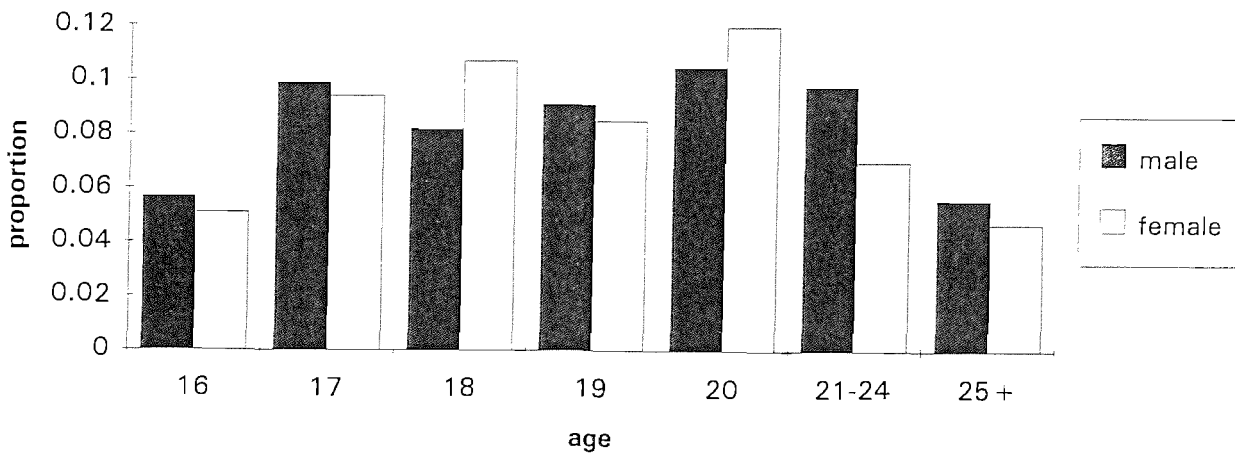
Year	Drop-out		Total Enrolments	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1991/2	531	474	7446	7541
1992/3	776	610	8487	8503
1993/4	688	567	8179	8260
Mean	665	550.33		
Standard Deviation	124.1	69.51		

Although the gender difference is insignificant [Chi, Ho = 46.325, associated probability = 0.0] in terms of pure number, the reasons women give for leaving differ from those given by men. An obvious example is women leaving to have a baby, this is 'wrapped up' as a personal reason and cannot be distinguished in these statistics, from a man who has also classified himself as a 'personal reason' for dropping out. Tracy was one such young woman, she managed to cope throughout her pregnancy, but shortly after the birth of her son, the baby's grandmother was no longer able to care for the infant, and Tracy had to leave. She then chose to train as a nurse at a hospital which provided creche facilities. The lesson to be learnt here is that sometimes figures such as these mask underlying ambiguities which must be examined for their significance; personal reasons

may mean 'I got pregnant' or 'I disliked the teachers' or 'I don't want to tell you'.

5. The Age Profile of Drop-outs

The age profile of drop-outs has a very low standard deviation (0.034) when calculated as a proportion of the total intake for that period. There is a close correlation (0.88) between the number of men and women dropping-out at various ages. The following graph shows the age profile of male and female drop-outs in one typical academic year.

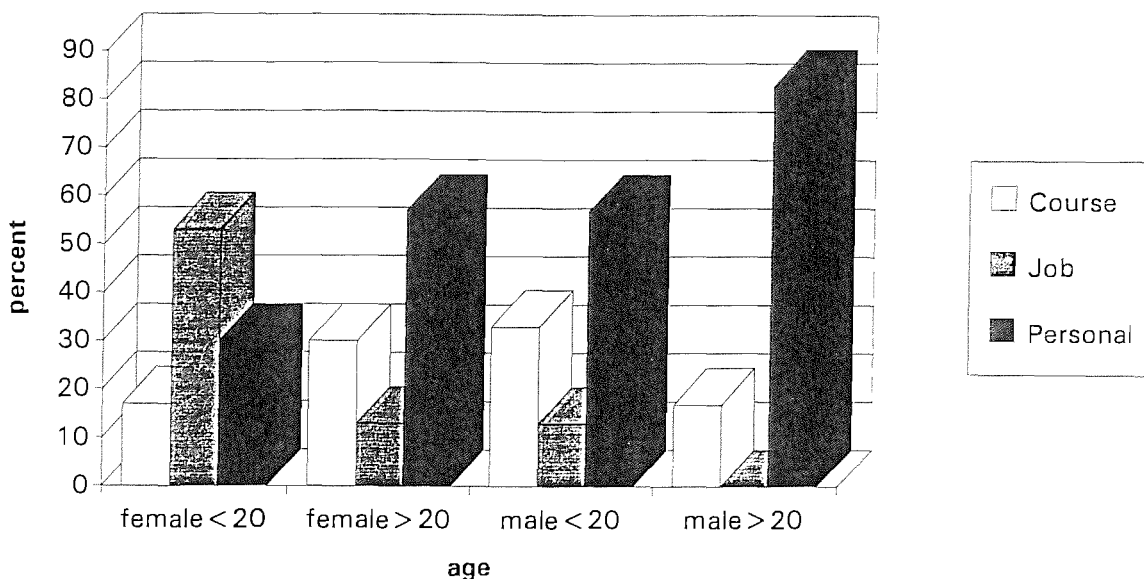


Graph 4.1. Age and gender profile calculated as proportion of student enrolment

The most surprising observation to be made from this graph is the low standard deviation from the mean, within 95% confidence limits, this value would not alter beyond + or - 0.02, which suggests that the proportion of people dropping-out within any age group is constant. This finding raises more questions than answers. However, it is indicative of some homeostatic function at work, which is maintaining an optimum number of people in any particular age range. Inferences can be made from these data relating to the increase in class size. Recently, due to external pressures from funding bodies, class sizes have increased dramatically. Broadly speaking, the real drop-out rate has doubled in five years [see Table 4.6]. The number dropping out increased from a few hundred to several thousand, in the same period the number of enrolments has risen from 14 000 to 18 000, while teaching staff numbers have remained fairly constant (there were 273 f/t academic staff in 1989, in 1994 there were 244).

6. The Age and Gender Multiplier Effect

The reasons students give for leaving College can also be analysed against age and gender. These data suggested a split into male and female aged over or under 21 years. The information collected about reasons for leaving has been aggregated into three broad categories, course related, job related and personal. As can be seen from the following graph, reasons vary according to both age and gender.



Graph 4.2 Reasons for Dropping-Out/Age/Gender

A cluster of people list dissatisfaction with the course as their main reason for leaving, they form about one third of this population. Women frequently give their job as a reason, a few young men do so as well. No men over twenty-one gave work as a reason for dropping out in the official data, which is interesting, because in the research survey, Philip, a married man aged over thirty said:-

"With a family (to support) I had to leave - no decision - I found a job - I found the work difficult - I was slow - The workload was stressful - no time to think - I couldn't do the job and College".

Another male respondent aged over thirty said:-

"I found full time employment which made it impossible to attend or to change to evening classes".

Simon, also a mature student said:-

"I'm afraid it was forced upon me, as I gained employment and could no longer take the classes".

7. Inconsistent Reasons

There is a discrepancy between data collected by the College about why people leave, and the answers respondents have chosen to give me during interviews and via the self administered questionnaires. The following pie chart shows the 'official' reasons for withdrawal given by 993 students to the College, in one academic year. It will serve as a typical example, since similar information is gathered every year.

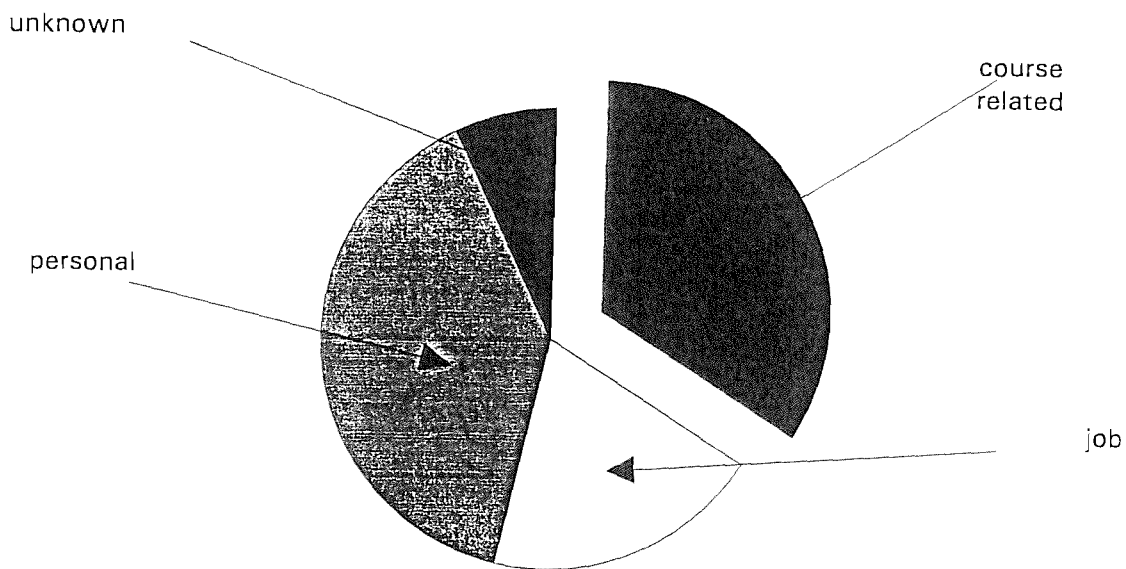


Chart 4.1. Reasons for Withdrawal from College

The form [BP63, see Appendix, p(i)] used to collect the 'official' information can be completed without the student, by a tutor. It is thus possible that well intentioned tutors simply tick the personal box because it is the most convenient category and the least likely to initiate any further investigation.

8. Expectations

Several respondents in the research survey said "the course was too hard" or "the syllabus was dreary" or "it was the wrong course for me". During my conversations with drop-outs, the one consistent feature of all narratives was that the course failed to meet their expectations. This highly significant finding needs to be examined in relation to marketing, access and guidance.

Another surprising feature is the high percentage of young women who leave to find employment, which raises serious questions about participation as well as drop-out, since it suggests, that many young girls come to College to pass the time, until a job opportunity presents itself. Lynne was one such respondent, she said she came to College:-

"because I didn't have a job at the time and I thought if I got a few more GCSE's a job would be easier to find".

Karen, in a similar vein said:-

"There were very few jobs around which was what I wanted to do, so I chose to seek a course of Further Education for extra qualifications."

9. Ethnicity

While gender equality for drop-outs is assured, this is definitely not the case for ethnic minorities. In this College, ethnic minorities form a very small proportion of the student body, only 2.9% but they are massively over-represented in the drop-out data. The following table shows that ethnicity is a highly significant factor in student drop-out. However, some ethnic minorities do not drop-out at all, for instance, students of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin have a remarkable 100% examination pass rate and zero drop-out.

Table 4.2. Ethnic Minority Drop-out Rates as a Percentage of Enrolment

Description	% of Enrolment
Black Caribbean	18
Black African	16
Black Other	33
Indian	12
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	0
n = 552	

Ethnicity information is collected centrally through the College enrolment procedures, because students choose to indicate their ethnicity and may distrust the way this information is used, the data presented here is an under-representation. However, some important inferences can be drawn; the most significant of which is that people from some minority groups do not have equality of outcome. A two-tailed Chi square test has shown that the observed black drop-out rate is significantly higher than expected, when predicted against figures obtained from white students.

Included in this study, were four ethnic minority students, three who talked to me in College, and one whom I contacted by telephone. Jeriato described herself as a Black West African, Rie was Japanese, Nik was Greek, while Fabienne was French. Jeriato and Rie became students in order to obtain visas. All four had come to Britain specifically to study English, they had chosen a course which interested them, but the subject matter was of secondary importance. This finding does not go very far in explaining the apparent contradictions in these data, again it begs questions about participation as well as cultural differences and the way that minorities are treated in College. Jeriato and Fabienne both said they enjoyed their time in College, both had no intention of sitting a final examination, and left College as soon as the syllabus was completed.

Rie had a different experience, described in her words, she says:-

"I enjoy it - but if the content was limited by my English then I can't find it interesting at all - the tutors were not helpful enough - I wanted to concentrate on Art the whole week - I lost any room [time] to do other subjects because it's completely different kind of work and I found it too hard - it was frustrating and stressful because the other students are all English people - the tutor cannot think about the me - only about the other students - at that point they were not helpful".

Nik also experienced difficulties because of his inability to understand English, he said:-

"I wanted to do business studies, I came here to learn about business, but the course was full and they [College administrators] said that this one was the same [it was applied psychology] and I would learn the same sort of things - but it is not so - and it is difficult - and my English makes it difficult - so difficult that I do not think I can continue".

Shortly after this conversation, Nik came back to see me in College because he had been 'mugged'. He was convinced this was a racist attack. It had happened outside College, one evening; he was unwilling to report the matter to the Police. Nik was not seen again in College. Which event caused his leaving, his finding out that he had enrolled on an unsuitable course or the violent attack he experienced, both need careful consideration in terms of their significance. Together, these two situations may be more influential than either one, on its own.

Discrimination and racial harassment cannot be denied or trivialised. Alternative sources of evidence show clearly that they exist, that they are unacceptable and unfortunately all too common. A College survey undertaken in 1993 found that "80% of the academic staff, 37% of the support staff and 44% of the students recognised the existence of racism in College", (Equal Opportunities: Multiculturalism, 1993, p.5).

However, some ethnic minority students choose to leave prematurely because they have fulfilled their objective, they have mastered the language or they have been granted a visa. We must be clear about these issues and not confuse data which at first glance seems to suggest that black students will have a 'hard time' in College, with the reasons given by black students for being here.

There were no indigenous Black students in this survey; this does not tell us about racial harassment or discrimination, but it may tell us something about who answers questionnaires. Further research focusing specifically on the experience of indigenous black students and other indigenous ethnic minorities is urgently required, since these data suggest it is very different from the white learning experience.

10. What a 'Typical' Drop-out Looks Like

The only conclusion to be drawn from the description of what a 'typical' drop-out might be, is that they can be either male or female, they can be of any age, but, once the drop-out 'quota' for that age has been reached, age as a factor will no longer apply, they will be unfairly representative of ethnic minorities especially black minorities, and the reasons they give 'officially' for leaving are more a matter of convenience than truth.

11. Where do Drop-outs Live?

The drop-outs in this study tended to cluster around certain schools, not as one might expect, the schools from the most deprived areas of the County, but from the relatively well off, middle class, home owning, professional districts. The catchment area described by one teacher from a school which rated as producing a high number of the drop-outs in this study said:-

"(our catchment area) is large ... I'd say we have a fair cross section ... basically it's a well to do area, but in the middle of a recession, particularly in the financial sector, many, many, of our parents have been made redundant, and we are having a lot of parents who are in great financial difficulty and we have a few pupils who are very able who have come from private schools, because their parents have fallen on hard times ... we've said that in terms of the prosperity of the area, we've said that it is relatively prosperous, it is neither very prosperous nor economically disadvantaged, of those who are economically disadvantaged there are very few or none ... the number of pupils entitled to free school meals is twenty-nine ... there may be many more ... but we are not aware of them".

This aspect of redundancy, unemployment and families which were once well off, falling upon 'hard times' occurred again when I was talking to another teacher from a different school serving a relatively deprived area. She was explaining the history of a College drop-out, a boy she knew very well, who had continued to visit her for support and advice, she picks up the story:-

"They do come back and visit us an awful lot - I can give you an example ... one young man who is about half way through an A-level course, a very clever boy, he wants to become a journalist ... he was coping perfectly well - but both parents got divorced - because both parents were

out of work, the boy felt he couldn't use their money to stay on at College - so he dropped-out".

12. Divorce

Divorce is another theme pervading these data, but no conclusions can be drawn about the significance of divorce on student drop-out. While 58% of the respondents who still lived in their parent's home, lived with two parents, 42% lived with only one. The financial difficulties confronting families and young people when their parents divorce cannot be ignored. For example, Clive said during our telephone conversation:-

"My parents are divorced - Dad would like me to go back to College - the qualifications will help - but trouble at home - trouble with drugs - you don't get the sleep - I just enjoyed it (the drugs) - I've sorted my life out - I've sorted my money".

This jumbled catalogue of ideas says it all, every possible problem is listed: divorce, money, pressure, drugs, what more could go wrong? From this conversation it was not possible to deduce a particular cause for his dropping-out, it may have been the sum effect of all the items in Clive's list, or it may have been just one key feature.

Lesley's parents also split up, her story gets more complicated, she says:-

"My Father left home nine years ago and for six years I have heard nothing from him - I came to College because I didn't know what else to do - I left for personal problems - I missed a lot of work, I also became pregnant - so that kind of made up my mind too!"

Len also found his parent's divorce difficult to cope with, he was seventeen at the time and he says:-

"The course was much harder than I ever conceived it would be, plus I was having emotional trouble at home due to my parents breaking up".

For mature students, their own divorce may constitute the problem, the attendant financial and emotional problems exacerbate the situation and can lead to drop-out. Only two students confided in me about their divorces. Elaine had been abused by her violent

husband, and eventually obtained a court order restraining him, she spent many weeks in hospital recovering from the injuries he had inflicted upon her; these, coupled with her own sense of vulnerability, caused her to miss some classes, the more she missed, the more difficult it was to return, eventually, she came in to tell me why she was dropping-out; she said she "needed time and space to put her life back together". Russel, on the other hand thought he was happily married, and was getting on very well with his course, when quite suddenly his wife left him; he turned to alcohol (evidenced by his being refused entry to College one day, because he was drunk) he started skipping classes, he got into financial trouble and eventually stopped coming to College altogether.

13. Leaving Home

65% of the respondents lived with their parents, the others had moved out, and this sometimes caused difficulties, especially financial ones. Before examining the data relating to this topic, it would be worth considering the irregularity of this span of answers in relation to the age framework of College students. Only one third of students are under the age of 19. It is not unreasonable to suppose that most mature students, especially those over the age of 25, have set up homes of their own. 30% of the survey respondents were over this age, and yet 91% of them still lived at home with their parents. This may be a potential source of error in the data gathering process; it is indicative of compliance among a particular group within the population: people who live with their parents are more likely to answer questionnaires than people who live in their own homes. This anomaly may skew the data and invalidate conclusions. Using a data matrix to measure the potential error, it can be seen that it is twice that which would have been expected from the age distribution alone.

These findings disclose much about questionnaire answering, can they also say something about drop-out behaviour? The direct question which needs to be addressed is, if you are a mature College student and still living with your parents, are you more or less likely to drop-out? The question, or rather the fact that it has been asked at all, also makes a disclosure about my expectation of adult behaviour. My expectation is that adults are independent and live independently unless there is a good reason for not doing so, such as caring for elderly relatives, or returning temporarily to the parental home after divorce or

trauma. The respondents in this survey did not mention any reasons for living with their parents, this in itself is informative, these respondents 'take for granted' such a life-style. Only one respondent thought it was problematic, Anne, who said:-

"Thank goodness (I still live at home) - so many people get thrown out - I feel it's unfair to go on living with my parents".

Some respondents, while still quite young and not financially independent, chose to leave home, this resulted in difficulties which contributed to their also leaving College. For example, Deborah, left home when she was eighteen, she explains her position:-

"I had to leave the course before the end, because during that time I left home and in the end could not afford the travel - and I went to see the course tutor, who could not help me - so I had no choice in the matter but to leave - I was angry - the College should have helped me out - with the travel money".

Wendy, another young girl living away from her family said:-

"I couldn't afford to live on £29.50 per week", [her training allowance].

Only one respondent lived alone, most lived in small family units of between two and five people, but three respondents said they lived in households of six, which by today's standards in Britain is very large. Jenny was one of these people, she came to College to pursue her chosen career, but she had to postpone her plans because as she says:-

"There were too many outside personal problems - I was trying to run a house and cater for six people, cooking, washing, cleaning, therefore I began to feel under too much pressure all round".

Summarising these findings it is difficult to say exactly where a drop-out will live. They are far more likely to come from a relatively prosperous area, but financial hardship is not unknown, recession, redundancy and divorce contribute to 'hidden poverty'. Drop-outs do not live in areas of real social deprivation, where poverty is clearly identified. If the drop-out is young, they will probably live in their family home, but not always with both parents, since divorce is quite common. In itself, divorce is not a factor in student drop-out. Alternatively, some young people choose to leave home and are unprepared for the financial burdens they will encounter, this is relevant to drop-out.

The most surprising characteristic to emerge from these findings is that mature drop-outs, tend to live at home with their parents. This may be due to sampling error, in that this group of people respond more frequently to questionnaires than do those mature people who do not live with their parents. Nevertheless, it is an interesting finding, and suggests questions which compare the actual independence of students and the perceived independence that comes with age.

14. Travel

At a more practical level, the distance from home to College and the ease of getting there may also have some bearing on attendance. The College serves a huge conurbation as well as some very, inaccessible rural areas. In 1992/3 a survey was conducted to find out why students who had been offered a College place, did not 'turn up'. Distance and ease of travel were both found to be significant factors in participation, especially for young women; can they also be a factor in drop-out? This study can make no headway with the argument. Many of the drop-outs in this study lived close to the College and could walk to their classes. For the others there is a strong correlation between the distance from College and their chosen mode of transport, but this is not unexpected. Almost 10% of these drop-outs were travelling long distances (over 10 miles) using the train, boats, cars and bicycles.

These findings are inconclusive and suggest that there is no link between drop-out and distance travelled to College, or the mode of transport available. There is one qualitative exception, a mature student called Colin, who was on a full time course. He lived in an isolated, rural area, and in his first term was involved in a car accident, although un-hurt, his car was wrecked. Colin was unable to pay for repairs to his car, having no other way of getting to College, he had to withdraw. He said :-

"I hope to be able to start again in the next year, when I've earned enough to get a new car",

This example is an unusual one, but it does illustrate the double trap of rural poverty.

15. Other Personal Characteristics

Several questions relating to personal characteristics were asked during the interview stages of this study. The first of these questions asked how impetuous people thought they were. Twice as many respondents said that they "think about it first", the others said they made "snap-decisions".

One respondent explained more fully :-

"Sometimes - certain things I'll come straight out with - deciding to leave (College) - abruptly done - I should have thought more!"

They were then asked how difficult they found their College work. The answers were split, half the sample found their work easy while the others found it difficult. In all cases where the respondent said they had a problem with the work being too hard, they either started the course late, or they were absent for some of the lectures. Missing lectures was the one consistent characteristic of those people who said they left because the work had become too difficult. Finding a link between missing lectures and dropping-out does not identify cause and effect. Does difficult work make you miss lectures or is the work hard because you have missed lectures?

From the oblique data, a retired Mathematics lecturer told me that in his opinion there were only two factors which predicted the success of a student, one was attendance the other was their 'mock' score; he insisted however, that these two factors should be taken together as evidence. If, from his prediction, a student who passes their 'mock' and has good attendance will do well in College, then it is not unreasonable to infer the opposite, that a student with poor attendance will be likely either to fail or drop-out. Ability and attendance may therefore be linked. Ability alone is not an indicator of success. This same lecturer added "except the kids that come from ***** (and he named a particular local school) ... they are all rubbish, they either drop-out or fail". The school that he mentioned has a very good academic record, and the students who come to College from this school are academically able, however, his casual observation was correct, many of them do drop-out [approximately 20%].

This simplistic picture does not reflect all the available evidence. Some students drop-out

very suddenly, after excellent attendance; for example, two respondents in this study left their course just before the end. Both had entered for the examinations and paid their exam fees. One of them left two weeks before the examination date, the other sat half the exams, but did not complete. Other students with erratic attendance patterns, often persist and pass their examinations. Poor attendance is not in itself an indicator of drop-out.

These data show that students who find difficulty with the work after missing some lectures, will drop out. This is an important finding, because it is the first drop-out feature revealed by this study which can be corrected by prompt, remedial action on the part of College staff.

16. What Does Being a 'Student' Mean?

All respondents in the telephone interviews were asked to think back, to before they became a student, and reflect on whether or not they thought they would enjoy being a student. Although the question was trying to take them backwards and forwards in time, none had difficulty in answering, perhaps because they did not think backwards, to before the event, but just told me about their final attitude, prior to dropping-out. Most respondents were quite positive about the way they felt and said that they did enjoy being a student. Even if these answers meant that they did enjoy, rather than predicting that they would enjoy student life, it says that the majority of drop-outs in this study, liked being a student. One respondent answered in such a way as to confirm that he really had taken the question in precisely the way it was intended; he had thought back in time and reflected on what the future might be, which is his 'now' and his spontaneous answer was:-

"Yes - I did think that I would enjoy it - and I did enjoy it."

The thought about the future is embedded in the first part of the phrase, and confirmation about the present, embodied in the latter part. From this one answer, the question format is unambiguously valid. It has served its purpose, eliciting answers about respondents' attitudes in the past, to something they have just currently experienced. Time leakage is a constant problem when meaning is developing, since the present interferes with the past, and predictions about the future may also contaminate reconstruction. Since it is almost

impossible to reconstruct past events without contamination from the present and the possible future, these data will have to be taken as imperfect. However, all data have been similarly corrupted; which suggests there may be hidden evidence here, dislodging the past, present and future from each other to reveal this hidden data remains problematic. While these data fit their purpose, it prompts a need for further investigation into the purity of response over time.

17. Motivation

Motivation was the last personal characteristic under investigation. In order to gauge motivation respondents were asked why they came to College. It has already been found that many students are coming to College for reasons other than the obvious one, of getting some particular qualification. Some enrolled to obtain a visa, others were just whiling away the time until suitable employment or marriage became available. Grounded in such answers is the reason for pursuing more questions relating to participation. If the objective of the student could be clarified, it would be easier to measure when they achieved their goal; unfortunately, these performance indicators will not necessarily correspond very closely with those employed by funding bodies such as the FEFC or the TEC. This creates a tension between the students' objectives and those of funding bodies and College staff. Certification may be a lower priority than skill acquisition or relief from boredom.

Only 31% of respondents in this study said they came to College for a qualification, even some of these phrased their answers in rather negative terms. For example, Cathy said "I came to College because my school didn't offer the A-levels I wanted to do", Lesley said "I took A-levels because I didn't know what else to do", and Jenny who told me that "the two Secondary schools close to me did not do the course I wanted to". Finally, Lindsay said she thought "College was better than Grammar school -being more relaxed - usual reasons - fed up with uniform etc - but I often wish I had gone to the Grammar school".

The other respondents either 'drifted' into College, or they were 'forced' to attend by employers or parents. The following comment will make clear the idea of drifting students.

Darren said "after finishing GCSE's I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so instead of doing nothing I decided to go to College - once I was there, I had to take the courses offered to me and not the ones I wanted".

The theme of being 'forced' into a course occurs again in the oblique data, when a College lecturer told me about a drop-out, in these terms:-

*"now there is this chap ****, this is definitely a College problem - he was offered this course very much as a second option because he left it a little bit late to get enrolled and this course was not what he wanted - it just didn't fulfil his expectations. Now, we have two people like that - one who exploited the course mercilessly and is still on the course and **** who has left. How we go about remedying that - I don't know".*

Another drifter was Maggie who said she came to College "just to give it a go!" There was also Andrew who said "My best friend was going - so I went too - but he didn't do it - he didn't go in the end". Finally, expressing the most confused reasoning from any respondent Ian said:-

"I choose (his error) to go to College because I had no other Educational choice and my wants were not a low grade job, I was very confused when I left school, I knew I'd wasted my time - I'm a lazy person - when I can't get self satisfaction from a task and need time to get my head together to do something. When I do get down to something I usually succeed. College was my only escape from going mad - so I went - the lecturer suggested this course - I just said - yes!"

Parents sometimes pressured their children onto a course, for example, Steve said "parental pressure - my parents felt I needed to go on to A-levels for which I needed better GCSE qualifications - I disagreed with them", and Martin who said "parent pressure really - but as I remember it I was quite enthusiastic at the start".

The most forceful agent in persuading a student to attend College against their will is the employer. Several respondents spoke about joining courses as a condition of employment. Robert, a mature student said " I was reluctant to come to College - I was forced by my employers - they've changed us around such a lot - so my role has changed - changed from a doer to an enabler - If that's the buzz word?"

Paula had a similar story "my firm was going to pay for this course - I work in a

Personnel Department doing very varied tasks". Hazel also tells a similar story, she said "I went to College to study animal care as a compulsory part of my job which was trainee veterinary nurse".

Finally, Tim said:- "I was TOLD to go on this course by the training scheme that employed me - I needed the money - It seemed particularly pointless, as I already had done most of the syllabus at a higher level."

Summarising these personal characteristics, it can be said that drop-outs are impetuous people, who frequently regret their sudden decisions. With poor attendance records it is not surprising that they experience difficulties with their work. Motivation to attend may be low because they have been forced into College by employers or parents who have misunderstood the students' needs and aspirations.

18. Parents and Family

Questions have already been asked about the home of drop-outs, it is known that drop-outs may be living with one or two parents, or if they are mature students they may have a family and children of their own. Surprisingly, this study has shown that a large number of mature students still live with their parents. Focusing attention on the parents and family may illuminate the extent of their influence on the drop-out.

The two fields covered by the questionnaires related to parental education and occupation. The first asked about the educational experiences of the Mother and Father. An interesting divide occurred in the answers, insufficiently large to be significant, but large enough to arouse curiosity. The GES and SSS samples differed; the GES sample had higher educational achievement levels than did the SSS sample. In both cases more Fathers than Mothers had continued their education. A possible source of error in these figures could arise from the drop-out answering these questions incorrectly. The GES sample was drawn from students taking academic courses, ie GCSE and A-levels, while the SSS sample was drawn from vocational departments. A pattern begins to emerge which suggests that parents who have experienced a College or University education have children who enrol for academic courses, while vocational students' parents do not have a

similar educational background. This may say something about student enrolment, but what does it say about student drop-out?

Several Mothers in the 'oblique' data collection were very positive and supportive of their children, and took the trouble to explain that their children were now doing something far better than attending College. The following three examples illustrate this.

1st Mother:- *"My son was in no way dissatisfied - it was simply that the people for whom he worked wanted him to go to Thailand - this was an opportunity he could not miss".*

2nd Mother:- *"My son was very pleased with the course - but the reason for leaving was that he took up permanent residency in France".*

3rd Mother perhaps a little more critical, but still very positive about her son says:-

"the teacher made some not very sensible remarks to him - he was very under confident - joining the course had been my idea and I was very surprised that he took it seriously - he's now working in a nursing home for a year out, before going up to University to read politics and economics".

Not one of these people could be thought of as having negative reasons for quitting; the excellent, unexpected opportunity presented to them was "too good to miss".

Some parents, while being supportive of their childrens' decision to leave College, did not offer such exciting reasons for dropping-out, for example, the following comment shows that this Mother is concerned about her daughter's behaviour:-

"I don't know why my daughter gave up - she dropped one subject because it wasn't what she expected - she was ill - but study seemed to be doing her good- then she suddenly stopped - I don't know",

Alternatively, some families change their minds about their child dropping-out of College. Mark was one such drop-out, first he skipped a few lectures, at which point his Mother was informed and she was insistent that Mark should resume his studies. Mark however,



seemed determined to withdraw. He could not leave until he had the support of his family. Quite suddenly Mark's Mother telephoned to say she had changed her mind, Mark could leave College. After three telephone conversations when she was very clearly in favour of his staying on, she suddenly changed her mind, she gave no reasons for supporting his decision to leave.

Another drop-out, Nigel, a mature man aged about forty dropped out as a result of his family changing their mind too. He had been seriously ill, but had overcome the cancer which had threatened his life and was now well on the road to recovery. He viewed his continuing education as part of that recovery process. His family had other opinions, they put pressure on him, suggesting that he was working too hard and it would make him ill again, finally he gave in and dropped out. When first asked about why he had left, he started to talk about some financial difficulties but he never finished that story, because he suddenly turned to his health again, and how he had to stop, not because of failing health, but because his sister was fretting that he might get ill again.

Two parents were unhelpful and I can only suppose this was in part due to the intrusion posed by my questions. The only Father in this study, answered very abruptly saying:-

"My daughter is not in - she is at work - I'm not sure when she will be in - I can't answer you questions".

In a way, he had answered them, he told me she was working, that in itself is a positive outcome after dropping-out; he may not have known why his daughter left College, but she was expected back home, so she was living with her Father, that too was something I was trying to collect information about. Finally, there was no disguising his annoyance, it seemed that he was as much angered by his inability to answer the questions as by my discovering his inability. Inadvertently I had found out something about this family's relationships. There is a great risk at this point of trying to read too much story into very little data, it is reminiscent of the reconstruction of early hominid skeletons from the fossil evidence provided by one tooth, a tempting prospect, but one which falls apart under rigorous inspection.

The other unhelpful respondent was a Mother who just kept saying "I don't know" to everything I asked, although she said it rather apologetically.

Only 34.5% of parents in this study had received further or higher education. In comparison to this figure, 72.7% of brothers and sisters had participated in further or higher education. This time the data is not divided, which creates another ambiguity, given the conclusion already inferred from the parents' educational background. It may be that the sibs in the SSS sample took vocational courses, the questionnaire did not make this distinction. Nor did the questions distinguish between the activities of younger brothers and sisters and older ones. The following table shows the proportions alongside the parents' educational achievement.

Table 4.3. Educational achievement of parents and siblings of student drop-outs

	Percentage of People Experiencing FE or HE		
	Mother	Father	Siblings
GES	35%	48%	73%
SSS	14%	28%	72%
n=68			

What else can be said about these parents? Nearly all were employed, most of the men (nearly 80%) were in full time employment, less than half the Mothers worked full time. This finding is not surprising since it reflects today's working practices. The occupations of these parents varied enormously from the relatively low skilled jobs such as window cleaner and milkman, to the professionals such as engineer and teacher. Some respondents listed their parents as retired or disabled and in a few cases, as dead. Most (65%) Brothers and Sisters of these drop-outs were also employed.

The most astonishing finding in these data is that none of the drop-outs participating in this study was an only child. Grounded on this finding, I set about finding out exactly how many 'only children' could be expected in the College as a whole. Taking a sample of convenience (rather than a random sample) I selected several classes and asked each lecturer if they could do a 'head count' of students who acknowledged themselves to be an 'only child'. From these figures I calculated the frequency of this occurrence in the total College population, which was 7.37: a high frequency when the result for drop-outs is zero. Applying a Z-test to these data it was found to be a highly significant difference at both the 5% and 1% levels of probability.

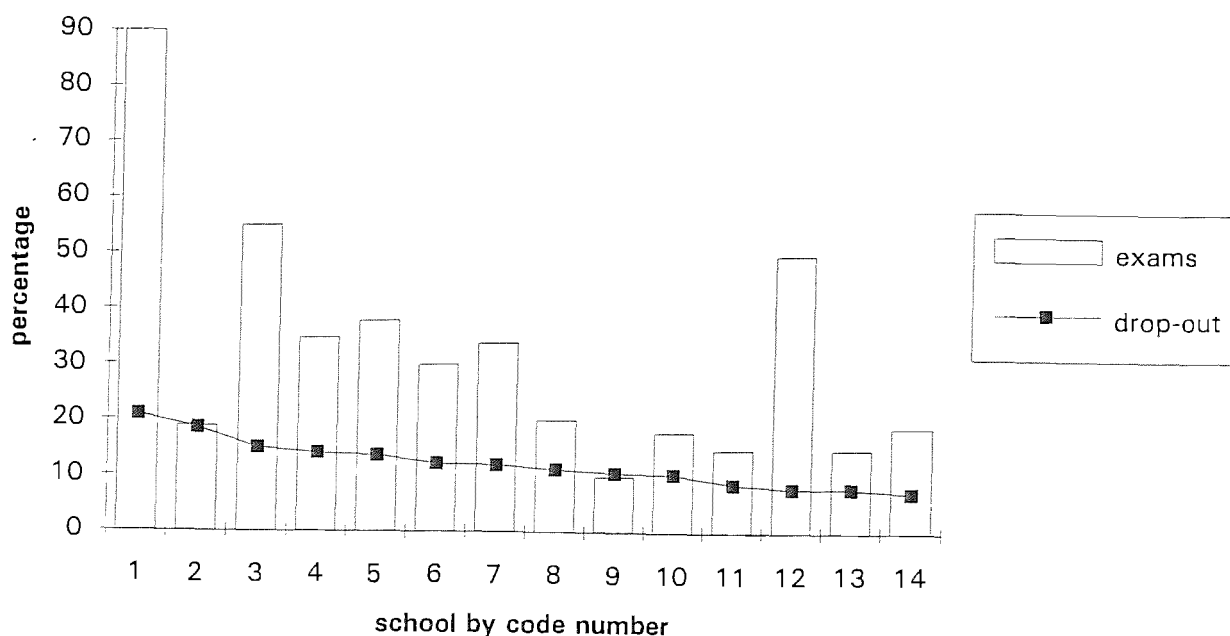
The relatively large sample sizes [n=223] involved in this analysis lend weight to these findings, although it cannot be said that an 'only child' will never drop-out, there were none recorded in this study.

19. Previous school

From the questionnaire it was possible to find out which school each drop-out had previously attended, and their qualifications before entry to College. Immediately apparent was the finding that some schools were disproportionately producing more drop-outs than others. This means that students from certain feeder schools came to College and then dropped-out in far higher numbers than would have been predicted by chance alone. By comparing the drop-out rate of each school with their GCSE examination results as first published in the 'League Tables' by the DFE, a clear link was found between the number of drop-outs who came from a school and the schools' examination success [concordance test = 0.735]. In other words, it appears that the academically successful schools are the ones who provide the College with most drop-outs. The following graph illustrates these data, the Schools have been listed under a numerical coding to preserve their confidentiality.

In a previous study of student drop-out, undertaken at one site of the same College, a similar link had been found between feeder schools and student withdrawal [Page 1990]. That sample was too small to provide sufficient data for significance statements about schools and drop-out. However, when added to the findings of this study, it produces another dimension, time, suggesting that certain schools produce drop-outs, and have been doing so since 1988 when the phenomenon was first investigated. The constancy of the same schools producing disproportionately high numbers of College dropouts cannot be ignored.

Exam league table results/drop-out per school



Graph 4.3 League table/drop-out data

There was one notable exception, school number 12. It has a high GCSE pass rate coupled with low drop-out, therefore this school deserved further investigation. Originally the research design included only the schools at either end of the drop-out spectrum, this new and somewhat unexpected finding changed the direction of the analysis.

The focus of this school's curriculum is on a child's readiness to proceed, the deputy head summed this up as follows:-

"we like to keep the kids until we think they are ready to go to College - if that means another year in our sixth form, then that is what we advise them to do - we've done an awful lot of work on assessment and profiling - it was in line with this move for making tutors more involved with the students - and I think we are quite advanced in this area of work, related to things with work - which is all tied up with this business of where you are going and so on ... [then later she picked up this point again] ... You see - the one thing we do do here, and this may affect drop-out - we don't

let people make a lot of chance applications - we are quite firm - we make them make a commitment - now, if a student has applied to the College or if they have applied to our Sixth, and the College as an alternative - we let them keep it - we have nothing against that - they have to decide and they may decide - OK - I'll go to College - well that's fine - but we control it and obviously it has a knock on effect on you - so the people you get from us, at least have made a definite decision."

The importance of the staff - pupil relationship was a prominent feature of another interview conducted with the head of school number 14, one of the best at not producing College dropouts. He said:-

"the main strength of the school is the relationship between the students and the staff - I think the fact that children are believed and are appreciated as young people, and we are here to do the best for them that we possibly can, there's a lot more to it than just sitting in a class room being blasted with fact after fact after fact, and the relationships, that I am so very keen on - we are all here for the education of the children - I and my deputies get involved in tutorial groups, so the children see us as teachers, as people who do exactly the same as everybody else in the school; there isn't in this school any hierarchical structure at all - that's the sort of relationship that we've got between the staff and it permeates through to the relationship that we have with the children."

His comments were reinforced by references to the school brochure which having proclaimed the winning of the Schools Curriculum Award in 1992, emphasised "the importance of individual development, and the care and concern for the individual ..."

A digression to consider how I received this information, reveals a good deal of scepticism about the comments on hierarchy and while impressed by the student centred philosophy of the school, I was wondering how it could translate in practice. These data, my starting point, had shown quite clearly that this school was producing successful students, or to use the head's phrase 'useful citizens'. The opportunity for further investigation was provided by an interview with another teacher from the same school. She told me that:-

"this is one of the most cohesive groups of people that I know - it really is - I think the staff draw strength from the fact that unless they're very new to the school they don't feel threatened - if they've had a bad time - they can go in the staff room and say Oh God! I've just had the most awful lesson - here, you can share the worry - there's an enormous amount of support and strength - there's a lot of staying behind after school - it's a very happy school and a very happy staff".

Unlike school number 12, this school is in a socially deprived area, the head summed this up when he said "there are a hundred and eighty six free school lunches ... and possibly many more that do not admit to it"

Poverty is not a sufficient explanation. The County of Dorset still has a Grammar school system with selection by 11+ examination. Further selection takes place at 12 and 16, so the brightest children are 'creamed off' and sent to one of the four grammar schools. The head of school 14 said:-

"we shouldn't be getting many A-C's (GCSE grades) there's something wrong if we do - because they should be in the Grammar school - but some will get F's and E's and those children will have done very well - we need to congratulate those children just as much as we do the girl who got nine A's".

At the opposite end of the drop-out/league table spectrum was school 1. The deputy head described his school's catchment area as:-

"large ... I'd say we have a fair cross section ... basically it's a well to do area".

Entering into discussion with him, the league table/drop-out data provided the starting point.

He picked up the conversation as follows:-

"roughly, you're saying that one in five students that we've sent you over the last couple of years has dropped-out - if they were our drop-outs it wouldn't be quite so surprising if they came to you and then they dropped-out, because they can't find their place either with us in our sixth form or with you in College - In terms of the environment - those pupils who have been with us for five years are fully aware of what's in store - they don't get the environment shock, but sometimes parents want to send a child to us for the academic respectability of our sixth form - clearly if a student has been kicking against us for five years then it may be that College is what they are looking for - then we would actively direct them along there - many of our staff would not believe, because they don't know, that in College you have a pastoral system - and I would guess that College life puts higher demands and more responsibility on students - (when children arrive at this school) they are told very clearly that there is a carrot and a stick system and the parents are told very clearly how the tutors are involved and that the tutor is the first point of reference - basically -

parents think that we take kids from the right catchment area - the tutor is the immediate point of discipline and also the immediate point of support".

What was he telling me? Two major themes emerge from this conversation, one is about discipline and the way children are controlled; the other is about staff attitudes towards the College. This deputy head was using phrases like 'believe' and 'guess' to describe College life, it is remarkable that he and his staff did not 'know'. Acknowledging the competitive element between this school's sixth form and the College goes some way towards explaining why the staff at this school did not know much about the College, but there is something here about not wanting or needing to know, because they only send students to the College, if they have been 'kicking against' the school.

What about the discipline? This school has an excellent academic record, there is no question about that, how is it achieved? The answer lies somewhere in the 'carrot and stick' regime outlined in the conversation. It is a very authoritarian school, as long as children do what is expected of them, complete their homework, perform well in class, participate in extra activities etc, they will do well, if they lapse, then the full might of the tutor is brought to bear, parents are called in and if necessary, disciplinary action taken. Exploring this with my respondent I asked what would happen if a child came into school having forgotten to put on a school tie. His answer was most informative:-

"That is a hanging offence"

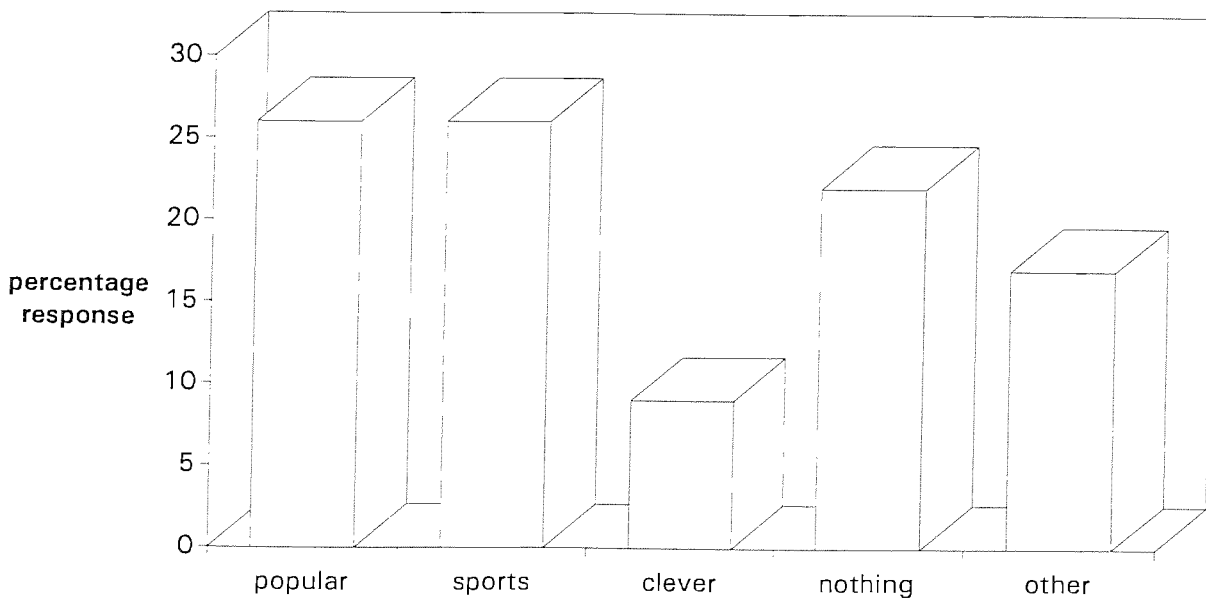
Further exploration was directed at finding out how these children were motivated, he told me:-

"We do the opposite (to self motivation) - there is a very regimented system here and they are checked on regularly",

This school achieves its excellent results by imposing an authoritarian regime upon its pupils which demands that they work hard and adhere to the traditions of the school. If pupils do not like this, they are actively encouraged to go to College because the school staff have certain 'beliefs' about College students. Unfortunately these beliefs are not founded on anything substantial and are therefore incorrect. Compared to the other two schools which had been investigated, where staff knew a lot about the College, what was on offer and what was required from the potential students, these teachers knew very little. This school only sent pupils to the College for negative reasons. The relevance of

negativity may go even deeper, since mis-informed staff interacting in the class room with pupils for about five years, have ample opportunity to transfer their negative attitudes, pupils learn that College is a place for failures and losers. Thus 'beliefs' can be a very powerful factor in creating drop-outs. This can be summarised in the words of one of the 'conversion' respondents who said "I was very badly informed about the course before I came - partly this information came from school - partly it was due to the College - I didn't get counselling advice - I didn't need it - I just asked my physics teacher - he helped me". Helped him drop-out, it would seem!

The questionnaire asked drop-outs if they enjoyed being at school and what they might wish to be remembered for. 71% of respondents said they enjoyed their school days, but the responses given for what they would wish to be remembered for, varied considerably. The majority wished to be remembered for their sporting activities, being popular or for nothing in particular. Very few wanted to be thought of as clever. The 'other' category was used by some respondents, two of whom offered the additional information, that they wished to be remembered for being pregnant. The following graph illustrates these findings.



Graph 4.4. What do you want to be remembered for at school?

Only 9% of respondents in this survey wished to be remembered for being clever, and yet the examination grades that these people already had before coming to College were at least equal to, and often higher than those of other students. The average drop-out has five GCSE passes already, if they have dropped-out of a higher level course, they already have at least six points at GCE, A or AS -level. Where appropriate, particularly on some vocational courses, they may have RSA or other vocational qualifications. The following table has been divided into two population categories, GES and SSS for convenience; there is little difference in the statistics of these two samples, this lends weight to the notion that they are in reality, one population. Of greater interest is the finding that people who drop-out of vocational courses have higher qualifications than those who drop-out of academic courses, and that both groups are already, fairly well qualified people.

Table 4.4 Drop-out - Examination Results

Sample	Statistic	Result		
		GCSE Passes	GCE Points	RSA
GES	mean	5.04	6	1.33
SSS	mean	5.2	9	1.6
GES	standard deviation	2.26	3.65	0.58
SSS	standard deviation	2.34	4.24	0.55
GES	n	23	4	3
SSS	n	15	2	5

Comments provided by some of the respondents also show that they are aware of their own superior qualifications and abilities. For example Ian said:-

"I knew I was wasting my time ... I love exams, I love knowledge ... I didn't find A-levels particularly difficult"

Another young man, David aged 18 years said:-

"I left college because I was not learning anything new".

The 'oblique' data also yielded the following comment from a lecturer about her students

"TO, SS, HB and CC (student initials) were especially able students and I don't think they were dissatisfied with the class - either the teaching or the peer group or the work".

There is something hidden inside these figures which needs further teasing out. The dilemma is posed by two conflicting findings; using data from the College's examination results analysis, the average score obtained by an A-level student taking three subjects is 6.59 [PISA]; the finding that the average GES drop-out already has a score of 6, while an SSS drop-out has an even higher score of 9 contributes to the conflict. It is difficult to extrapolate from these data because of the relative non-response to this question, but it does show that some drop-outs have higher qualifications than persisters can hope to achieve by course completion.

How can these findings be usefully explained? Do potential drop-outs become aware of their own, superior abilities? Do they find out that the course they are on will not lead them any further? If they are making comparisons, who are they comparing themselves with?

20. Boredom

Respondents did not refer directly to their superior ability but many talked about their courses being 'boring' for example:- "I just didn't enjoy it" said Cathy; another drop-out, Hazel said "I felt the course was uninteresting"; Ian said "I left because I knew I was wasting my time"; a mature student, Dawn said "Initially I expected the subject to be interesting but I found it to be incredibly boring"; another mature student, David said "I abandoned the idea after two or three weeks when the dreariness of the syllabus had sunk in".

These people did not find their work difficult, they said they were bored. Further to the idea of being bored by a course is the notion that it will not take you forward in terms of achievement. Elizabeth provides a typical example of this:-

"I felt the course was of little benefit considering I payed three hundred pounds for it! The course was not as advanced as I thought it would be and I was not learning anything that I did not already know".

21. Other students

The amount and difficulty of work, may not constitute the main problem for the drop-out. Interactions with other students may be the centre of the problem and the work being too easy or boring is just a reflection of these problems. These interactions may be 'normative' where the drop-out is trying to make friends and be part of a group, or it may be 'comparative' in that they are comparing themselves to others, and finding they are different.

Starting with Cathy again she says "I didn't like my surroundings - and I didn't really get on with any of the other students",

Jenny, who was on a hairdressing course said "I left because I couldn't get on with the people I was put on (work) placement with - they were not helpful and very bitchy!",

Amanda said "I've no friends in class - I don't talk to anybody - I'm an outsider - I've tried talking, but their level of conversation is not mine - I feel left out"

Finally James said "I didn't get on with the class - even with friends from the previous year - I don't associate with the kiddies in my class".

The emergent picture clearly shows that these drop-outs see themselves as different from and better than the other students in the class.

22. Friends

If drop-outs see themselves as different from other College students, what influence, if any, do their friends have? One or two drop-outs have already talked about coming to College to accompany their friends. Do they drop-out together? There is no evidence to suggest that this happens, dropping-out of College appears to be an individual activity.

During the telephone interviews friendship was discussed. Many respondents had friends still at College, while others had friends in employment. There were some anecdotal

pieces about other people they had heard of who had dropped out, and one respondent knew a drop-out, but she told me that they were now planning to return to College. Some respondents talked about their friends changing; their current friends are a different group of people to the ones they used to associate with. From the questionnaire, 42.86% of the respondents said that their friends came to College at the same time as they did. None claimed that any friends left at the same time. Several respondents mentioned friends going away and losing touch. While other respondents, particularly those currently employed, said they got on much better with their friends now, because they had money for social activities.

No pattern emerges from these data. Drop-outs have friends in College, they also have friends who work. The one feature which merits attention is the financial aspect of a social life, students who have little income may find it difficult to go out and enjoy themselves in the same manner as their working, earning, peers. This in turn generates another question, why are these students socialising with working people rather than other impoverished students? If they socialised with people who, like themselves had little or no money, the differences in spending power would be negligible, but they are comparing their resources to those who have paid employment; immediately they seem to have less and, by the same terms of reference, less fun. This may be a reason for dropping-out.

23. When Friends Become Enemies

One drop-out's story was so unusual it merits special attention. The reason John gave for leaving College was that he was 'hounded' out by the other students in his class; people he had been to school with, turned on him, threatened him, harassed him, until he dropped-out. What had John done to attract this unwanted attention? Rumour accused him of incest. His own father committed suicide. His Mother also eventually, killed herself. John found her body, hanged, in their flat. He dropped-out when he could no longer take the abuse. His teachers were alerted to his problems, but there was little they could do to suppress them outside the class room. John came to see me the day of his Mothers inquest, dressed in his best, looking smart and confident, he told me that because he had no money, he had to get a job, maybe with training. I made some telephone calls for him and arranged an interview. Here was a young man with university potential

having to work in a kitchen to survive. John always denied the accusations made against him.

Peer pressure is a powerful drop-out factor. If a potential drop-out compares themselves to others in the peer group, they may conclude that they are better off out of it.

Alternatively, the group may decide to reject one of the class. In John's case it went as far as violence, usually the pressure is much milder. Mild pressure can be just as convincing.

John's story is both extreme and sad, but violent reaction between students does occur from time to time. Another student, Jammie was beaten up and trussed in a dust-bin liner when some of the other students decided to punish him, or frighten him away, because they thought he was homosexual. Another student, a young girl, Lisa was also frightened out of College by other students who threw things at her when she was on her homeward bus journey, at first it was peanuts they threw, but eventually the missiles became harder and she was hurt, and so frightened, she gave up her studies. She told me the other students did not like the way she dressed. I could see that she had assumed a style that was different from the usual mode worn by most students, but I could not understand how this caused offence which merited a violent reaction.

24. The College

For convenience the College experience can be sub-divided into three categories: access, covering marketing, advice and guidance; process, covering all classroom interaction; outcomes, including data collected on College leavers.

Every drop-out in this study talked about their course failing to meet their expectations. The following comments will serve to illustrate this point.

"I wasn't informed fully about the course"

"the course was not what I expected at all"

One angry respondent displayed her feelings about the situation saying:-

"I left my course regretfully because it was the wrong course for me - there was no mention about it being the wrong course - even when I specifically asked if it would be OK - I was furious - I'd wasted all that money - it seems to me that the College is only interested in your wallet".

A mature student offered a solution to what he saw as the problem of inadequate information, he explained:-

"the details of the syllabus should be available for inspection - it is unreasonable that (money) should change hands at a time when only the tutor knows what is on offer. Perhaps I should have refused to enrol blindfolded, but I decided I had no option but to take an optimistic view".

These comments suggest that drop-outs are not receiving adequate information, even when they specifically ask for it. Are admissions staff deliberately misleading these people or are these drop-outs misunderstanding the information given?

One articulate, and well qualified woman made some salient comments about this:-

"I really feel I was totally misled - I really feel the College have tried something that I don't feel really works - and certainly not for me - I feel this course has been misrepresented",

Dismissing this problem as entirely the fault of the drop-out, who has misunderstood the information, is an over simplification. If the College misinforms potential drop-outs, then it would be logical to presume that persisters may also feel their courses have been misrepresented. A survey of 1500 other College students [SPOC 1992/3] showed that 35% felt their course did not meet their expectations. This is an alarming result. Of all the criteria so far considered, this is of major importance and the simplest to rectify.

Having overcome the misinformation trap, a potential student has to enrol on the right course. Getting the course of your choice is not always easy, especially if the application is made late. One vocational drop-out said

"I barely started the course before I left - I already had grave doubts about going into construction - but at this late stage I had no idea what to do about it".

Another student, also forced into a course they did not want said *"I had to take the course offered to me and not the one I wanted".*

These data suggest that some students do not recognise their options, and staff do not

always make the alternatives clear.

Once a student has embarked on a course, more difficulties present themselves. The work may be difficult, either because the student has missed lectures, as discussed previously or because the student has un-recognised learning difficulties. Gillian explains her problems with her A-level class as follows:-

"At the beginning the staff don't take it seriously enough - to see you are right for the course - I know a lot of people who couldn't handle it and dropped-out - especially with adults".

What about staff attitudes? All respondents were asked to comment on their relationship with staff, 87.24% said they were satisfied, they said:-

"The tutors were fine - very helpful"
"The tutor gave me a lot of confidence"
"Lecturers were OK"

A minority of students were not happy with their teachers/tutors and said things like:-

"The teacher did not have enough time to go round everyone - pity",

"I resent the unhelpful attitude of my teacher - we do not like this teacher - in the previous year we complained - she makes me feel so little"

"He makes me feel like a three year old - I'm just not able to expose myself to this treatment any longer - I like the course - but I just can't make him (the lecturer) understand what he's doing".

"When I was asked questions that I couldn't answer in the class I became increasingly more self conscious and eventually gave up - incidentally, I paid for the exam two days before I gave up - which proves that I had every intention of trying - but I just couldn't face it",

The following table summarises these findings from the questionnaire,

Table 4.5. The staff/student relationship

Questions	Answers		n.
	yes	no	
1. Did you get on with your teachers?	87.24%	12.76%	47
2. Did you like the teaching methods?	54.55%	45.45%	44
Total Percentages	70.88%	29.11%	100%

From the table above, it can be seen that overall, about one third of these drop-outs expressed dissatisfaction with the teachers and the teaching. The majority got on well with staff as individuals but opinion was divided about the suitability of teaching methods. Aggregating isolated pieces of information gleaned over several years, a pattern emerges which suggests very strongly that one third of all drop-outs do so because of course related reasons.

The following table quantifies the people involved in dropping out for course reasons.

Table 4.6. Number of people dropping out for course related reasons

Year	Number of drop-outs (% of enrolment)	% drop-out giving course related reason
1988	63 (20)*	33%
1989	10 (20)*	27%
1990	***	
1991	995 (6.2)	33%
1992	1754 (10.3)	34%
1993	1516 (8.4)	36%
1994	1253 (7.6)	37%

* These figures are low because they refer to one department only.

*** no data available for this year.

This data matrix provides the raw material for drop-out rate prediction. The pre-1990 data is scanty because prior to this time, no attempt was made to count drop-out, it was deemed unnecessary, since all funding was linked to student entry. It is important to consider all these figures as an under-representation of the true drop-out rate since most

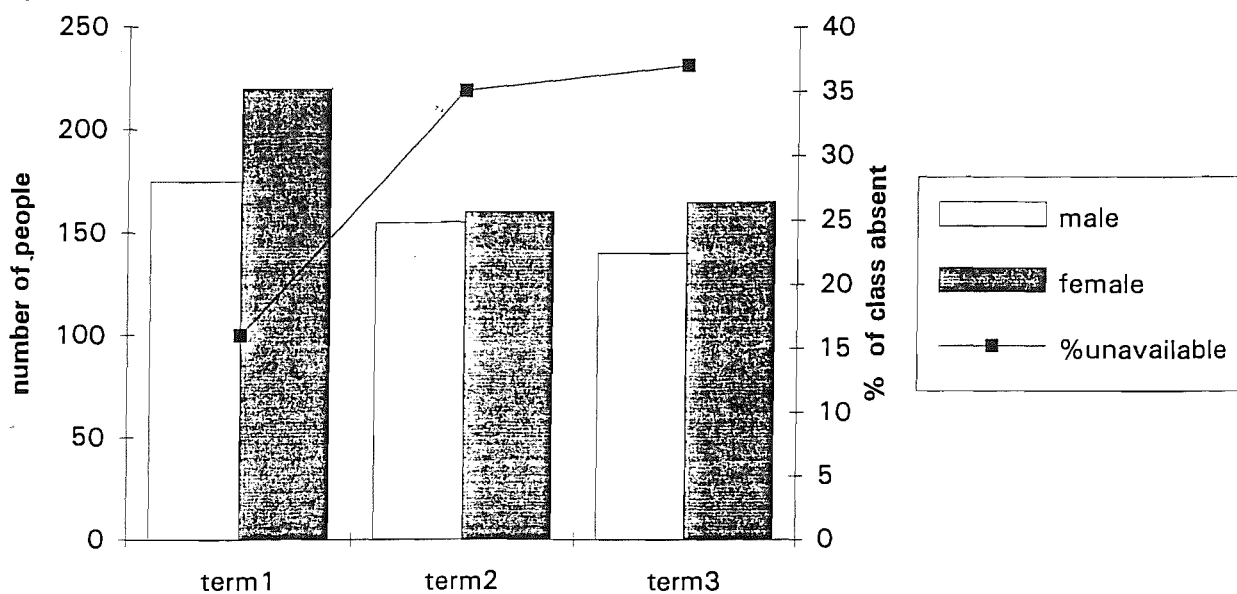
students who drop-out of College are not recorded by any internal mechanisms. A more realistic figure can be calculated from the outcome data for students, by subtracting the number who enter examinations, from the total enrolment, the remainder represents the true drop-out figure. Unfortunately, the College has never been able to provide accurate statistics on the number of people enrolled. To get at any figures which approach the real drop-out rate the examinations analysis reveals end results are missing for approximately 4000 people each year. This is the closest approximation to the real drop-out figure that can be made at this stage.

The following data also illustrates this 'tip of the iceberg' phenomenon. The first sample for this study was drawn from one department, the GES sample. The official data showed 179 drop-outs. Checking this listing against classes which I taught, I realised that some drop-outs were not included, I arranged to trawl all the GES registers, enlisting the help of other staff, I asked them to supply me with a list of their drop-outs. They sent me a further 171 names, only nine of which appeared on both lists. All these people together, formed the GES sample. The margin of error is approximately 50% and validates the previous calculation of the true drop-out rate for the whole organisation.

Two lessons can be learnt from this, firstly, student attendance and withdrawal can only be monitored from registers, reliance upon staff completing the appropriate paperwork is misplaced, because there is a positive dis-incentive attached. Secondly, the College needs to re-evaluate its curriculum in the light of this more realistic drop-out figure.

What happens to a student when they decide to drop-out? If they notify the College, they are recorded as a drop-out statistic; if their continued absence is noticed, they will be sent a letter, asking them to report to their tutor to 'sort out' their problem. In all probability, nothing will happen at all, they are just lost to the system, and only appear as a missing outcome statistic at the end of the academic year.

There is a marked seasonal variation in student drop-out. It starts off slowly at the beginning of the academic year and then accelerates. The following graph illustrates this phenomenon. The data was collected by tracking 465 [SPOC 1993/94] students through one year in College. A correction has been made to allow for illness and negotiated absence.



Graph 4.5. Student Absentees

From this graph it can be seen yet again, and by a separate method, that the drop-out figure is approaching 40%. Acceleration takes place during the Winter, but the rate continues to rise until it peaks in the final term. Most drop-outs leave College either in September/October or immediately after the Christmas vacation, in January.

25. The Drop-out in the Community.

When students drop-out of College they drop-back in to the local community. A few quickly move on, two of the drop-outs in this study had moved abroad, one had moved to London, seven were untraceable.

68% of respondents in this survey said they were employed. Some had more than one job, while others were working part-time and/or claiming benefits. Those who were unemployed had financial difficulties, as illustrated by the following three comments:-

"I am unemployed, I claim benefit - but I am also married - my partner helps to support me".

"This is a short term strategy - just to tide me over until I go to University"

"It is causing severe hardship - I've no money - I have to borrow off friends to live"

Of those who were employed, some obtained their jobs as a direct result of being on a College course. Two respondents talked about these experiences, Joe got her job as a nurse because she was able to satisfy her employers that she was capable of study, having completed two terms in College, and Moraig got a job as a pharmaceutical sales-representative because she had studied science in College. Two other drop-outs went directly to University, when offered unconditional places. If a student is offered such an appealing opportunity, in whose interest is it to continue? FEFC does not acknowledge alternative successful outcome as a criteria for funding, maybe they should?

26. Returners

Many respondents (56%) said they would like to go back to College, most wished to go onto other courses, but some wanted to finish the course they dropped-out from. For example Sarah said:-

"I'll have gone through one of the courses - and be training and boring down to work"

Another respondent quite clearly summarised his situation thus:-

*"I did learn from dropping-out - I learned that this (course) was not for me
- I may want go on to do Open University - I don't want to stop education
- I discovered that I wasted my time - now I want to get on with my
education - I want to make something of myself"*

27. The Right Decision

67.65% of respondents in this study thought that dropping-out of College was the right thing for them to do. Most want to return, but they want better information before they start, they want different teaching methods and they want more study support. Of those

who do not want to come back, the opportunities presented to them outweigh those on offer in College; they either have the University place they were after, or they have found the ideal job. If coming to College assisted them in obtaining these goals then there should be a mechanism for recording it as a positive outcome.

When drop-outs come to College the second time around, will they succeed? This has never been investigated; anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that some of these students end up doing very well. This aspect of 'second time around' drop-out needs further investigation.

28. Death

There is one factor in this investigation which must be acknowledged, however unpleasant and that is that some students are categorised as a drop-out when they have died. The average death rate for the four years of this study was three people each year. In most cases death was accidental. Death is mentioned here because it became a methodological issue. No distinction can be made from the official statistics and on several occasions I found myself trying to interview a bereaved family. I have included this information specifically for two reasons. Firstly, it is an unexpected and yet, unavoidable event which may confront other researchers. Secondly, the College must address this classification issue since it does not fit 'snugly' with the concept of course non-completion.

29. Summary

Table 4.7. Statistical Summary of Data

Part 1 The College Population	
Number of students enrolled each year	18 000 approx
Number of GES sample drop-outs	341
of whom addresses available	115
Number of SSS sample drop-outs	1 000 approx
of whom 20% were sampled	200
Number of persisters surveyed	1 500
Number of students in tracking exercise	465
Number of students in 'only child' exercise	223
Number of ethnic minority students	552
Part 2 The Research Population	
Number of questionnaires returned	68
Number of telephone case studies	10
Number of conversion case studies selected for sample	18
Number of conversion sample contacted	10
Questionnaire response rate	21.58%
Conversion response rate	55.56%
Telephone follow-up response rate	100%
'Oblique' data in depth interviews	7
Other 'oblique' data respondents	37
Number of schools investigated	3
Number of drop-outs directly interviewed	15

30. Acknowledgement

I would like to emphasise that all the names of people included in this study are fictitious in order to protect respondents. Two of the schools in this study, number 12 and 14 wished to be named. They are: Ferndown Upper School and Martin Kemp Welch, respectively. The staff from other schools involved in this study wish to remain anonymous. All College staff who participated in this research also wished their identity to be withheld.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

1. An Untidy Journey

The following is a record of the intellectual journey which lead to this research. The justification for its inclusion has been borrowed from many contemporary authors such as Polanyi (1974), Burgess (1984), Hammersley (1984), Atkinson (1984) and Denzin (1989).

There is always a relationship between the research question and the research questioner. This relationship encompasses the history and context of the researcher, but as Burgess (1984) suggests, this relationship is often rather 'untidy'.

The journey will begin with the autobiography of the researcher as recommended by Denzin (1989): biographical details and their chronology are fairly straight forward but placing the 'self' into the research in a reflective manner requires critical analysis of the personal context relevant to the study. Choosing relevant criteria becomes problematic since so much 'self' is taken for granted, and rarely exposed to analysis of any kind. Usher and Bryant (1989: p.149) recommend that the dual roles of researched and researcher are replaced by personalising the "action of enquiry".

2. 'Rites de Passage': The Biography

My biography starts in London where I was born into a family of Polish refugees. As an only child, raised by parents who spoke little English, my primary socialisation was very European. At school I learnt to speak English, and progressed in fairly routine fashion through the various scholastic levels. I attended single sex schools, which was the 'norm' at this period. This enabled me to study science without ever questioning its gender implications. It was not until I reached university, and found myself heavily outnumbered by men, that I began to think science androcentric. At University instruction followed the rigorous disciplines of objective science, and it was easy to fall in with the prescribed

goals of scientific method; description, prediction and control (Reaves 1992).

Later, as a working scientist I contributed to the popular myth that science is superior to other forms of knowledge because as Chalmers (1978, p.1) explains "Scientific knowledge is reliable knowledge because it is objective proven knowledge". Byrne (1993, p.14) describes science as " an intellectual, principle-based area of curiosity leading to knowledge, but located in an abstract attempt to explain the world by systematic, objective, ordered analysis" and goes on to say that science is perceived to be a male domain because its disciplines have been constructed by men creating "a patriarchal and instrumental paradigm" (p.16).

I had internalised, without thought or question the foundations inherent to this paradigm. I was a scientist. I was a woman. There began to emerge a conflict between the scientific 'me' and the woman.

3. The Feminist

I failed completely to recognise these scientific 'taken for granted' assumptions. I did not begin to unravel these assumptions until I became the Mother of daughters, and suddenly this new imperative drove me to question the world in which I had been operating. I had been the only woman taking my particular options at University, I was the first female scientific officer where I started work, and now Motherhood forced me to reflect upon the world my daughters would grow up in. My world was androgenous, and naively I had been too busy to notice.

My personal growth was beginning. Awakening a feminist outlook, I thus began to dissect my embedded assumptions. This reflection focused on my role as a woman, mother, scientist, and inter-personal relationships. I also questioned my perspective; did I ask different questions, did I see different evidence; did I have a feminist way of seeing as Cook and Fonow (1986) advocate.

Crowley and Himmelweit (1992, p.5) explain that

"women... hold a specifically gendered consciousness. This affects not only the way that they behave as objects of study, but also the way in which they as subjects of knowledge understand themselves and the world".

My developing understanding was that women in the world of science were alien; tolerated if they can speak the language and cope with the day to day rigours of the job, but always viewed as different. Creating a frame of reference based on the other scientists (male) finally showed me my own gendered consciousness.

Lyotard (1979) alluded to there being two forms of knowledge, scientific and narrative, and that these exist in conflict. The self which is a woman, wife and Mother has pragmatic, practical knowledge based on experience which can only be described in narrative form and is heavily influenced by a gendered reaction. The scientific self, which is also part of Me, has knowledge of a different kind, its purpose may be every bit as practical, but its form is theoretical, conceptual, statistical and often counter-intuitive; it has grown from male discourse. The result is not as Lyotard predicted a conflict or competition, instead it is a reconciliation. These two forms of my knowledge, the scientific with its insistence on rigour, measurement and objectivity is reconciled with my subjective experiences, unfolded in narrative. There is no conflict, just two ways of looking, two ways of seeing and two ways of talking.

4. The Christian: "Knowing Ourselves Puts us in our Rightful Places... and Self Knowledge Yields Humility." (Mother Teresa, 1987: p.133)

Being a Christian involves obeying the Commandments, upholding the Beatitudes and living according to Doctrine.

When I stop to consider my own Christianity, I recall first of all a sign I once saw outside a church, it said 'if Christianity was a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?'. This endeavour to answer the question locates my self knowledge within an Christian tradition.

Paul Tillich (1948 p.78) said "Religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion".

It is necessary to explore this link between the religious beliefs of people and the shape of the prevailing culture. I use the term 'shape' to include all aspects of society, including what Pauk and Pauk (1977) list as science, art, ethics, society and state. From early childhood I was raised as a Christian, the framework of Christianity which governs my work and life has been built over many years, it foundered, collapsed during the years when I rejected formal religion, and was restored when my Christian values re-asserted themselves.

I cannot quantify my early indoctrination but the effect lingers on. The Gospels speak of 'love' as the essential ingredient of Christian being, through the expression of love all other Christian virtues manifest themselves. 'Love' is not an easy expression to use today, people prefer terms such as compassion, concern and care. I see my work as an expression of 'love' for others, professionally I envelop it in a veneer of pedagogic pastoral valuing for all my students, but beneath that veneer is the hope that I share for them, with them and through God.

Mother Teresa (1987, p.41) once said " the Lord has willed me here, where I am. He will offer a solution".

It is a prayer I share. I did not freely choose this topic for study, it was pushed towards me, not by anyone with the power to make me take on such a project, but by my own drop-outs. As for God providing solutions, that is un-quantifiable, but I believe they are there. Some people would prefer to call it good luck, or professional acuity, that put me in the right place at the right time, asking pertinent questions. I define it as the interface between my own autonomy and divine provenance, or more simply, God answered my prayers. There may be other, more logical answers, but they would not be my answers: the reader may choose.

Christian philosophy teaches us to see good in all, again this is an extension of the 'love' doctrine. I found myself looking at student drop-out, which was classified professionally as wastage or non-completion, always in negative terms and I began to see a different picture. I could see the 'good' in the drop-outs. The problem now confronting me was to reconcile this new vision with current practice.

The doctrine of reconciliation has enabled another merger to take place, one between the subjective experience of conducting research and the objective rigour demanded by the process. Bringing together two disciplines which are viewed as incompatible, has created an opportunity released from the restrictions imposed by either discipline which artificially limit the resolution of the problem.

Another aspect of the 'love' doctrine is forgiveness; forgiving others and forgiving oneself. Before applying forgiveness, it is necessary to examine the conscience and acknowledge fault. The result of all this 'soul searching' is often guilt, and just like many other Christians I can usually find myself wanting. It was guilt which drove me to search for an answer to the drop-out problem in the first place. I initially thought that it was something I had done which caused some of my students to drop-out, and this generated feelings of guilt. Reflective research is not dissimilar to the processes of an examination of conscience. Emphasis must be upon the reflection, a looking outwards, because if the process is totally reflexive, then it will generate more and more guilt and become unbearable. Reflexivity to the exclusion of all else limits the productivity of the exercise while reflective research opens a door to others.

Teilhard de Chardin (1957, p.53) explained that the work of all Christians should be undertaken for God, because it "restores the value of human endeavour" so that "the least action will be filled with God".

This for me becomes problematic: it is not that I disagree with the sentiment as expressed by Chardin but I find it an impossibly difficult task, which then creates more guilt and the need for more forgiveness. The God that I work for is the same one that speaks to 'Don Camillo', rough, practical, humorous, and ready to kick-start a reluctant participant in the omnipotent plan (Guareschi 1951). Belief in that God presents no problem, believing in God simply requires faith; faith alone defines the verity of belief.

5. FE as a Research Context

"The development of FE has not only been haphazard, but also difficult to pin down"

[Gleeson and Mardle, 1980, p.8]

Traditionally, Further Education has not received much attention from researchers. Research activity in Education was restricted to University departments, few of whom had any FE connections. FE lecturers themselves could have undertaken these research tasks, but by training were quite unsuited. The paucity of research activity in this sector is not just a phenomenon of the College in this study, it "remains alien within many FE cultures but may be a major factor in influencing the success of the new incorporated College" (Muller et al 1993, p.24).

Crotty and Warrender (1992, p.11) noted that:

"The establishment of a flourishing research culture is an aspiration common to most FE institutions [but] progress towards establishing institutional research cultures follows a common pattern. That progress is somewhat uneven is scarcely surprising as most Colleges have to contend with the ramifications of government policy, mergers, restructuring and incorporation..."

Starting with Government policy, Johnson (1993, p.1) explains how its role has been a "major influence... its economic targets and its educational reforms" all trying to relate the practice of education to the goals of the market place. During 1992/3 the College prepared for incorporation. The 'big day' fell on April 1st 1993 and was celebrated with Champagne and the arrival of numerous FEFC circulars, a new phenomenon. These circulars were written in a new language, with new acronyms, and were read with a new urgency since now a major part of the College's funding came from this new organisation.

The language was dictated by market economics. Education had to produce strategic plans and set targets, which if not met would incur penalties (the price). Not only were targets centred on student achievement (the product) but they had to allow for students with special learning needs, under-represented minorities and suddenly, the government wanted statistics on the DLE (the customer) and these had to be made public (the marketing).

The Demand led element, DLE, relates to student enrolment and retention. This started to produce research with a purpose if not panic. Before incorporation, the only criteria on which Colleges were judged and funded were the number of students enrolled and the pass rate at examination. Suddenly, Colleges were required to look at completion rates as a performance indicator, and very few Colleges had any idea of what their completion rate really was; drop-out had always been an irrelevant statistic; retention became the new

"buzz" word.

Another major effect of incorporation has been the restructuring of Colleges. Since much more effort is required to obtain statistics in these new fields, new staff have been appointed to gather these new data. This is both time consuming and expensive and as a direct consequence of the need to provide such information to the 'purse string holders', colleges now have to divert funds into these non-teaching activities. The balance has not yet been reached when the benefit of accurate progression data informing the curriculum improves pedagogic standards such that funding increases in line with the amount spent on collecting data in the first place. Theoretically it should be possible to arrive at this balance, however, there is a language problem: the language of administrators prevents their being able to understand the needs of academics and vice versa. Traditionally the administrative work of the College was purely for funding purposes, suddenly it is also needed to inform curriculum changes; this has not yet been grasped by the staff concerned. Administrators still see their data as privileged information and will not part with it for a purpose they do not recognise as legitimate. Academics do not understand the need to provide data for administrators because they are teachers and they have never been required to enter into this type of activity before, it runs against the prevailing culture; a culture that states very clearly that lecturers teach and administrators push pieces of paper.

The consequences of this breakdown in communication are that lecturers are threatened with losing their funding and ultimately their jobs because of their own shortsightedness and administrators may jeopardise the whole learning process by not feeding pedagogic information into a system which suffers such inertia that any changes need a year or more to come about. The consequence of this inability to speak the same language and understand each other's need is that even more staff have to be employed in order to complete the same tasks, duplicating the effort, so that they can then be made available to curriculum planners, at twice the cost, twice the time and twice the frustration.

The solution is not yet in sight. A senior admin-officer explained very carefully to me that "the only purpose of the student tracking system was to attract funding to the College" and she could not understand that the same information was needed to feed into 'value added' research, learner support programming, EFL provision and special needs

help, student retention and quality improvement. There is a gulf which seems to be widening between the objective purposes of administrators and those of teachers; neither population is communicating effectively with the other, and until they do, a solution will not be found.

The problem is linguistic and has an historical basis of distrust between these two populations within the organisation. The root of the problem is philosophical and centres on the beliefs embodied by the employees in these various roles. The administrator philosophy was exemplified by one of the College's financial controllers who said that for him "the customer will always be King!". With a little probing I was able to find out who he thought the "customer" was, and I admit that I was surprised, because for me it would be the students, but for him it was anyone who payed for the services of the College. In other words, his customers were the funding Council, the TEC, employers and industrialists; people who did the paying and not necessarily the recipients of learning.

Hence the communication dilemma, when we talk to each other we speak of differing purposes, differing functions and in a different language. There is a conflict of interests caused by a differential value system.

6. Research as a Threatening Activity, Creating Forbidden Knowledge

As a direct result of FE having no research tradition, some staff fail to see the benefits of research activity and therefore are reluctant to participate. Johnson (1993, p.2) says that research activity benefits "the institution, staff, students and the community". Which seems to include everyone concerned with education. What then, creates the deep distrust of research within the organisation?

A senior manager summed up the feelings of many of his colleagues when he said rather aggressively "what the hell has it got to do with you ... you shouldn't have access to information like this ... it is for departmental management only ..."

There were two messages being delivered here, one was overt, the research activity that I was undertaking was encroaching upon this managers territory and he had something to

hide. The second message is one buried in the understanding of what and how the words were spoken. This man was very angry, part of the hostile display was due to the dual nature of my role as a woman and my hierarchical position within the College.

Taking first my position in the organisation; it is ambiguous. I have a polyvalent role as a lecturer, a curriculum researcher and equal opportunities co-ordinator. It is these roles which enable me to operate at all levels within the organisation, empowered to breakthrough existing departmental structures and gain access to people and information without having to accept refusals from "gatekeepers".

The second aspect, my being a woman is a more difficult concept in this context. The prevailing management style is highly competitive, hierarchical and patriarchal. The everyday working conditions are dictated by men, primarily for men, and the few women involved are expected to conform. Partly because of my unusual professional role and partly because I am female, I do not conform to these male expectations. Inevitably therefore, a mystique is created about my work and my perceived power. By denying the existence of male power relations over me and my work I have effectively taken to myself an unanticipated power role. This perception of my power has fuelled the mystery which threatens some staff. The problem lies within the perception of those who feel threatened by the research activity; what is this knowledge that they would forbid me to have?

It is not possible to over-emphasise the impact of the prevailing 'macho' culture on the work of women in this organisation, it debilitates and undermines constantly. Against this backdrop, this study has progressed; it has had to overcome direct opposition, indirect ridicule and contempt, secrecy, disruption and inappropriate organisational obstacles. The personal challenge has been to protect my own academic freedom to direct my enquiry and not to submit to pressure to engage in re-active research aimed only at solving short term problems; pro-active research such as that embodied in this study may not have a place in the post-incorporation world of FE, simply because it may be too costly and the benefits unclear at the outset. This idea will be returned to and expanded later.

Crotty and Warrender (1992) warn that the College environment shapes the form and the focus of research. I have shown that the environment in which this particular research was undertaken was not supportive, it was a resistant environment which pressed upon the

researcher in an attempt to stifle progress.

7. Why "it" Rather Than "them"?

The "it" refers to the organisation as a whole, rather than "them", individual people. Within the organisation individuals take on prescribed, negotiated roles. Understanding "it", the organisational framework, is a pre-requisite to understanding student drop-out.

The College has a pyramidal hierarchy, with the principal and governing body at the top, the executive and heads of department in the next layers down, followed by staff on the management spine and lecturers and finally all the support staff, although they too have a hierarchy and some consider themselves to be more powerful than others. Across this hierarchy is a vertical departmental structure, the college is divided into seven departments, one of these is predominantly academic, the others are vocational. In their study of Western College, Gleeson and Mardle (1980, p.59) described the departmental structure as "present (ing) a major frame of identification for its staff, (which) lies at the heart of all institutional competition and conflict". This College is no different. The lecturers and support staff all identify with their departments, and because this College is a multi-site College, they usually identify with one geographical area as well. Rooted in the historical notion that enrolment is the all important criterion of success for any department, staff actively compete to keep students irrespective of the needs of the student, who might wish to extend their studies in another department. Evidence of this type appears every year, and so far, in spite of the change in funding and the publication of the student charter, shows no sign of abating.

Uniting all the departments is a corporate image aimed at presenting to the public a very 'glossy' picture of high quality education at the heart of the community. This image is exemplified by the College 'logo' and qualified by the publication of its mission statement and the quality characteristics which provide the philosophical framework for the ethos of the organisation.

Corporate identity, corporate colours and corporate logo all reinforce the notion that this is one College, but staff persist in identifying with a department, and it is to their

department that they give their loyalty. From this departmental loyalty springs the conflict between staff and management, since the executive are not affiliated to any department. Any other members of staff who are not linked to departments are automatically seen as 'other' and not to be trusted. This has had a profound effect upon my own position as a researcher within the organisation. Since I am also not part of the management structure, my own sense of otherness is complete, I fit nowhere, and thus my freedom to research has been bought at a cost.

8. College and Community as Audience

Norman Lamont, speaking in Parliament just after being forced from office as Chancellor of the Exchequer said of the government:-

"There is something wrong with the way we make our decisions,,,,,as a result, there is too much short-termism, too much reacting to events,not enough shaping of events. We give the impression of being in office,but not in power".

Short-term solutions, re-active rather than pro-active strategies and very rapid decision making are all characteristic of this College, and the management also give the impression of being in office, while the funding bodies exert the power.

This fuels a conflict between the management and the purposes of the research, as initially defined, calling into question the autonomy a researcher can claim when studying the organisation in which they work. When this study was started I had a vision of helping students, people that I could easily envisage, sitting in the classroom in front of me, people with families, with stories to tell, with faces and personalities; the whole process was real and made alive by the very people I hoped to study. The administrative systems never see people, they only look at numbers and have an overbearing concern with money; to them numbers of students equal pounds on a balance sheet. When the government changed policy radically to include retention as a performance indicator, I succumbed to the pressure to provide numbers, and in so doing felt very aggrieved that some of my work had been corrupted for the purposes of administrative systems and making the cash balance, rather than my altruistic ideal of making peoples' lives better. I cooperated for a short term solution, a re-active process instigated to solve an immediate

funding problem. Where was the power? Who was in office? The management needed the information, I had the data, but the power was exerted from the funding bodies, and ultimately it was political. It was my own research and I suppose I could have withheld the evidence; I wouldn't like to contemplate the consequences of such an action. However, this answers the relative autonomy question; it is extremely fragile.

Long term, pro-active research has become a luxury. If individual members of staff choose to do research, it is not prevented, but neither is it supported in any tangible form; no money, no time allowance, no resources. If the research comes up with anything useful, it risks being 'highjacked' immediately to serve the purposes of the organisation, irrespective of the purposes of the researcher.

At this point in the enquiry process all the elements so far discussed in this chapter come together. The woman in me knew what it was to be put under a spotlight and minutely examined; the Christian in me could not let an injustice pass without comment; the scientist in me got very excited by the novelty of the situation.

A recent study showed that one million young people, between the ages of 16 and 25 were unemployed in 1994, (North, 1995) while a further 292 000 school leavers aged 16-17 were in training schemes. These are the sort of young people who form the student body in this College. There are other older students; with adult unemployment currently at 'officially' three million, many adults need to update or change their qualifications in order to find employment, and therefore College is, if not the only option, certainly one of the most popular. It is against this pattern of increasing unemployment and in particular, the unemployability of the poorly qualified, young person, that this research was set.

My first naive appraisal of student drop-out prior to starting the research, was that dropping-out was regrettable and constituted a waste of human resources. This view was shared by many of my professional colleagues. Initially, the research was for me, I wanted to satisfy myself that I was not responsible for causing my students to drop-out. Finding the solution to this problem, thus articulated, is insufficient reason for undertaking such a rigorous, systematic study. Reflection and informal theorizing may well have produced satisfactory answers without the need for a complex research design. Although

it is difficult to bring it to the fore as a parameter of the study, it has to be acknowledged that the audience, as identified, constituted a target that I hoped to influence with this study. Making these parameters explicit is a little problematic.

The relationship between the researcher, the researched and the audience is triangular. It follows in such a way that the researched can only be made apparent to the audience through the efforts of the researcher. Therefore there must be a barrier between the researched and the audience. If this barrier is pictured as a mist or fog rather than a solid obstacle, then it is easier to understand how the researcher can permeate the mist and help the audience see more clearly. Part of the process of removing the barrier which lies between the audience and the researched is that the instruments used to clear it all away are acceptable to all parties involved. It is quite conceivable that if I had thought about the issues for long enough, I could have arrived at exactly the same conclusions as I have reached now, after a long and arduous process of formal enquiry. However, how would my informal reflections be received by the intended audience? Their critical analysis would immediately identify the lack of generalisation and the focus on a particular and hence personal problem; they may be pleased that I had a solution, but at best it can only be my solution, not anyone else's. To be strong enough to withstand such criticism, this study had to be systematic, large scale, rigorous, probing and comprehensive.

A second difficulty in terms of acceptable instruments for clearing away the fog, rests upon the gender of the researcher. For this College, solutions offered by men are routinely far more acceptable than those offered by women. Women apparently cannot clear away the fog, they can only make it worse. The preference for male solutions rather than female ones necessitates an even stronger need for rigorous enquiry with methods that can withstand unpicking by men, couched in a language acceptable to men.

I anticipate that as a result of explicitly positioning myself, the research and the audience in this manner, I may have weakened my case. However Usher and Bryant's recommendation that the enquiry should be personalized, lends justification to my risking such criticism. Unless all the restrictions which formed the parameters of this study are acknowledged, then the findings may be flawed and concealed by the omission.

The audience can make particular demands upon the research. It can ascribe importance

to one aspect in favour of another, which may be alien to the research and threaten its integrity. It may demand a particular tone or language, the language of systems being quite different from that of curriculum. It may demand that its imperfections are not made public, and this is perhaps the strongest facet of the conflict facing the researcher from within an organisation. Because you are on the inside, you can get at these imperfections, to anyone else they would remain hidden, but from this privileged position you also have responsibilities which conflict with the need to write about your findings, unhindered, and unafraid of the consequences.

The solution I found in a prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), which says:-

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other".

Changes already have been brought about by this study, more changes I hope will be catalysed when readers have had time to relate these findings to their practice. The term catalyst is the one that I prefer to use when describing the function of this research. Its recommendations will not be prescriptive, rather they will be informative. Some readers will resist the information, disliking its implications for their working practice; others will identify immediately with the findings and wonder how it can have taken so long for me to write about the obvious. It is the nature of all catalysts that they are not used up in the reaction in which they are involved, they only bring together the vital elements necessary for the process to occur. That is what this research hopes to achieve. It will bring together the voices of all the drop-outs in this study and the fund managers and executives in education. The reaction may well be exergonic.

9. Wrapping up the Parcel

A gift can be made even more exciting by the use of colourful and elaborate wrapping paper. The initial acceptance of a gift is a judgement of this wrapping and nothing whatever to do with the actual contents of the package. So too with this study; there has to be some attention paid to how this gift will be wrapped in order to make it acceptable to its intended audience. Knowing that this study has unearthed new ideas and found a new way of looking at student drop-out, from which various measures can be teased out to

form the basis of preventative strategies, is not enough.

At the other extreme of this analogy, I have no intention of using the wrapping to disguise my work, and where I have come across unpalatable information, it must be faced, in the "raw". A fine balance is needed between the cosmetic virtues of making the study appealing and the unacceptable use of a disguise which would render the whole thing a falsehood. It seems to be as difficult as walking along a tight rope.

I am the vehicle through which the story has been told. All the participants in this study, spoke not only to me but through me, to a wider audience. Perhaps in this way I am the wrapping for their words and I fervently hope that I have not distorted or disguised them so much that they become devalued. Wherever possible I have left the words exactly as they were spoken, but sometimes meaning will not emerge from words alone, context, nuance, and colloquial understanding needs to be made explicit. Thus my own words have mingled with those of the researched, in an attempt to make them intelligible to this wider audience.

In this mingling of words, the 'everyday' language of the drop-out, the pedagogic language of the teacher and the systems language of the administrator can be understood by the College lecturers, governors and executive, the various funding agencies, perhaps also by politicians and all those concerned with the drop-out phenomenon.

10. Operating in Isolation

The College context so far painted has shown it to be a somewhat hostile research environment. Were this to be continuously so, then this study would never have been accomplished; some support had to be in place and readily available. Fortunately this support came from within the executive and was provided by the vice principal (curriculum) who could see that the findings would be useful, even though they might also be unpalatable. I owe a great debt of thanks to the vice principal without whom some of the doors I had to get through might never have been opened. At a personal level, when the 'going got tough' and the institutional barriers were erected against me, she gave me the confidence to keep going and break down the obstacles. The importance of having a

woman to provide this support, in this androcentric climate cannot be over-estimated.

- When there are very few women within an organisation, the mutual support women can give each other, when challenged constantly by the male majority becomes very important. Other women in the organisation also helped, they often constituted the 'backdoors' through which I gained access to information which their male bosses would not have let me get to. These subversive activities of the women's network have made much of this research possible, and yet their assistance cannot be openly acknowledged for fear of reprisals.

Operating in isolation therefore is neither desirable nor indeed possible. The organisation's attempt to marginalise and prevent the research from continuing was thwarted by lots of people coming to its rescue, these people were predominantly other women. The sense of solidarity that this support has given me has become part of my own empowerment, it provides both a drive and a vehicle for progress. The network has given me the encouragement to persist and the practical help to succeed.

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CHAPTER SIX
ANALYSIS: GIVING MEANING TO THE DATA COLLECTION

1. The application

"Researchers, practitioners, and administrators in many fields are perennially confronted by a major challenge, namely, to seriously consider the application of seemingly relevant, potentially valuable knowledge and exemplary practice in connection with their respective subject fields and, thereby, seek ways to improve methods of operation".

[Glaser et al, 1983, p.vii]

The primary objective of this study is to understand student drop-out so that retention can be improved and success rates increased: inevitably this involves changing methods of operation in the light of the evidence collected. This evidence has already been presented in Chapter Four, while the context of its collection has been discussed in Chapter Five. This chapter will deal with the application of that evidence to the research goal. Broadly, these data will be categorised as portrayed in Figure 3.3, Chapter Three. Qualitatively sub-divided into the given and the negotiable and supported by the quantitative information.

The cladistics classification system, designed to impose system onto amorphous data, will begin with the relevant 'givens', the community, the family, the school and the College. The 'negotiated' aspects will intertwine with this analysis, uniting observable action with narrative meanings as outlined in Chapter Three, helping to place the individual drop-out in a wider context: developing a reflective understanding.

2. The 'Given' Community

"Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by (people) and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world". Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p.33) reflection upon the way in which everyday life is construed by those who live it, is equally valid for the consideration of everyday drop-outs and those other people associated with them, in

the world of education.

This reality often takes the form of a given, a situation which is not questioned or analysed but simply taken for granted. The 'coherent world' of the drop-out is provided by the community into which they drop. How they make sense of that world, how they find their role within the community and how they choose to either problematise or ignore that framework needs questioning, as does how they talk about it.

"Students enrol in College with hopes and aspirations of college success. To these students, success means having the opportunity to develop potential, realize ambitions, enhance career options, and increase self-satisfaction ... A great deal of effort goes into the educational process, and the pay off is seeing the students make progress towards their goals".

[Fralick, 1933, p.29]

Fralick has outlined the socially acceptable goals of education. This goal formation needs to be explained in the light of the new evidence from this study which shows that for drop-outs at least, these may not be the reasons for enrolling in College.

There is a firm relationship between society and education (Banks, 1968). Education has a socialising role, it transmits 'local' ideologies, inculcates political goals, and provides the workforce for the future; "civilising the worker" as Dickinson and Erben (1983 p.96) would call it. The myth of social mobility is also perpetuated by the education system and endorsed by society. Bernstein, (1975, p.37) says that education "gives access to other styles of life and modes of social relationships". Perhaps this concept of social mobility (upwards) is why so many young people are staying on in post-compulsory education and that more adults, especially those who are poorly qualified, are returning to education.

Learning is seen as a good thing; learning comes about through education and education is perceived to be the province of schools, colleges and universities. Thus the hierarchy of knowledge is also implicitly reinforced by society which values these formal modes of learning over and above the informal gathering of wisdom. The evidence for this comes from the value placed upon certification rather than performance of skills or demonstration of ability. Employers want identifiable, consistent qualifications. The 'tag' of an NVQ supplies the consistency and level of competence associated with a qualification, this is easier to ascertain than an individual's demonstration of ability.

If learning is valued by the community, then the deliberate rejection of that learning, through dropping-out, is categorised as deviant. "Thousands of young people drop-out of school, (they) begin a life of unemployment, poverty, low self-esteem, violence and frequently wind up in jail". According to Hoyle (1993, p.26) this is the inevitable outcome of dropping-out. The study goes on to say that accurate data is "elusive, inaccurate and inconsistent" but then carries on explaining the relative cost of imprisonment, as if drop-out was automatically associated with criminal behaviour. In this study, only one respondent ended up in prison.

Praport (1993, p.309) echoes these ideas when she says that "drop-outs face unemployment or a low-paying blue collar job and may experience feelings of inferiority and alienation. The costs of quitting school are high for the drop-out, but they are also high for society, which must bear the financial brunt of the drop-out's inability to hold a job".

68% of the drop-outs in this research study were employed, proving conclusively that drop-out does not equate with unemployment. Some had more than one job, others were working part-time, usually these were women with family commitments. Undoubtedly, those who were not in work and claiming benefits said they were experiencing financial difficulties, but they were few in number. One respondent admitted fraudulently claiming benefits whilst working; certainly this constituted an admission of criminal behaviour. By comparison, some of these drop-outs had very good jobs, they were professionals, working in banks, business, teaching and nursing. There appears to be a clash of perceptions here. The community has a subjectively meaningful idea that drop-out is deviant, leads to crime and unemployment and as a consequence drop-outs are a burden on society. Drop-outs have an alternative subjective reality where they see the opportunity of a job, perhaps one that they have been wanting for some time, their ideal occupation, and they take advantage of that opportunity. The cost is withdrawal from College. They see their behaviour as sensible, taking control of their own situation and capitalising on the opportunities presented to them, rather than deferring their opportunities to a later date when competition for those coveted jobs may be greater.

How has the drop-out stigma been constructed? Wasted resources may account for some of the ill feeling towards these people, in that they have accessed scarce educational

resources and have not completed or qualified. "Admitting a student to a post-sixteen full-time course is likely to incur public expenditure of about £3 000 a year or more" (AUDIT Commission 1993). The community has made a great investment in providing education, this investment is the evidence of the extent to which learning is valued by the community. If education is rejected, the community may see this as a rejection of not only its investment but further to that, a rejection of its value systems. From wasted resources it is just a small step to wastrel; the drop-out is considered to be a waster of resources in general, and then a burden on society. The empirical evidence shows quite clearly that drop-outs do not constitute any more of a drain on the community than anyone else, yet the negative opinions continue to be held, in spite of the evidence to the contrary.

From this position, it may be worth looking for a functional association between the stigma and the reality. Dropping-out maybe condemned because staying in, may then seem to be more virtuous. Construing drop-out in terms of deviance may console persists for the efforts they are making, especially if, as is inevitably the case, some of them become failures. Failure or not, persists continue to explicitly uphold the values of the community. Persaud and Madak (1992, p.235) compared the attitudes of high school graduates and drop-outs, and found that "graduates perceived themselves as being smarter, more ambitious and responsible, more involved in church and volunteer work, less involved in drugs/alcohol, and less involved in criminal activities than dropouts". This gives a fairly clear picture of the value systems upheld by the community.

A community is more than just employment prospects, production and industry. It would be mechanistic and simplistic to analyse any community by the parameters of work alone. The local community in this study consisted of a large proportion of elderly people. In Chapter One, some of the consequences of this top-heavy population have already been described, but one of the un-anticipated aspects of this research was the involvement of a 'third age' drop-out.

He was a retired hotelier, whose family were now running the business that he had built up. He had come to College as a leisure activity to "while away the Winter evenings" as he put it. Unfortunately he found the course "dreary" to the extent that he soon left; he was quite vociferous about his experiences because he felt that he had been deceived by the College marketing material and the short discussion which he had with a member of

staff just prior to his enrolment. It would seem that important information was withheld or at least not made available to him, even on request. He joined an English literature course and had wanted to know, before the course commenced, what books would be studied. No-one could tell him. After starting the course, he found the book selection to be disagreeable, he forfeited his fees and left.

From the lecturer's point of view, the course was not a leisure course at all, it was leading up to an examination and most of the books were specified by the syllabus. Why could not this information have been made available to the student? This was entirely the wrong course for this man, he would have been better advised to go to a WEA or University of the Third Age course which would have met his needs. If this was the wrong course, and eventually he recognised that it was, why was he enrolled in the first place? Clearly there is a needs conflict; the needs of the lecturer to get enough students in for the class to run, and the needs of the individual student which may be at variance from those of the other members of the class. The AUDIT Commission (1993) pointed this out when it stressed that colleges should be encouraged to "modify the 'bottoms on seats' incentives to recruit students to courses irrespective of their chances of success on these courses".

In the past, no-one worried much about the outcome of students, enrolment numbers were all that really mattered, so enrolling a few people who were unsuitable was considered almost 'unavoidable'. It was a shame for the individuals concerned, but it did not affect either the lecturer or the College. Today, outcome is important, drop-out is measured as well as success rates and these are reflected in the continued employment of College staff. Some areas of under-achievement have already closed down. Enrolment is now just one of many important criteria relating to the continued running of a course. Some lecturers, however, have not yet shifted their thinking on these issues and are still operating as if drop-out did not matter. Maybe they have misunderstood the new funding formulae or they choose to ignore it. Traditions versus new funding formulae are in conflict, the first casualties of this conflict are the students, or more precisely, the drop-outs, for BPCFE the short-fall in FEFC funding, since incorporation accounted for by student drop-out is approximately, £2 million per year.

There are other aspects to the 'given community' which are exceptional but very interesting. One of the drop-outs in this study was offered a contract to play football for a

local professional team. In such circumstances, A-levels can be taken at any time, footballers having a limited professional career must grasp their opportunities while they can. Undoubtedly, football, in this community is highly valued and his actions were not condemned, this finding may represent a hierarchy of drop-out, where leaving College for some activities is preferable to leaving for others.

Two other exceptional drop-outs were offered unconditional university places. University education is also highly valued within the community, so their actions were 'acceptable', in the sense that it was in no-ones interest for them to complete a College course when they could go straight into Higher Education. Statistically, they were still classified as a drop-out.

It becomes more difficult to understand the value placed on staying in College in the light of recent changes to benefit payments. Two drop-outs were forced to leave College, one of them the day before she was due to sit her final examinations, because the Job centre where they were registered insisted that they attend a job seekers training course. If they refused, their payments would be stopped.

Whose interests were being served by this enforced withdrawal? For the individuals, passing their A-levels would have been preferable to going on such a course, it would have provided them with a more valuable 'currency' in the Job market. Finn (1995) found contradictory data in relation to this, in that the Employment Minister claims there are some 80 000 unemployed people on College courses in Britain at present, but the Association for Colleges claimed that there were in excess of 100 000. The new job seekers agreement will require students to make themselves available and "those who do not meet their new obligations will be subject to much harsher benefit penalties". The rationale is quite simple: education and training in Further Education is not seen as a "positive step" towards gaining employment. If the department for employment does not see FE as a route to work, then the future role of FE is brought into question.

The occupational role of women within this community has been relatively unchanged by recent moves towards equality. The drop-outs in this study reflect this pattern. Many of the women drop-outs had children to look after or other family commitments, sometimes these were so strenuous that it was the cause of their leaving college. The dual occupations of running a family alongside a job, albeit part-time, make education/training

almost prohibitive, yet there is little direct help provided for these women. Creche facilities have been ignored on the grounds that there are too many College applicants and therefore there is no need to attract any more students. This position is now beginning to change with a much more active approach to bringing under-represented minorities into education aided by EU funding. Young mothers will be amongst the first to benefit and a new creche will open in 1995/6. Child care is not a cheap commodity; it would appear that the European community places a higher value on the provision of child care than does the local community.

One drop-out whom I telephoned, just three days before her wedding told me how she had left College to get married and was going back to her husband's home, in Ireland. Implicit to our conversation was the 'normality' of her action, to give up her chosen occupation in favour of her husband pursuing his career.

Female employment patterns are changing, it is anticipated that "part-time jobs are predominantly taken by women ... and that by 2001 ... women will constitute 52% of all employees"⁷. If the labour market is changing then education will have to change to provide this new workforce. Women, who have traditionally been trapped at home or confined to under-skilled and low paid work because of their family commitments, will become a new client base for Colleges. "Using the potential of the whole labour force to the full is a priority to ensure business and national competitiveness. Greater attention should be paid to those groups (women) who have faced barriers to work in the past"⁷.

Identifying these barriers is difficult because they are part of the 'given' community, they have remained unquestioned for so long, articulating the problem is challenging. Greed (1990, p.59) says that "Whilst progress does seem to be made, it is important to be aware that the men are still playing by their rules ... progress based on the needs of the current economic situation and designed to meet the needs of men is a far cry from women re-creating professional education and practice to meet their needs".

If women are socially situated, so too are men. There is a 'given' expectation that men

⁷ From Planning for the 21st Century. A summary of Labour market and skill trends 1995/6. Nottingham: A skills and Enterprise Network Publication.

will provide for the family, be the economically stronger partner in any family relationship and that they can over-ride the needs of women. This has already been shown to be the case with Maria, who left her course to travel back to Ireland with her new husband. A different example is provided by Philip, who complied with social expectations, even though he really did not want to. He gave up his course to do extra work to support his wife and their new baby. The way he talks about his situation - I had no choice - no decision - this is not a man in control; this is a man goaded on by social expectations to provide for his wife and child.

This community is one driven by competitive economic needs, manifest through labour forces. These employment driven requirements serve the needs of men. Women serve the needs of men. Women perform these tasks in two ways; they either service the home and family, or they labour, by taking up employment as yet unfilled by male workers. There is very little evidence to suggest a shift in the power relationships between men and women in this community. The traditional role expectations prevail. Education and training are geared towards the training of men, and women are allowed to participate; ostensibly all the barriers to equality have been removed except for this last bastion of social expectation.

This community also has a large proportion of elderly people. These people may require a service from the College, not just to provide the training for those who will become the future caretakers of the frail and old, but a requirement to acknowledge that old age does not automatically bring with it decrepitude, that people are living longer and healthier, and may wish to enact the rhetoric that education is a life long process.

The drop-out in the community has shown there to be a twofold structure. There is, on the one hand, a public structure; thriving, productive industry, happy conventional families and shared value systems uniting everyone into a friendly community. On the other hand, there is the less obtrusive structure which seeks to hide away anything which conflicts with the public image. Un-married mothers, the elderly, the unemployed, the imprisoned, even the College drop-out, these are not acknowledged as part of the community even though they are a product of it. If they are not perceived as an integral part, then they become outsiders, and automatically form the 'other'. They form a focus of comparisons which serves to reinforce notions that insiders are better. This

corresponds to, but has been explained in quite different terms from, the notions of Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p.149) "ongoing dialectical processes ... externalization and objectivation", they add another category to this process, "internalisation" which I have touched upon in outlining the compliance of some respondents to social expectations without question.

If the world is linguistically formed, as Gadamer (1975) has suggested, then the word drop-out, with all its negative meanings has been socially created. The purpose for which it was made is questionable, but one reason may have been to give encouragement to those who choose to stay and complete their education. Completion requires some degree of self-sacrifice, hard work and the deferment of gratification; these 'hardships' may be easier to endure if the alternative strategy, dropping-out, is socially unacceptable and considered to be deviant. The only obstacle to the perpetuation of the negativity drop-out myth is the empirical evidence which shows that drop-outs tend to be successful people, ordinary people, really quite nice people. Most of them are working for their living, they have ordinary family relationships, they are not *en masse* in prison, they have aspirations and ambitions much the same as anyone else. The word - drop-out - has a social function in the community, the person who is a drop-out does not have to share in this function, the word has a 'life' or existence of its own.

3. The 'Given' Family

The concept, family, in Britain today usually means Mother, Father and Children. In other cultures or at other times, this definition was often made larger by the inclusion of what we now refer to as the extended family. The relationships within the family may be legal, religious or formed for convenience, but the roles persist in their well defined forms.

For the purposes of this study, a student may be from any one of the roles within the family. A student may be the child, the Mother or the Father; this requires a slight shift in emphasis from the usual way of thinking about pupils in a learning environment. The word, family, is simply a label as is the word, student.

Families exist, we all 'know' what a family looks like and we may also have a fairly clear idea what they are for but "the assertion that a family is an agency of socialisation ... is an assumption impossible to substantiate" according to Robinson (1981, pp.48-49) which makes it an ideal 'given' in that everything about families is accepted and understood, but very little can actually be proven or explained.

Both Bernstein (1975) and Banks (1968) support the idea that families are instrumental to a child's success at school. It would therefore be naive to suppose that such an influence should suddenly cease when the child becomes sixteen. It would be convenient to consider family relationships in two ways, firstly the relationship between a young student and their parents, brothers and sisters, and secondly, the relationship between a mature student and their family. In this latter category, the relationship may still be towards parents, or alternatively it may be to a spouse or towards the student's own children.

Family studies are fraught with inherent difficulties. They are highly complex structures with social, psychological and biological intricacies, all combining to make analysing the effect of family upon educational achievement very difficult. The genetic inheritance of an individual, which gives rise to their potential achievement, develops within their 'material environment', which nurtures that potential (Banks, 1968, p.71), all of which is impossible to measure accurately.

Taking first, the young student and their family relationship, the evidence shows that most lived at home, with one or both parents. Talking to these drop-outs, most said their parents wanted them to stay in College, but had supported their decision to leave. In some cases the family had to be convinced before the student gained enough support for this change to occur. If the student identified the course as unsuitable, then families tended to be supportive because they hoped that the drop-out would go back to College and try something else. The evidence suggests that drop-outs often return, 56% said they wanted to, and anecdotal evidence from lecturers, also suggests that they do well the second time around. On the other hand, if the problem was financial and the young person saw themselves as a drain on the family resources, then their decision to leave was probably motivated by a desire to make a financial contribution to the family income.

In both cases the family had a latent function which supported the decision to drop-out.

The manifest function would have encouraged the student to succeed. The latent function makes it acceptable to withdraw. From the available data it was not possible to gauge precisely when a family switches from its manifest encouraging role to its latent supportive role, but the latent role must have been present in its static form prior to any decisions being made.

If parents were divorced or if separation was in progress then there was an extra strain upon the family relationships. Divorce itself, was never quoted as being the reason for dropping-out. Although some of these young students talked with bitterness about their parents' rifts, they usually talked about their withdrawal in financial terms and the relative poverty resulting from their parents' separation. Because of the age of these students, some found it difficult to secure a home with either parent. In one case, which will serve as an example, the father had re-married and moved away, while the mother had been forced to move into a one bedroom flat where she no longer could accommodate her eighteen year old son. Social services are not required to take care of these people, who legally are no longer children, but who individually, may still require a lot of support.

Leaving home, when you are young and relatively un-prepared can cause problems, whether you leave because of your parent's behaviour or from choice. These young people are ill informed about the cost of independent living, so they quickly get themselves into financial difficulties; the easiest way out of this is to leave college and earn some money.

The second group, the mature students, have different family relationships. The most surprising finding in this study was that so many mature students who drop-out, (91%) still live at home with their parents. This finding requires further investigation because it may be due to a quirk in the questionnaire completing behaviour of this sub-population, or it may be a valid finding which is as yet inexplicable. From the comments made by these drop-outs, they took it for granted that living at home was an ordinary thing to do. The relevance of this finding is difficult to place unless it is put into a subjective context relative to my own expectations of adult behaviour. I expect adults to be independent. These drop-outs were not living independently, nor did they see any reason to explain this situation. The numerical significance of the finding makes it too big to ignore, on the other hand, the available evidence does not explain what it is significant of. This is an

example of one of those 'hidden aspects' thrown up by the data collection process which hints at some exciting phenomenon, hidden beneath a veil of information, worthy of further examination.

Divorce affects mature students too, for them it is more significant because it is a divorce from their partner rather than the divorce of their parents. Only two respondents gave me information about their divorces and how it effected their thinking in relation to their decision to leave College. In both cases the severe trauma caused by the marriage breakdown, lead to other complications; in one case to alcohol dependence in the other to hospitalisation due to the violent nature of the relationship. Two examples are not enough on which to base a theory or even an adequate explanation of the relevance of divorce to student drop-out. What they do provide is an example of how marital breakdown can lead to behaviour changes which in turn have a profound influence on educational achievement.

This study also investigated the educational history of the parents and siblings in the family. The findings revealed an interesting and surprising anomaly. The GES parents were on average, better qualified than the SSS sample parents. The immediate interpretation of these data would suggest that parents whose children are on academic courses are themselves better educated than the parents of those students who are on vocational courses. This may not be so. The anomaly may have been caused by a fault in the reporting of parental education by the drop-outs. There was no counter-check to corroborate the evidence, therefore, these data are un-supported and have been formed from disclosures made by the drop-outs about people who may or may not have been asked to help with the reporting. While it is unlikely that anyone deliberately lied, it is quite possible that some respondents guessed or thought they knew, but actually, had mis-remembered. On the other hand, these data were remarkably consistent, if there was a flaw in the instrument, then the distortion will be uni-directional. In the light of these possible flaws, the findings have to be interpreted with caution.

There was little difference between the education of siblings in the two samples, 73% and 72% respectively. The questionnaire however, did not try to distinguish the kind of courses these people had undertaken, nor did it distinguish between brothers and sisters. In hindsight, this may have provided some useful, additional information.

On the heels of this education history investigation came the discovery that none of the drop-outs in this study were an only child. This was a completely un-anticipated finding. In its turn it provided the impetus for a comparative count of only children, in college, in general. The finding that none of the drop-outs was an only child was highly significant, but what did it mean in terms of practice? It would be totally illogical to restrict all future enrolments to people who have no brothers or sisters simply because they have the best, statistical chances of completing their course. It is easy to assume that two parents can devote twice as much attention and resources to one child as they could to two or more and that simply because of this extra parental input, the child will benefit educationally. Until the precise role of the family is understood and the part of the individual family members, theorised, it will not be possible to account for this astonishing finding. What can be said is an extrapolation of a study done by Sewell and Shah (1968) which showed a link between parental encouragement and academic ambition and achievement. Perhaps, single children get more encouragement and therefore become achievers. This may also go some way towards explaining why there is no direct correlation between family size and achievement. Families will differ in the amount of encouragement they give their children because of the functional role encouragement plays within the family. Older siblings can assume a parenting role and give encouragement to their younger brothers and sisters, (Essman, 1977) and sometimes, children are just resistant to the purposes of education (Aggleton and Whitty 1985), and do not respond, even when encouragement is given.

Many studies have looked at the effect of siblings on each other, Adler (1931), Schachter (1959), Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1969) and Essman (1977) and others. While it is obvious that they do have an effect upon each other, it is less clear what those effects are and how they might be related to educational achievements. At a practical level, in a crowded home, it may be difficult to find space and peace in which to complete home work assignments. Alternatively, older brothers and sisters may be a useful source of information and help. Older siblings may also act as role models, this could work in either direction, to raise or lower the aspirations of a youngster in relation to their ability.

65% of the drop-outs' siblings in this study were employed. The questionnaire did not attempt to distinguish between the activities of older or younger siblings and this may have introduced a missing variable which could, on reflection, have been useful. The other

35% who are not employed could be too young, they may still be in education or training or they may be unemployed. Given the very high numbers who are known to have taken further or higher education courses, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that most of these other people are not yet ready for work. From the data matrix, we can safely account for at least 12% of them still being in the education/training system somewhere.

In functional classification, a family may be manifestly supportive of educational achievement, in terms of certification and course completion. At this point, some families diverge. These divergent families have a static, latent function which will provide support for a student's decision to withdraw. The point at which this static function becomes dynamic has not yet been discerned and further enquiries are needed to define this turning point. The concept of dysfunction should be reserved for those families who have experienced divorce. These families become dysfunctional, temporarily, until such time as the individuals can re-form relationships. Dysfunction of this kind may have a bearing on the educational achievement of an individual, but in itself, it is not responsible for student drop-out.

4. The 'Given' School

In spite of government rhetoric about parental choice, most children go to their local school. This study found that choice was further restricted by the 11+ examination which took the brightest children into one of the four Grammar schools in the area, further selection on academic ability also diverted children into Grammar schools at 12 and at 16 years of age. The other secondary schools were left to educate the remaining children. Some of these schools have sixth forms which are in direct competition with the College for young, full-time students, especially for A-level courses. The publication of 'League Tables' of school performance exacerbated the choices parents had to make, since some schools, inevitably, had much lower pass rates than others, and no-where in these tables was there any opportunity to explain that schooling is much more than just the passing of a handful of examinations.

The 'given' concept is once again most appropriate for schools. Very few authors stop to define what a school is or indeed what they are supposed to do. We all 'know' what schooling is about. This study has veered into this arena and chooses to make problematic this taken-for-granted world by questioning how it comes about, how it is empowered and what effect this has upon the children who finally end up as College students. Three schools were investigated and they were all very different. One was considered to be poor on academic performance, but the students it sends onto the College always do well, with very few dropping out. The second school scored much better in the league tables and also produced very few college drop-outs, but it had its own sixth form and there was an element of sending students to College only if they wished to do something that the school could not provide. The last school investigated had a remarkably good performance record in academic terms but the students who came to College from this school had a very high drop-out rate.

Bernstein (1975, pp.175-176) points out that schools

"create a particular structure of meanings ... (while) ... pupils possess criteria whereby they evaluate, compare and group the meanings they receive and create".

Using this twofold framework it is possible to distinguish between what a pupil brings into school with them, in terms of social context, and what it is that the school provides for them; in terms of the school's climate or milieu, (Banks 1968). Furthermore, how does the pupil relate to what the school has to offer, how do they negotiate their role within this 'given' organisation, bearing in mind that for most children, school is their first experience of a large organisation with a bureaucratic structure.

The two parts of this dual framework may be inseparable. Economic pressure is perhaps the most potent force operating on and in a school, but the school's role as propagator of value systems inherent to the local community is also a powerful force. These value systems come from the families who send their children to the school as well as from local industries, religious leaders and the Government of the day. The role is dialectical, and where it is not, it is dysfunctional. If a family does not share the objectives enshrined by the school, they will be at odds with the teachers and staff, and their children will not be able to embrace the messages they are receiving at school, (Bernstein 1975). By the term

- messages - I refer to the wider curriculum, not just the subject matter taught in class.

Most families share the value systems of the school they have chosen for their children, they are happy with the school's structure of meanings. As we have already seen from looking at the wider community and the family in particular, education is perceived as a good thing in its own right, by extension, schools are valued too. These perceptions were reinforced by all three schools in this study; the respondents from these schools talked freely about the trust that parents placed in the schools. Parents know about their local school, they understand how it operates, they share its values, they have probably been inside the buildings before their child started school. They become familiar with the buildings, the reputation and the ethos long before they have access to a prospectus.

The empirical evidence in this study shows that the previous school attended is one of the most powerful factors associated with student drop-out. This is not to say that schools create drop-outs, the situation is more complex than this, but it is true to say that some schools give rise to a disproportionately large number of College drop-outs.

The starting point of this part of the investigation has to be with Bernstein's meaning structures. How do the schools which feed students to the College shape the attitudes of their pupils?

The 'League Tables' provided a useful tool for identifying which schools produced most drop-outs. Surprisingly this correlated well with their academic standards, the highest achieving schools producing the most College drop-outs. One school broke the pattern, it was both a high achiever and had relatively few College drop-outs, (school 12). The schools at either end of the drop-out spectrum (1 and 14) were investigated, as was school 12. School 14 and school 12 both produced very few College drop-outs. Both schools placed great emphasis on personal responsibility and gave children the opportunity to make their own decisions, within a framework of rules and regulations which made it clear what standards were expected, without alienating the children.

The three schools had quite different attitudes to parents in terms of both communication and involvement with the schools. At one extreme, parents were simply expected to uphold all that the school stood for (school 1), at the other, the Head teacher made

parental access simple, and involved himself in many issues which were worrying parents but which really did not necessitate intervention by a head teacher (school 14). The other school in this study (school 12) had an efficient relationship with its parents, mediated through information dissemination systems.

School 14 was situated in an area known for its relative social deprivation. Many children had free school meals and this provided a useful index of poverty. Although the school's results were low on the League Table they did not truly reflect the hard work and perseverance of the staff and students at this School, who have managed to raise standards of achievement and expectations while receiving very few 'able' students from within the catchment. The poverty, the financial restrictions and the difficulty of teaching children from deprived areas, has prompted the staff to unite, developing as a result, a cohesion which enables some very creative and innovative work to go on, in a safe environment supported by understanding colleagues. This school exerts a huge force on a child's life which seeks to extend their horizons and ambitions. The background of many of these pupils is often restrictive, their understanding of opportunity in the adult world would be very limited if this school did not intervene and promote another picture, where accomplishment is not only possible but also desirable. When the pupils of this school reach sixteen they usually go to College. There has been a link between the two for many years. College staff often go into this school to talk to pupils about courses. School staff often come to College to see how ex-pupils are getting on and to update their own information about College courses so that they can provide better information to their pupils. The relationship is cooperative and productive.

School 12 on the other hand does not need to work hard on recreating the ambitions of its pupils. Most of the children at this school come from relatively prosperous, middle class families, who would automatically share the values of the school and its staff. The children are directed quite early on in their schooling to think about possible career options, to explore these carefully and make a firm decision about what they want to do when they are sixteen. There is a degree of emphasis on responsibility, but the children are all gently guided by their tutors and teachers. Academic achievement is highly valued by this school, it is expected by both staff and parents. There is a school sixth form specialising mostly in GCSE and A levels, which readily provides a source of role models to other pupils lower down the school. Although this school's sixth form is in direct

competition with the College, it has always maintained a good working relationship with College staff. There have been many instances of staff from both organisations working together on various projects and this may have helped the school teachers to understand more fully, what College is all about. Students not wishing to pursue academic options are usually directed to the College, if the tutors think they will be able to cope. The tutor's judgement of this, from the evidence in this study, seems to be correct, very few students who come to College from this school ever withdraw prematurely.

School 1 on the other hand has a formidable academic record, which would be difficult to beat. It is a single sex school, highly authoritarian in its outlook and standards. The children are given very clear instructions, (I hesitate to use the word - orders - but it would almost be more appropriate) about behaviour and what the school expects of them. Parents are expected to comply with these standards too. Many parents choose his school for their children because of its academic track record. They want their children to go to University and that is where most of this school's pupils end up. Which is unfortunate for the pupil who has another career in mind. These pupils are seen by the school to be rebellious because they have alternative aspirations. The school views anything less than University entrance as an admission of failure, and therefore any child deliberately choosing a career which would entail a College training course is not viewed sympathetically. Pupils from this school are only sent to College when they have been rejected by the school.

Because staff at this school have little or no value for the College, they have no need to inform themselves about its provision. Further to this devaluing process, they have built up a system of beliefs, mostly untrue and certainly unfounded, about what going to College is like. They have five years, ample opportunity, to inculcate these erroneous beliefs into the children in their care. These pupils grow up believing that Colleges provide a second rate education for failures. It is hardly surprising then, that when some of these pupils do come to College they find that being a student is not at all what they expected, and because of the very strict regime from which they came, they find it difficult to take responsibility for themselves and their learning. They have internalised failure, and eventually this prophesy is self-fulfilling.

The drop-outs in this study also had views about their school days. Most spoke

favourably about their early schooling, remembering it as enjoyable. Sports and being popular were the two things most respondents wished to be remembered for, but this was closely followed by another quite large group who said that they had nothing to be remembered for at all. This was a very negative way of looking back upon one's school days. Very few wanted to be thought of as clever, which is interesting since a large proportion of these drop-outs were actually better qualified than the persisters on the course. Green (1962) suggested that about 18% of drop-outs were 'gifted', this study finds that 7.35% thought of themselves as clever, while 8.82% had higher point scores than the average persister on similar courses. The relative non-response to this question meant that the sample was too small for valid significance testing, however, these findings are indicative of a tributary theme running through these data relating to the ability of drop-outs.

If a school functions to create 'particular' meanings as suggested by Bernstein (1975, p.176) then this study has shown that these meanings are very different according to the type of school and the context or community in which the school operates. Wehlage (1989) agrees and points out that the condition in schools and the position of the school within the local community effect the way in which teachers can respond to pupil needs. How these meanings are received by the pupils and the parents depends to a large extent on how completely the school has succeeded in getting these messages across. Pupils 'evaluate, compare and group' these meanings according to Bernstein, parents will do the same: this is the negotiation process. Hoyle (1993, p.26) has made the point that schools should be sensitive to culture and create a curriculum which "cultivates, captivates and celebrates student success". In their own, very different ways these three schools do celebrate success, their definition of success however, is at the root of drop-out.

School 14 sees a successful pupil as one who goes to College, finally qualifies and gets a job. School 12 has a clearer hierarchy of success, students being more successful if they go to University at the end of their time at school, but since it also caters for a great many pupils whose ability would prohibit this outcome, they are happy to send these children on vocational training courses leading to future employment. School 1 values University entrance, it has set very high standards and views a college course as failure. It deliberately cultivates these notions at all levels of the school and transmits these values to parents, although it would appear that this transmission is reciprocal.

"One important aspect of effective drop out prevention is identification of students who are most likely to drop-out"

[Frazer 1992, p.3].

In the past, many studies have concentrated their efforts on identifying students at risk of dropping-out by looking at their academic ability, as if this can account, at least in a large part, for their behaviour (Frazer 1992, Fralick 1993, Lanier 1949).

The findings of this research show that students entering College from school 1 have a four times greater chance of non-completion than students coming from one of the other schools, lower down the League Table. The investigations have shown that where schools are well informed about the College and understand what College courses are about and what being a College student entails, teachers are better able to pass on this information to their pupils. These data also contradict the notion that drop-out is solely dependent upon the students' academic ability, since undoubtedly, the students coming from school 1 have a high standard of academic achievement. This finding is also supported by the high number of students with above average point scores who participated in this study, they have indicated a new trend in these data which could benefit from a more extensive investigation focusing on ability. Certainly, from these data, it appears to be the case that Colleges are losing some of their most able students, not their least able.

The manifest functions of these three schools were quite different, School 14 aimed at getting its pupils into College. School 12 aimed at getting its pupils into an appropriate programme dependent upon their ability. School 1 aimed at getting its pupils into university. School 1 also had a latent dysfunction operating throughout the school which worked to discredit the College and to devalue the standing of College students. When this message is internalised by those, usually in the minority, who actually want to pursue an alternative career path, and choose not to go to University, the result is that having been mis-informed, they are not prepared for the reality which confronts them at College. If they also lack the personal resources and skill to overcome their subsequent confusion, they drop-out. This is the result of "incongruence" (Whelage 1989, p.53) which occurs when children have an identity and aspirations unrelated to those held by their teachers.

5. The 'Given' College Culture

When a student enrolls at the College they encounter a new situation, historically formed, which is "given". Within this structure they can begin to 'negotiate' their own role and create a place for themselves.

The most noticeable differences between school and College are the adult nature of the College environment and the size of the organisation. Further to this, the College is spread out over several sites, each one having its own, distinctive 'atmosphere'. These sub-cultures are partially created by the nature of the activities going on in these areas; the ethos in the Engineering workshops is quite different from that in the beauty salons and both are different again from that in the computer centres.

In Chapter One I discussed the 'macho' nature of FE college management, post-incorporation. In Chapter Five I looked specifically at the context of BPCFE as a research field. Two major barriers were identified in this field, they can be summarised as anti-feminism and the lack of an historic research culture.

The College has a pre-formed social world (Shibutani 1968), it has an organisational structure and a wealth of human resources. Organisations have been analysed in many ways and from many different theoretical perspectives. Weber (1957) looked at power relationships within bureaucratic structures and from this was able to construct a model of authority. Merton (1949) approached organisations from the functional/dysfunctional point of view and focused his analysis on the roles adopted or learnt by the workers in the organisation. While Gouldner (1959) tried to distinguish between the rational and the natural systems in an organisation, building on systems theory using an holistic approach. Parsons (1956 p.63) viewed organisations as if they were an organism with internal parts all working towards a "primacy of orientation to the attainment of a specific goal".

Having borrowed heavily from all of these analytic methods, in the tradition of OTSOG, a model of the College has developed which shows its hierarchical structures to be legitimated and perpetuated by a system of authority whose power relationships devolve through clear lines of management. The roles of staff may indeed be dysfunctional in some aspects, the 'estranged lecturer' or the systems information manager whose language

precludes an understanding of curriculum are just two examples from this study of such dysfunction.

On the other hand, most roles are functional and are orientated towards the goals of the organisation, in so far as these are understood by the individual role holders. When an individual is appraised of these goals they have several choices, they can ignore the instruction (as with the lecturers who continue to enrol on traditional lines, ignoring new funding formulae), they can obey the instruction or they can interpret the instruction. Interpretation may lead to dysfunction in that individual people interpret and translate according to personal and un-predictable criteria.

The process of translation may cause tensions and conflicts between various role holders and students. Manen (1990) pointed out that pedagogic interaction was always unique; from this point of view it is possible to see that there must be some 18 000 unique interactions going on compounded by some 1 000 staff, most of which work very well to the benefit of all concerned, even drop-outs found their lecturers friendly and helpful.

Particular interactions will have meanings which may not be the same for the student as they are for the staff, this is where the process begins to go wrong. The staff are goal oriented and these goals have been set by the organisation, under pressure from the Government and the community, for example, the projected increase in student numbers. The students are also goal oriented, but who has set their goals? This study shows that they have been heavily influenced by their school, their family and by the wider community.

These data have surprisingly disclosed evidence of an homeostatic mechanism at work in the College which restricts the numbers of students in any given age to an optimum number. There is pressure on staff to increase student numbers. Resources have not increased in line with class sizes. Again there seems to be a goal conflict, the homeostatic mechanism is the result of this conflict, but how it is operationalised is not yet clear. The evidence shows its presence, its function will be mediated through classroom interaction involving the lecturer and the other students. This group dynamic is not deliberately conceived, but it seeks to eliminate any student whose characteristics do not fit the general mould. This mould may be prescribed by the subject area and governed in terms of

ability, but it also has social aspects, so that ethnicity, gender, age and status all have a bearing on outcome, as does the ability to form and maintain friendships within the class. Once a student has been identified as alien to the group, forces of comparison work upon the persisters, who actively reject the drop-out; simultaneously the drop-out shifts their allegiance from the class. The class persisters act as a reference group (Shibutani, 1968, Merton and Rossi 1968) for the drop-out, this is a reciprocal arrangement, involving the lecturer as well.

"To set standards for people... have them fail these standards, and then blame the failure entirely on them, their families or some other (outside) element... is an abdication of our roles as educators".

Hamby's (1989, p.22) criticism is both correct and perfectly descriptive. While the standard setting is obscure, in that it involves criteria such as ethnicity, gender, and age, it remains clear that the lecturer is in a position to intervene and chooses not to. This, in part, is why it is so easy to blame the drop-out for their action.

Perhaps the most damaging 'given' in the College context to affect student drop-out is the established and accepted way in which drop-out is routinely under-reported. For many years student withdrawal was counted, cataloguing only those students who formally notified the College of their intention to leave. When compared to non-completion statistics, calculated from an analysis of outcome data, it was immediately apparent that withdrawal was the tip of the non-completion iceberg, and accounted for less than half the total number of drop-outs.

There was something 'comfortable' about believing that drop-out numbers were relatively small and the resistance to count drop-out systematically was evident when FEFC demands made retention figures mandatory. The other 'comforting' statistic provided about students who had dropped-out came from the use of BP63's which grouped their reasons for withdrawal into well defined but inappropriate categories for the bureaucratic purposes of the organisation. For example, there is no category for being pregnant, or for having received inappropriate advice and guidance prior to enrolment.

If drop-out has always been perceived as of little significance because of the low numbers concerned and the unimportant reasons given for leaving, then it would follow that the

advice and guidance given to students need only be measured against those students who persist. Which brings to light the most important 'given' in this study. All the drop-outs in this study said that their course was not what they expected and many went on to explain that they had been misled by the course information, the marketing material and the staff who interviewed them.

This is the 'given' situation; the student feels deceived, the staff have promoted their 'product' in an attractive and to them realistic manner, creating a mismatch of understanding. It is tempting to assign misunderstanding to the drop-out by suggesting they are inadequate in some way and have failed to benefit from the advice and guidance process. Alternatively, it is very uncomfortable for staff to hear drop-outs using terms like, - deceived - lied to - misled - when they talk about their perception of the same process. Adding to this discomfort is the finding that a large number (35%) of persisters also find their courses to have been misrepresented. An alarming picture begins to emerge where the College cannot absolve itself entirely from the responsibility of passing on inaccurate information. Issues of pre-enrolment advice and guidance must be addressed, these data show quite clearly that staff either are unable to provide accurate information about College courses, or they choose not to provide it. There is some evidence to support both explanations. Neither situation is satisfactory, both have contributed in a significant manner to student drop-out.

6. The 'Given' Student and Their Negotiated Role

Students come to college for a variety of reasons; the most successful are those who come because they want to, it is part of their career plan and they see College as a stepping stone to their chosen future. Many drop-outs had other reasons for coming to College and until these are understood, drop-out remains meaningless.

Some students come to College because they have to; they have been sent by their employer, by the Job Centre or by parents. Others come because they have no other sensible alternative, it is a way of using up their time until something better comes along, they have drifted into College. A minority of these 'drifters' actually wanted to enrol on other courses and were either late with their applications or were not sufficiently well

qualified, so they took a second-best option; it is important to recognise that this is still 'drift' in that it was not what they actually wanted to do, or planned for.

A third group of drop-outs never actually became students at all. They have truly grasped the commercialism which now characterises the FE sector, and have shown their grasp of this by buying the product. These people come to College to purchase skills and knowledge, just like we might go to a supermarket to buy sugar. As a supermarket customer, I do not expect to be quizzed on my reasons for purchasing the sugar nor do I expect any intervention once I have paid for my purchase. Nor do these people expect College staff to interfere with their education plans. They enrol on a course and when they are satisfied that the course has provided them with what they wanted, they leave. They have always been in the customer relationship with the college, never the student relationship. For some skills based courses this type of drop-out accounts for over 80% of the course enrolment.

A minority of people enrol to get a visa so that they can remain in Britain, as a student. The term student, is thus more a convenience rather than a reference to learning.

These 'given' aspects are part of what each individual student brings with them into College. These aspects are not readily apparent to staff, who usually assume that students have arrived to gain a qualification, which is the accepted reason for College attendance.

Negotiating their role as a student is then totally dependant upon whether they want to be a student. If they are purely a consumer of educational services, the studentship concept is irrelevant.

If you have been sent to College against your will, you are a reluctant student. It may be that given time and encouragement, you may change your mind about study, and start to value the course, but if this is not the case, then some of your energy will naturally be diverted into persuading those who sent you, to change their mind. This form of negotiation might even result in a student changing their job to get out of a course which they perceive not only as irrelevant but negative in every way. If it has been parental pressure which forced the student into College, then poor performance and truancy may be the precursors of drop-out, in these cases the student changes the attitude of their

family, because they need the family's continued support once they have left College.

Drifters are waiting for something better to turn up, they are opportunists. The opportunity they are waiting for is usually employment, often of a specific nature. Some young women drift into College waiting for the opportunity to marry. Whether or not they are looking for their ideal partner among the other students is not so pertinent as the fact that these data show this traditional female role to be prevalent in the late 1990's in spite of feminism and equality measures working so hard to offer choices to women which take them beyond marriage into wider choices about careers and motherhood.

Once inside the system, the negotiations continue, both with the staff and with the other students. Most respondents in this study reported having good relationships with staff. There were some reports of lecturers being insensitive or unfair in their treatment of some individuals, but these were very specific incidents and few in number. More commonly, drop-outs reported having difficulty maintaining good relations with the other students, and it would appear that staff choose not to intervene. Occasionally this breakdown in relationships between students can become violent. Although violence is rare in College, it is on the increase, and perhaps it is time that lecturers recognised their own position in turning a 'blind eye' to such incidents, they are perceived as condoning them, this reinforces the violent behaviours and increases the likelihood of repetition.

More than half the respondents in this study said they would like to return to College, indicating that it was not the College experience as such which caused them to drop-out. 68% of them also thought that dropping-out was the right decision for them, at this time. Their views on how matters might be improved all centred upon better advice and guidance prior to enrolment.

The student brings with them a context built upon their family and school relationships, heavily influenced by the community's values. The College staff routinely ignore these contextual aspects, applying an historical meaning to each student, as if they were making a completely fresh start. The intentions of students do not match their behaviours, or more precisely, their spoken intentions, because it may be that their internal ideas about motives for coming to College have always been clear, but never articulated. Drop-outs have different reasons for coming to College; they come by mistake, are forced or just

drift, but they do not come as part of a well thought out plan.

None of these reasons justifies categorising the drop-out as a dysfunctional student. Dysfunction may have a part to play in the process, but it will be situated in either the family, the previous school or the College.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

1. Words, Meanings and Actions

Wright Mills (1959, p.5) explains that "the sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals" and then goes on to say (p.6) that this enables us to "grasp history and biography and the relation between the two".

This research started with a word, the word was - drop-out. This word had a meaning. As a label it was attached to certain people. The strength of that attachment was dependent upon the extent to which they conformed to its meaning. The empirical evidence unearthed during this investigation has shown very little conformation between these people and that meaning.

From investigating the word - drop-out - with its many negative attributes, the study moved on to look at its function. There were two areas where the word had power, one was in the general community, where it was equated with deviant behaviour, criminality, unemployment and low self-esteem. This made the word into a deterrent which could be used to modify (encourage) the behaviour of persisters. The other area was in College where the word provided an excuse for getting rid of students whose characteristics failed to match the requirements of other students and staff. Defining exactly what these other requirements might be, proved problematic since they had little to do with ability or aptitude, rather they were based on social categories such as gender, ethnicity, age, status, and attitude.

The drop-outs in this study shared their experiences with me by telling me their stories. A double check was included in the design to compare these narrative accounts against statistical information. Completion rates provided the evidence for the 'external action'

which these drop-outs were talking about. The meanings, the inner life, could only come from their narratives. While interpreting and editing these narratives, distortions were avoided, but in seeking to find the relationship between the 'big picture' and the individual drop-out's biography, I have had to impose my own language, the languages of science and education, upon the whole undertaking.

Usher and Bryant (1989 p.100) point out that "certain characteristics of any investigative field, what it is that one is looking at or for, will be pre-given in the enquiry language... in arguing for a reflexive understanding of research it is therefore necessary to look at the language of its practice".

The language practised here is scientific, with borrowed terminology from sociology and psychology. The terminology is not arbitrary, but it is an artificial construct, it is not the language of the drop-outs. They have their own "speech community" as Rubin and Greene (1991 p.391) would call it.

Looking for the 'function' of a word could only come about if 'function' is part of the investigative framework: part of the working language. Lyotard (1979, p.49) claims that the language of science is defiant and that its legitimacy is rarely questioned. This research forced open an examination of its language constructs because it was recognised that there was a conflict between the 'talk' of lecturers, scientists, administrators, teachers and drop-outs. Each term, each classification and each coding was therefore examined for pre-given meaning, power and its value for developing knowledge.

"It is to be regretted" as Trollope [1815-1882] (1953, p.185) points out, "that no mental method of daguerreotype or photograph has yet been discovered, by which the characters of men can be reduced to writing and put into grammatical language with unerring precision of truthful description".

2. There are four kinds of drop-out

This study identified four different types of drop-out, each one having quite different

reasons for attending College in the first place, and each one having quite different reasons for choosing to leave.

The first of these types is the early drop-out. They usually leave early in the academic year, no later than November. Early drop-out accounts for nearly 20% of all drop-out. These people are on the wrong courses, they enrolled on the wrong courses because they received the wrong advice before starting. This poor advice may have come from an employer or parent, or even a school teacher, the careers guidance officer or staff at the College. What they all have in common is that the advice which was given totally ignores or overrides the ambitions and plans of the student. Withdrawal occurs as soon as the student discovers they are on the wrong course. There may be a time lapse while they muster support for their decision or while they find something else to do, but inevitably, they leave.

The second type of drop-out is the opportunist. They have drifted into College because they had nothing better to do, and un-surprisingly, when something that they perceive as better, turns up, they leave: they are more of a drop-in than a drop-out. Their ideal job is offered to them, they get the chance to go directly to University or they get married and move away, whatever the opportunity, they just dropped-in to College to while away their time. The timing of this type of drop-out is un-predictable since it is impossible to determine the onset of such diverse opportunities.

The third type of drop-out never actually becomes a student. They enrol on a course, but in their terms, they have bought an educational commodity, they are not affiliated to the College or its student body. They do not see themselves as a student, therefore they cannot see themselves as a drop-out either. This type of drop-out, the consumer, accounts for a large number of drop-outs particularly from skills courses such as foreign languages and business studies. People come to learn the skill, they are not interested in the certification: they have simply bought the product.

The fourth type of drop-out leaves because of a life crisis. They may have come to College for the conventional reasons of gaining a qualification or they may fall into one of the categories above, but at some point in their College career, an insurmountable crisis

overtakes them, and they leave. Car accidents, ill health, death in the family and sudden financial hardships can create difficulties some students cannot overcome. Life crisis drop-out accounts for about 4% of total drop-out, and because it is un-predictable, it will be almost impossible to eliminate. Curiously, it affects vocational students more than academic students, perhaps this is linked to the better educational achievement of academic student's families who may as a result of this, be better able to cope with life's misadventures.

3. The big surprises

During the course of this study, four startling discoveries were made, these were surprising partly because they were un-anticipated and partly because of their statistical significance.

The first of these was the finding that none of the drop-outs in this study was an 'only' child. This was a highly significant finding, but what did it mean in practice. Many students have brothers and sisters, they do not automatically become drop-outs. There had to be other pre-disposing factors involved, but no correlation could be found between either the family size or the position of the drop-out in the family. Undoubtedly, what can be said is that 'only' children are at an advantage when it comes to College completion.

The second surprise was discovering an homeostatic mechanism at work which governed the proportion of drop-outs in any given age range. Again, the research is confronted by a significant finding, which is difficult to explain. The only activity in College related to age is the organisation of classes. In the FE sector, this is not as stringently adhered to as it would be in school, where children are routinely sub-divided according to age, but generally College students are put in classes with other people of a similar age. Class size, therefore, is only a tangential age related factor.

Recently, student numbers have increased, so has drop-out, could there be a link? This study examined previous research from other Colleges as well as looking back over data spread out over several years from BPCFE, and found that drop-out is persistently about

30% of the total student enrolment, and has been for many decades.

There is no direct correlation however, between class size and student drop-out. The relationship is more complex and involves a group dynamic which operates to identify and eliminate any member of the class which does not conform to the characteristics of the majority. These characteristics include not only the student's age, but also their gender, (in terms of its appropriateness for the subject or activity undertaken - stereotyping) ethnicity, status (marital and employment), and their attitudes.

The elimination process can be summarised as part of the College's occupational socialization agenda. This involves learning the 'norms' of a vocation, over and above the necessary factual material required to perform its tasks. The College has a socializing agenda, as do the other students, this is implicit and unspoken. For those students who do not share this agenda, the socialization processes will work to oust them from the occupation rather than draw them in. Group referencing will soon create distance between the potential drop-out and the other students in the class. The division increases, even under the supervision of a vigilant lecturer, until finally the target drops-out.

The third surprising result in this study was the correlation between school League Table performance indicators and College drop-out. The analysis discovered that schools with high academic achievements, although sending relatively few students to College, gave rise to a higher proportion of drop-outs than schools with lower achievement. Many previous studies had singled out low ability as a significant factor in drop-out. These findings contradict this, as does other evidence from this study which shows that all the drop-outs involved in this research were as well qualified as their peers, and some were much better qualified and well aware of their superior ability. While it was not possible to uphold Green's 18% (1962) predicted figure for the number of gifted drop-outs, it is possible to say that some well qualified people leave College prematurely.

What the League Table analysis also showed was that where school teachers are well informed about College provision, they were better able to advise their pupils about College courses. These pupils subsequently persist and qualify.

Finally, the fourth big surprise was the discovery that the majority of mature drop-outs still live with their parents. This again was a very strong statistic, but ambiguous in interpretation. It shows that either these adults are very compliant in the way they respond to questionnaires, or it shows that adults who still live at home with their parents are more likely to drop-out of College than other mature students, who live independently. These conflicting interpretations are the result of ambiguities within the data matrix which shows that there is still something more to be learned about the family context of the adult learner.

4. The numbers game

Astin et al (1987 p.36) identify "student retention" as a "'hot issue ... prompted initially by institutional concerns about enrolment during a period of demographic decline, more recently these issues have emerged as part of the larger public discussion of institutional performance and student outcomes".

Institutional performance has been made public in a manner never before experienced by the FE sector. League Tables, NTET's, Section 52 Returns and the publication of PISA all endeavour to make student outcome public knowledge, funding is rapidly becoming more outcome oriented, and this puts extra pressure on institutions to put forward the best possible statistics.

Yorke (1995, p.2) points out that "performance indicators continue to be a topic of debate ... (this is) a reflection of a lack of consensus regarding their use".

While there is some agreement about what a performance indicator should be, in that it is a numeric measure of educational achievement, the fine-tuning needed to adjust such measures so that they capture all achievement has not yet been satisfactorily completed. Add this to the debate about what they could be used for, and at once it is possible to see the source of one of the most contentious educational arguments of the decade.

Performance indicators are needed for three definite and not necessarily conflicting

purposes. Firstly, they are used for institutional accountability to funding bodies and to the general public, who have a vested interest in knowing that their money is being well invested. Secondly, performance indicators can be used as a marketing tool to attract more students to a successful organisation. Thirdly, they can be used as a measure for curriculum enhancement.

The conflict arises from the first two uses of PI's not being in balance with the third. Public accountability and funding led indicators require the organisation to present the best possible results. Curriculum enhancement requires the organisation to be honest about areas where it is not performing well, so that remedial action can be put in place to correct the problem. This type of PI could be damaging if it became public.

The same PI's could be used for all three purposes, but this would require a degree of cooperation among staff responsible for their collection, which historically has no precedent. While administrators continue to value PI's in terms of potential funding, they will be blind to their other possible use because as Yorke goes on to say "an indicator only has validity in so far as it relates to a defined purpose". Curriculum is not the 'purpose' of administrators, it is the province of academics, and the two traditionally have been divided by a substantial gulf, maintained by a difference in values and language. Bridging this gulf will be difficult, but logically, enhancing the curriculum will lead to better student outcomes which in turn will lead to more student enrolments and consequently more funding.

5. Positioning the Self

In some ways this may become what Burgess (1984, p.267) calls a "confusional account" of how I did the research, rather than a mechanistic list of methods, results, problems and so on, it seeks to place the researcher's experience in a reflective manner, at the centre of the study.

Engaging in the research process required an involvement with the research subjects. Not distancing myself from respondents in the enquiry gave me an advantage in that I was able

to gather information from many sources, even potentially hostile sources. At the same time, the issue of my own vulnerability became real, in that I was researching the organisation in which I worked and some people found this threatening.

My analysis has shown that not only was the notion of research alien to FE, but the added dimension of my being female created tensions which might not have been so difficult to circumnavigate had I been a man. Hierarchical obstacles were also evident, but none were so strong that they could not eventually be removed. Thus my confession includes what Burgess (1984, p.267) recommends as "reactions from those being researched".

The drop-outs however, had a much friendlier attitude and always seemed interested and 'chatty' when we talked. There was no implicit threat for them and I enjoyed talking to them. Perhaps that is also important to acknowledge, because no-where in the method have I said that it was fun to talk to all these people and share, for a while, in their life stories, their hopes and their ambitions for the future.

The only real obstacle that I encountered during the study was an ethical one of my own making. Some respondents told me about issues which I found difficult to place in an objective way into the research while trying to ignore the jarring effect they had on my own sense of right and wrong. Eventually, I concluded that the purpose of the study would be served by the inclusion of these data, and that my own integrity as a researcher could remain intact only if I preserved my respondent's confidence. Therefore, I did not criticise or condemn their behaviours. I simply recorded and analysed these as I did all the rest, but it was an uncomfortable experience.

6. Praxis

Fernandez and Shu (1988) point out that while there has been a substantial amount of research done on student drop-out and its remediation "Most studies reveal a glaring absence of theoretical frameworks that may serve to explain why youngsters drop-out".

This research has shown there to be four distinct types of drop-out and offers a theory to

explain each of them. In the light of this new theoretical understanding it is possible to recommend solutions which could go some way towards alleviating the problem.

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that life crisis drop-out cannot be prevented, it accounts for about 4% of withdrawal and this is likely to continue.

Secondly, advice and guidance must be improved so that students enrol on the right course. Better information should be given to school teachers and careers advisors. Employers seem to be mystified by the new, post-incorporation FE sector, this needs to be addressed as they are influential in sending their employees to the College as students. The public have some ill-founded ideas about College too and these should be remedied, so that when students come to College, they know exactly what to expect.

Opportunist drop-outs should be identified at entry and provision made for their needs. If they are looking for work or filling up their spare time before starting something else, they should be directed to specialist courses where they could at least gain accreditation in study skills, career planning, and increase their self esteem (Hopgood 1988). If employment is their primary objective, securing a job could be the major PI. This novel approach confronts a large scale problem, and funding agencies would need persuading of its merit.

The College also has to decide which side of the consumer fence it wishes to sit on. If FE is going to sell a product to customers, then it must accept the commercial relationship which will ensue, and with it, the consumer drop-out, who has bought a product and used it as they want, and not necessarily how the funding bodies thought it should be used.

Meaningful intervention is needed to 'rescue' potential drop-outs. Recognising that some students do not share all the necessary characteristics valued by the other people involved in a course could prompt remedial action. This requires a "Back to basics approach - which recognises ... a multicultural, multilingual student population" Kunisawa (1988), and distinguishes the different needs brought to College by students with individual life histories and various backgrounds.

Some students would like to change courses because they recognise they are on the wrong course. This should be made easier for them with the introduction of modular courses; the academic year will no longer be so rigid, and will allow greater movement of students between courses.

Drop-out recovery programmes, with early identification could rescue people who have dropped-out before they get settled into their new way of life. At present, drop-outs are identified only if they have been missing for four or more weeks, this may be too long. Drop-outs, if they are going to be recovered successfully, will have to be offered something more than just a return ticket to the course they abandoned. They may need learner support, more one-to-one tutorial or mentor support, or a complete change of direction requiring career analysis and guidance. If they are the victim of a life crisis, this support may require specialist knowledge or the aid of specialist agencies from outside.

The overall strategy involves vertical integration, where prevention, intervention and recovery are united into one plan. This would require linking enrolment procedures to classroom activities and to final examination entry. At present these activities are dislocated from each other and undertaken by different groups of people with the minimum interaction or communication. For example, advice and guidance is the province of careers officers and admissions tutors. Enrolment is almost purely an administrative activity. Classrooms are dominated by academic staff while examination entry is again entirely administrative. No-one at all is interested in drop-out recovery unless grant money has to be repaid, in which case it falls to the finance department or in cases of hardship, the student councillor. Vertical integration would seek to unite all these different layers of the hierarchy so that they worked together, with a common aim: student retention. Personal tutors would also have a greater role to play in drop-out prevention and recovery, since they could be the key people who would identify imminent withdrawal and may be the first point on which a student's educational pathway could pivot in a more successful direction.

Finally, on exit we need to do more than just "re-arrange " the figures, [Conrath 1986] "Reform by numbers" [Hanford and White 1991] is not going to address the real issues at all, although it might suffice to cover them up for a while. Numbers alone are not going

to provide educators with reasons for drop-out, they only provide an indication of how much there is. Re-defining the criteria on which these numbers are collected will not improve the quality of the College's provision, its marketing strategies or its advice and guidance services.

7. The Barriers

"Did she drop-out or was she pushed?"
[Curran, 1980, pp.22]

This study discerned several barriers which pre-disposed students to dropping-out. These barriers were located in their family, their school and in the wider community as well as encountered directly in the College classroom.

While it may not be possible to do anything about the family situation it is possible to improve communications with families so that they become more involved with the College, as a whole family.

Schools would benefit from closer links with College staff, especially those schools which have been resistant to such offers in the past. Uniting the schools and the families of children in those schools into an information dissemination project would have benefits for all. Those children destined for University are unlikely to change their ambitions, those who are undecided about what to do will have a wider range of choices to consider. Those who have already chosen a vocation will be able to confirm their decision. In practice this requires more than just the occasional parent's evening or careers convention, this proposal is an on-going dialogue between the College, teachers, children and their families.

The community's impression of College has come primarily, from two sources, the students and the way in which the College is portrayed by the media. Drop-out has had a bad press even in academic journals. Perhaps it is time we began to build some bridges uniting the reality with the impression. If the community has a distorted idea about

student drop-out and its causes then it is not surprising that it holds the College responsible.

If the community could be made to see that drop-out is a product of its own value systems, then it might take a fresh look at the issue and begin to respect the decisions that some students have to make in choosing to leave a course before completion.

The empirical evidence from this study shows quite clearly that some individuals have the odds stacked up against them to such an extent that drop-out is inevitable. Perhaps, what is even more surprising is that so many students persist and succeed. There is evidence which shows some students are predisposed towards dropping-out. If intervention and recovery measures are not put in place, then drop-out will continue at its alarmingly high rate. Such measures come at a cost. The continued increases in student numbers will automatically increase the number of drop-outs. How much longer can we afford to let this continue unchecked?

8. In Conclusion: The Puppy's Tale

Solzhenitsyn (1970 p.198-199) published a short story about a puppy, visited by a little boy who was bringing the dog some delicious chicken bones. The puppy was released from his chain and immediately began to play in the snow. The dog could smell the chicken bones, but he went "back and forth, burying his muzzle in the snow" ignoring his food. The story concludes in the puppy's words "I don't need your bones ... just give me my freedom".

Drop-outs are like that puppy.

To expand upon the metaphor, college education is the 'delicious chicken bone' offered to the student. The students may have ambitions of their own, they reject the food, this education, in favour of something much more important to them, 'freedom' in the case of Solzhenitsyn's puppy, freedom to choose something else in the case of a drop-out. The inbuilt arrogance of the education system is thus challenged. An arrogance that supposes

it knows what is best for everyone, is rejected by those who can see for themselves that it is not best for them.

There are no winners and losers. Drop-outs are people with needs which differ from those of the majority. The word - drop-out - has a character of its own, and a power for negative labelling which is difficult to shift. Social forces maintain the power of the word while allowing the people, the drop-outs to go about their newly found business. If they are successful and contribute to the community they will be re-labelled, if they fail and become a burden on society, the word's power will be reinforced.

The only true drop-out is the life crisis drop-out, and this is not readily preventable. All the other categories are a function of enrolment, a variation upon a theme of attendance. The reasons people come to College and choose to study a particular programme give rise to drop-out. The early leaver, on the wrong course; the opportunist who did not want to be in College at all but had nothing better to do; and the consumer of education who never really became a student anyway, these people drop-out as a direct result of the way they accessed College in the first place.

This study has observed and described drop-out. Drop-out has been measured and investigated for its meaning and its size. Several theories have been put forward to explain what has emerged as several, inter-related phenomena. Drop-out is only a word, drop-outs fall into one of four categories, each one very different from the others.

There is little correspondence between the meaning of the word - drop- out, and the people who are drop-outs. The word is a social construct, the person is a social product. The two need to be reconciled. In the words of Mother Teresa (1988, p.137)
"Reconciliation begins with ourselves. It begins with a pure heart, a heart that is able to see God in others".

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CHAPTER EIGHT
APPRAISAL AND DISCUSSION

1. The Purpose of Evaluation

This chapter will give consideration to the research findings against the background of the methods employed which gave rise to them. There are three underlying purposes to this examination of the work:-

- firstly, did it achieve what it set out to do?
- secondly, were there any un-anticipated problems which arose during the process and if so, how were these problems overcome: what lessons were learnt?
- thirdly, has this study pointed the way forward to further work which might usefully elaborate on the issues in question: what next?

Deciding whether or not a programme of research has worked well is difficult when the answer is not already known, "In most science... the appropriate range of outcomes is known at the outset. This provides a universally agreed criterion of experimental quality" which according to Collins and Pinch (1993, p.98) provides scientists with a yardstick against which to evaluate their work. No such yardstick was available to measure this research against because this investigation broke new ground, and in novel situations, the correct outcome cannot be pre-determined.

New situations such as the topic of this study run the risk of producing contentious findings. Arguably, the conclusions drawn from this study will challenge the prevailing thinking about student drop-out, and therefore, the results may be viewed by some practitioners as contentious. Collins and Pinch (1993, p.111) whilst trying to explain how sometimes new ideas take root and become established as a new way of thinking, note that more often 'contentious findings or approaches are simply ignored'.

How the community chooses between which results to ignore and which to acknowledge is a complex social process dependent on many factors extending beyond the correctness of the procedures involved. Ultimately, the community will choose. It remains the responsibility of the researcher however, to justify or amend their methods according to the experience of having completed the study. In this way the ladder of investigation can be extended, and the risk of having the findings ignored avoided.

2. Evaluating the Quantitative Method

i) The sample frame.

The sample frame was composed of three separate populations. The first, the GES sample comprised all the drop-outs in one department. Originally it had been the intention of this study that this would be the only sample, however, response rates were so good and the data generated from these was so interesting that a further population was included. The SSS sample was drawn from the rest of the College and was formed by random sampling. Whenever sampling is used there is always the risk of sampling error. To overcome this error the sample must be large enough and representative of the whole population of interest. This was difficult to guarantee, so the use of oblique data from a population who knew drop-outs, but were not one themselves, provided a rich source of complementary information. Supplementary data was also used and all together, these different elements provided a triangulation method. Triangulation ensures that the short-comings inherent to any one method can be compensated for by the strengths inherent to the others. Provided all the weaknesses are cancelled out by the use of alternative sampling strategies, the overall frame will be robust and withstand statistical manipulation.

Sampling error was not the only problem which had to be overcome. Selection error and availability error were also threatening the study. Selection errors were due to the way in which the College's own administrative systems classified drop-outs. Availability error was due to people not being available (at home/at the address given) to respond to questioning. To overcome these problems, conversion of non-respondents gave rise to data which could be compared to that already collected so that a judgement could be made

about the degree of skew in the findings. It transpired that there was no difference between these populations, but this could not have been known before the investigation started. External sources were used as an ultimate check on all data so that the evidence could be corroborated from an independent source.

The optimum number of respondents needed to participate in this study was calculated from a formula devised by Brown (1986, p.32). To achieve reasonable confidence bands for the findings approximately 175 respondents were needed. Eventually, 147 people participated, which falls short of the optimum required but still allows confidence limits of + or - 5% which is adequate for the purposes of this enquiry.

ii) Non-response

Non-response can cause serious distortion to data and therefore must be compensated for to eliminate directional bias. Non-respondents may have divergent views from respondents and may create a gap in the data matrix. The "silent minority" as Goyder (1987) would call them. This was overcome by a process of 'conversion'. Non-respondents were telephoned and questioned not only about their responses to some general questions in the study but also about their reasons for not having responded in the first place. All the non-respondents sampled were 'apathetic' respondents. There were no refusals and there were none who said that they objected on principle.

There were however, some cases of partial non-response, failure to answer questions or give information relevant to parts of the study. These tended to concentrate in one particular area, the compilation of prior educational achievement. Respondents were asked to give an account of their previous examination results. Some respondents did this easily and gave a fairly full account of all their accomplishments, but there was a high refusal to answer this particular question. Acknowledging that it was an intrusive question, it perhaps could have been better placed towards the end of the questionnaire, but at the time of designing the instrument, it was decided that this was a simple, factual question which did not require much effort on the part of the respondent. In hindsight, it is obvious that this question met with a reluctant audience, and future studies would

benefit from devising methods of collecting this information from secondary sources, which is possible from enrolment statistics, but very time consuming to collate accurately.

This possible error created a gap, which it turns out, may have produced a more significant finding, in line with other studies such as Green's (1962) which suggested that about 18% of all drop-outs are talented. Alternatively, the results of this enquiry may have turned up the true figure for this College which is closer to 8% and collecting further information would not change this finding. One possible reason for the College having a lower loss of talented students may be because fewer come to the College in the first place, bearing in mind that the College is in direct competition with four Grammar schools and several other Sixth Forms and many independent training providers. This requires further investigation because the finding is significant not only in terms of its statistical interest but also in terms of practice, it makes sense to retain one's best students.

Partial non-response may also have occurred and gone un-noticed as a result of respondents misunderstanding the wording of questions. There were some multilingual respondents included in this study, all of whom had an excellent grasp of the English language. Un-noticed misinterpretations are more likely to occur amongst native English speakers, since there is an underlying assumption that they will understand perfectly. There is no evidence in this study which suggests that any respondents had difficulty understanding questions, only that occasionally they were reluctant to answer them. The questionnaires and interview schedules were tried out on a small sample of respondents and revised in the light of these trials before being finally used. These pre-trials were a very effective method of eliminating question ambiguity.

iii) The follow-up interviews

When respondents returned their questionnaires they were asked to indicate if they would be willing to participate in a further interview. This raises again the questions of selection error and availability error. Selection error is somewhat un-avoidable in this instance since the samples were self-selected. Self-selection was used as a means of circumventing

the invasiveness of telephoning people without obtaining their permission. Other surveys have used the 'cold' telephone technique, calling potential respondents and initiating immediate interviews (Page 1995) with reasonably good results and high response rates, but it was deemed inappropriate for this study because of the sensitivity associated with the subject matter.

Availability error can be overcome by sheer persistence. Continuing to ring until someone answers the telephone, or if the target respondent is not available, making an appointment to call again at a better time, or failing that, using the person who has answered as an 'oblique' respondent.

iv) Triangulation

The short-comings inherent to the sampling were eliminated by the addition of 'oblique' and supplementary data sets. While the 'oblique' set was rather *ad hoc* in its collection, with respondents either volunteering to participate or being selected for the investigation, the supplementary data was gathered far more systematically.

Cross checking of this kind allowed the investigation to expand its horizons of enquiry. It opened doors into the homes of drop-outs, into their schools and allowed me the opportunity to speak to some of their friends. The supplementary data allowed, for the first time, a comprehensive analysis of the true scale of student drop-out. Never before had anyone at the College quantified outcome data in terms of drop-out and measured the real size of the problem. In the wake of the surprisingly high figures produced, came further enquiries into how drop-out had been under-reported for such a long time. Cross referencing documentation provided the raw data for this analysis which showed student drop-out to be more than double the number that administrators admitted having. This was the 'trigger' that caused some staff to feel threatened by the activities of this research; they had a vested interest in not disclosing these data and they certainly did not want the information made public.

v) Statistical manipulations

These data are so strong that they really speak for themselves. However, at the outset, this could not have been predicted, it was assumed that like so many other, real life settings for research, these data would be in a 'messy' form which would need some statistical untangling so that its significance could be deduced. As it transpired, most of the discoveries made spoke clearly of their significance, it was obvious, and all that the statistics did, was confirm the observations. Confirmation of this kind is useful because it lends weight and credibility to the findings, ensuring their validity. This also makes it more difficult for the community to ignore or reject the findings.

3. Evaluating the Qualitative Method

i) Objectivity

Remembering that the 'objects' in this study were people made the inherent problems associated with objectivity greater. Even with fairly simple designs, scientific experiments often yield variable results, which require explaining; such explanations are of necessity, subjective. How much greater is this variability compounded when the investigation focuses on one of the most variable 'objects' available - people?

It was not possible to abandon my position as a participant in the research process. Every time I engaged someone in conversation as part of the enquiry, I engaged as much with them as they did with me. It took me a long time to accept this situation because my early training as a scientist forbade such interaction while intuitively I knew it to be unavoidable. The conflict was engineered by my own inability to submit to the obvious, and allow subjectivity to dominate; instead of this I was naively fighting against it.

Submission occurred when I realized the inevitability of my own judgmental processes. It was this realization which triggered the need to find a method which could accommodate these processes and remain robust enough to withstand rigorous examination and criticism. This required an honest approach to the reporting of the whole process rather than the

adoption of the usual scientific form preferred by science journals. This chapter acts as a witness to this approach. Subjectivity has not only been acknowledged it had been contextualised, placed within an historic time frame and examined for prejudice. Each point in the analysis, going deeper and deeper, uncovering each fractal, to show clearly the picture at every level of understanding, from the superficial to the in-depth, before any conclusions were drawn.

Aligning qualitative data against the relevant numeric indicators provides the necessary evidence on which a judgement can be made about the 'goodness of fit' of these data to the conclusions that have been drawn from them.

Some readers may argue that having read the narratives they disagree with these conclusions. This situation will only arise when a reader has a conflicting frame of reference upon which to build their judgments. The risk is that they will then devalue the conclusions, but the risk has been avoided because every reader will have had the opportunity to understand my frame of reference. To arrive at similar conclusions, adopting this frame is all that is necessary. Believing it remains the choice of each individual reader.

ii) research as practice

If I am strictly honest, then I have to admit that there was a working theory behind the research, even at its inception. This working theory had emerged as a result of previous studies (Page 1990), wide reading around the topic and my own experiences as a lecturer in an FE College. Blending the experiences of other practitioners with mine, led to a re-evaluation of these working theories which eventually gave way, in favour of more practical ideas based on the empirical evidence which emerged from this research. These fragmentary theories eventually coalesced to form a unifying framework for the understanding of student drop-out, in its present four part form.

Some of the evidence collected during this enquiry simply did not fit; it did not fit the original working theory and it does not fit the newly formed framework either. There is

always the temptation, with evidence of this nature, to either, bend the finding and there are numerous, valid methods for doing this; or conversely, distorting the theory so that it fits these difficult data. This is a three pronged problem composed of theory, evidence and practice, or more correctly, practitioners.

Ignoring these difficult data, these misfit units of evidence, would have been simple, they could easily have been discarded as flawed narratives. Acknowledging them has actually proved more useful. Unusual findings can be used as examples, even unique examples can illustrate a more general point, as with the cases described in the section - when friends become enemies, which describes some extreme cases illustrative of a general situation which usually, is much less severe.

Two of the 'big surprises' in this research also came into the misfit category of data that just could not, at present, be put into the framework. The findings relating to the 'only child' and the homeostatic mechanisms relating to age cohorts were statistically significant pieces of information with no-where to go. In the former case, the significance for practitioners was negligible in that there really does seem to be nothing that can be done about the situation. Educationalists cannot prevail upon families to restrict their offspring to one, in order to improve their opportunities of educational success. In the latter case, there was a tangential argument which could be made in linking this homeostatic mechanism to class sizes, but the operational factors continue to elude the enquiry and while they have been touched on in some of the narratives, their exposure is limited. The case rests upon a group dynamic which seeks to eliminate members of a class who do not 'fit', in some subjective and unclearly specified way, until the class is reduced to a manageable number of people with similar backgrounds and social/vocational 'agendas'.

While inexplicable data can be embarrassing, it does show the way forward and points with a clear signal, the direction for future studies. For the time being, the theory will remain as it stands, until such time as contradictory evidence forces a change. It may be unsatisfactory, but the real world is a 'messy' place to do research in.

iii) The gift has been given

The gift (Mauss 1954) introduced me to the notion of "potlatch" which appropriately described the inter-relationship between the respondents in this study and myself. The idea that I could magnify and empower their voices, their stories, so that their opinions could be heard by those in authority, has been achieved. The extent of the achievement has not yet been fully measured because it has not yet been concluded, but preliminary evidence suggests that there is an appreciable amount of interest in student drop-out and there has been considerable pressure put upon me to deliver solutions and explanations based on this research.

iv) refining the technique

Data was accumulated in three ways, through the questionnaire, through telephone conversations and through face-to-face interviews.

In hindsight, the questions on the questionnaire could have been re-ordered. The questions relating to previous examinations should have been eliminated from the first part of the enquiry and re-positioned into the telephone follow-up survey, or preferably, this information could have been collected from secondary sources.

A slightly different problem also emerged at this stage which generated some very interesting and useful data, but was a completely un-anticipated occurrence. Some respondents, who I had identified from College records as drop-outs, did not think of themselves as having been a student. Therefore the arrival of a questionnaire, purporting to obtain the views of students who had prematurely left College seemed confrontational. This group eventually formed the 'consumer' drop-outs, the people who had bought an educational package and having used it in a way that they deemed appropriate, left, fully satisfied. Because they could not identify with being a student, it was even harder for them to think in terms of being a drop-out, especially when they were very satisfied with the College provision and in their terms had successfully completed their learning (if not the course). One or two of these respondents were quite indignant at having been

included in the survey at all and they questioned where I had obtained my initial information (student listing) from. This was one of the first major turning points of the enquiry. The realisation that some students were disaffected, but in a positive way, brought this study into a new light, focussing on issues of successful completion using the drop-out's terms of reference.

The 'oblique' data collection provided another turning point once it began to be clear just how large a role the drop-out's previous school plays in their eventual College outcome. I recognised that the political climate put me at something of an advantage in gaining entry to the schools chosen for this study. Accountability was a fairly new concept for schools and there was much discussion about when exactly, schools could stop being responsible for the outcome of their pupils. At present they are required to publish destinations, it is likely however, that they may soon be required to account for their pupils long term destination as well, and in this light I was welcomed into these schools as a 'benevolent' expert who may be able to shed some light on the long term prospects of their students. This became, therefore, a reciprocal interchange, and not just a data gathering exercise on my part.

v) Refining the theory

The working theory which was in place at the outset of this research was not so much refined, as thrown out and replaced by something altogether different. This was the result of two simultaneous processes, each complementary to each other which evolved under the influence of the data gathering.

The first of these processes was the generation of meaning from the qualitative data collection. These data had to be sufficient (replicated) and representative and fit for their purpose - the explanation of student drop-out. I did not expect to get the levels of replication within these data sets that actually emerged. All the drop-outs talked about their courses failing to meet their expectations, none of the drop-out was an only child, these examples of 100% saturation astonished me, and increased my confidence in the process. The second process was the uniting of the quantitative and qualitative

information into a comprehensive whole.

The inherent difficulty which had to be overcome at this stage was one of belief; forming a new theory was less difficult than believing it to be an adequate explanation of what was going on. The reason I was finding this difficult lay in the juxtaposition of truth, validity and my interpretation of the stories the drop-outs had told me. This study does not seek to overcome the subjective-objective divide, but it does have to acknowledge the divide in order to progress. The stories I was told were true to the people who did the telling. The interpretations I formed were true for me. The theories formed reflect these two truths. If readers have an alternative truth, which a postmodern philosophy has to allow, then these theories may be inadequate for them. Alternatively, some readers may find the match between my explanations and their own observations of the world to be so close, they will be left wondering how it could possibly take so long to arrive at the only, logical conclusion.

vi) The structure

Structural analysis is a purely artificial way of imposing order on a chaotic world. I needed to locate this study in such a way that the reference points could make sense to others and to me, and yet, drop-outs were scattered all over the place. Set theory allowed me to draw a map in which the relationships between the drop-outs, the College and the wider community could be plotted and mathematically described.

Once this map had been drawn it was possible to see clearly where the most fruitful places were for the study to focus, because as Janne (1954) pointed out, the most interesting situations occur at the structural intersections. This structural map was never intended to provide an accurate representation of the drop-out situation, because it neglected the temporal dynamic which would shift persons from one part of the structure to another. Instead, it was designed to act rather like a map, an indication of the whereabouts of possible drop-outs in relation to other structures in the universal set, society.

vii) Evaluating the concordance

The word, concordance, means agreement. This study was looking for a method which would bring into agreement, the narratives of drop-outs and the meanings that I would give them. Out of this agreement, new knowledge would grow.

The procedures, which involved the use of quantitative support for qualitative information, provided a basis upon which these agreements could be checked for their verity. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in this way, has led to the formulation of a new theoretical framework which explains student drop-out in the FE context.

4. Evaluating the Research Context

This research was a personal endeavour. It began when one of my own students dropped-out; he was by far the most able student in the class and I felt both responsible and guilty at this loss. I wanted to find out if I had caused his leaving or whether he had gone for some other reasons, as had been suggested by my colleagues. From this one incident the study steadily grew. It would take many years and examine the details of several thousand drop-outs before it was complete.

My positioning as a scientist, a woman, a Christian, a mother, the daughter of refugees even, has all had a bearing on the research process. These were the precursors of my taken-for-granted world, my own experiences of discrimination, prejudice, harassment at the hands of individuals and institutions have developed in me, an understanding which fosters an empathic awareness of other people's trouble. As a consequence of this empathic understanding, I am unable to turn my back upon injustice. Sadly, when I found that drop-outs were on the receiving end of a totally unjust assumption, socially perpetrated and perpetuated, this acted as a compelling force, motivating my enquiry.

FE is a hostile research environment. It has had little or no contact with research culture, and there is an inbuilt distrust of new initiatives which breach the unwritten etiquette which seeks to guarantee secrecy in relation to the activities going on, within the

organisation. Recognition is beginning to emerge, of the value that research may hold for the future well being of these new, post-incorporation organisations. At present, though, most of this recognition is based upon the immediate needs of the bureaucracy to provide funding driven statistics and information to government bodies. Curriculum enhancement research is still in its infancy by comparison, and yet these are inextricably linked. This fact has not yet been grasped by the various role holders who are in conflict with each other over the uses to which research and management information can be put. The conflict has arisen as a result of a communication breakdown, which may be less of a disintegration than the historic result of never having been fully formed in the first place.

The dual barriers formed by the communications breakdown and the lack of a research culture have combined to make the environment in which this research took place, a pressing, hostile and at times malevolent environment in which to work. I was fortunate, however, in that I did not have to operate in isolation. I received considerable support from colleagues within the organisation, many of whom could see that the benefits of research activity could outweigh the draw backs involved when 'unpalatable' information comes to light. Professional interest from outside the College also helped to 'protect' the endeavour and to give it some credibility in the eyes of more sceptical colleagues; these outside interests made all the difference in getting reluctant administrators/managers/lecturers to participate.

The audiences, for they are multiple in number, have also had a profound bearing on the shape of this study. The College, and practitioners in the field of education have a preference for 'hard' data. I have deliberately avoided the ideas of hard and soft data in preference for a more holistic approach which unifies all the information in this study, gives it all equal weight and credibility and allows the natural emergence of conclusions with the resultant framing of new theory.

Educationalists also seem to lose patience with too much under-pinning and justification, it is as if they want 'instant' answers to pressing problems, re-active solutions rather than pro-active enquiry, because time is limited in this new, market forces led learning environment. Academic research on the other hand, requires rigour and system, and all conclusions should be suitably reinforced with soundly underpinned methods which have

been fully explained.

The triangular relationship between the researcher, the researched and the audience is one which will be amplified to include the background and biography as well as the credibility of the researcher. The researched will be examined in the light of the methods used to uncover the associated data. While the audience will ultimately accept or reject the findings as a result of their correctness, their worth and their validity in relation to the salience of the subject for that particular audience. None of these decisions is divorced from the others; they are co-dependent choices. Recognition of this co-dependence has necessitated the 'wrapping up' of the research as if it were a gift. The wrapping paper is the language in which the report is written and the scientific basis of this study. The drop-outs told me their stories, they spoke through me, not to me. It is the task of this research that takes these voices to a wider audience.

5. Evaluation of the Analysis

"It cannot be too soon understood that science is one, and that whether we investigate language, philosophy, theology, history, or physics, we are dealing with the same problem culminating in the knowledge of ourselves. Speech is known only in connection with the organs of man, though in connection with his brain, religion as an expression of his aspirations, history as a record of his deeds, and physical science as the laws under which he lives. Philosophers and theologians have yet to learn that a physical fact is as sacred as a moral principle. Our own nature demands from us this double allegiance".

[Louis Agassiz, 1874 p.435]

This same double allegiance gave shape to the analysis of this research; it became a search for both physical facts and underlying moral principles, and the two became as one. The facts were actions, words and observations which gave rise to measurement. The moral principles were the givens, the taken-for-granted in the world under examination and in my world, both of which required detailed investigation.

The analysis started with various 'givens': community, family, school and college culture and history, there was however, another given, which had been examined in an earlier

chapter, it was the given self (Chapter Five). Gross (1992, p.356) explains that "women (are) faced with a dilemma ... they can either remain detached from the 'objects' of their theoretical investigations ... or women could maintain a closeness to and identification with their objects". I chose the latter position and in doing so have run the risk of weakening the scientific objectivity demanded by the academic community because the alternative to "disavow" my position as a woman, (Gross, 1992, p.357) was something that I was reluctant to do. Being female had given me the advantage in that I was able to get close to my respondents, even the hostile ones.

Women's identities are complex and include many roles, some of which are traditional gender roles such as Mother, wife and daughter; other roles are non-traditional, in my case scientist, lecturer, researcher. In developing an analysis of drop-outs, others, I have also developed a relational analysis of myself. Through a better understanding of myself I have come to understand these others. This falls in line with feminist theory which does not limit research to the inclusion of women, but seeks to extend research to include all, from the theoretical (political) position of women. Thus, research done by women is not restricted by male discourse, "Women's activities" are not just "added" to the subject matter, because this would distort the framework, (Harding, 1992 p.338) rather, women's experiences are the baseline from which the rest of the study, which includes the activities of men, have been analysed. There was no alternative; I am female, I absolutely had to do this research from the point of view of a woman, disavowal was not negotiable.

Finally, the proposed solution, vertical integration which unites prevention, intervention and recovery, has been devised in such a way that would allow it to be practicable in the FE context as it operates today. The dynamics of FE are such that it changes very rapidly, and it is difficult to predict what tomorrow's Colleges will be like. It is not unreasonable, however, to assume that drop-out will continue unabated unless some or all of these measures are introduced. The alternative is that society will have to accept drop-out as an inevitable consequence of its education system's operating procedures, an alternative that would be un-palatable to most funding agencies even if the community could be persuaded to accept it.

The word, drop-out needs to be disempowered, its negative connotations removed and the

adhesiveness of its label weakened. This word has a history and a context of its own. Its history is part of its cause; its effect is to blight the lives of many students, not only the ones who leave early, but also those who are too afraid to leave, because they fear the word's consequences.

Nakane (1982, p.48) explains that "in order to really understand ... we need to get to know people ... research through documents and books alone " is inadequate. Her comments about her own motives for undertaking research are echoed in mine, many previous studies, especially the major investigation carried out by the Audit Commission (1993) Unfinished Business, were based on an examination of documents and statistics, provided by Colleges and the DFE. This research has also used such documentation, but it has not been central to the study, it has had a supporting role, so to speak.

Getting close to, and getting to know the drop-outs has generated a new understanding. Firstly, it has to be understood that many College statistics are inaccurate or incorrect, they seriously under-report student drop-out. Secondly, hearing what the drop-outs have to say, has allowed the four part framework to be elaborated such that all aspects of drop-out empirically evidenced in this study have been incorporated into its mesh.

6. What Next?

"Although publicly-funded education in something like its present form has been provided for almost fifty years, it is only recently that informative quantitative techniques for assessing its efficiency and effectiveness have begun to be developed and applied"

[Audit Commission 1993, p.61]

It is a great pity and a possible source of concern that qualitative measures have not been developed alongside quantitative techniques. If we are really in the business of assessing efficiency and effectiveness, and I question whether these two aspects of education are not actually mutually incompatible, but if they are to be measured then the precision required to do so must be increased beyond the current measures available today.

Efficiency is about cost effective provision for the maximum number of people, all educated to a consistently high enough standard to satisfy the community and its future needs; according to NTET targets this translates to the majority of students gaining an NVQ II while about half of them reach NVQ III.

Effectiveness is about each student reaching their full potential; pursuing a career of their choice and becoming a net contributor to the community. This does not restrict their future role to one of work, as their contribution may take any form, artistic, imaginative, practical, as well as economic.

How we match up efficiency and effectiveness in a climate where market forces steer education down a road of ever more stringent resourcing and ever increasing student numbers, is difficult to envisage. The use of performance indicators will increase and with this increase will come the inevitable reliance of managers to use this data to justify their programmes. It will escape all but the most clear sighted individuals that if what you are measuring is an artifact of your measurement system, then your judgements are based on nothing.

For decades, drop-out did not exist because no one measured it. We now have that measure.

"Study is in all cases directed towards the securing of qualifications" according to Unfinished Business (1993, p.61) and I wish it were so because then there would be no drop-outs. The reasons given by students for coming to College are another example of a performance indicator that no-one really wants to know. There is no need to know, because it is universally understood that all students come to qualify, and this obviates the need for further enquiry. If it does not exist it cannot be measured, if it is not measured it does not exist; the argument is circular.

Drop-out cannot be studied without looking first at enrolment. The classification of enrolment at present, precludes the possibility of any terminology which even hints at there being multiple reasons for College attendance. Drop-out measurement is ultimately dependent upon the classification of enrolments. If one does not exist, neither does the

other. Drop-out can then be eliminated in either of two ways. It can be denied, its very existence can be so obscurely buried in performance statistics, that its real value will never be discerned. Alternatively, it can be positively tackled, through the curriculum, by prevention, intervention and recovery, as encompassed by the strategy of vertical integration. Vertical integration will seek to link enrolment procedures, including advice and guidance with classroom activities and with examination entry. At present the links are very weak, the tasks relative to each of these stages are performed by different personnel, and therefore, bringing them together will require a dramatic change in practice, leaving them dislocated as they are at present will simply perpetuate the drop-out problem.

7. The Last Word

"And who can apportion out and dovetail his incidents, dialogues, characters and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly ., .without either compressing them unnaturally, or extending them artificially., .and then when everything is done, the kindest-hearted critic of them all invariably twits us with the incompetency and lameness of our conclusions. We have either become idle and neglected it, or tedious and over laboured it. It is insipid or unnatural, over-strained or imbecile. It means nothing, or it attempts too much.

[Trollope (1815-1882), p.185]

It is my express hope that this work does none of these things just as the novels of Trollope do none of these things. Aligning a research project with a work of fiction may seem out of place until it is realised that both are simply a way of painting a picture of the world as seen by the author, for the better understanding of the reader. I trust that this audience has now developed a better understanding of the world of student drop-out in Further Education.

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APPENDIX i

BP63: AMENDMENT TO ENROLMENT FORM

AMENDMENT TO ENROLMENT

STUDENT DETAILS:

SURNAME _____

OTHER NAMES _____

PERMANENT HOME ADDRESS: _____

Postcode _____ Tel No _____

EMPLOYER/MANAGING AGENTS NAME AND ADDRESS: _____

Postcode _____ Tel No _____

DAY		MONTH			YEAR	

DATE OF BIRTH _____

STUDENT REF. No. _____

ADDRESS WHILST AT COLLEGE: _____

Postcode _____ Tel No _____

COURSE DETAILS:

DELETE
ORIGINAL COURSE NO _____ PERIOD _____

DATE OF LAST ATTENDANCE _____

ADD
NEW COURSE NO _____ PERIOD _____

DATE OF FIRST ATTENDANCE _____

NEW OR ADDITIONAL COURSE DETAILS:

COURSE TITLE		YEAR/TERM	COURSE NO		COURSE PERIOD					
Subjects	Division (if applicable)	Stage	Day(s) of Class**					Time(s) of class meeting		Hrs per Week
			M	T	W	Th	F	From	To	

REASON FOR LEAVING

Tick box(es) as appropriate

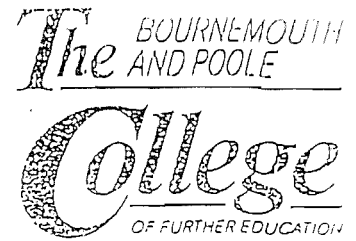
- | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| 10 To do with course <input type="checkbox"/> | 17 Other course related reasons <input type="checkbox"/> | 40 Chose TA Scheme <input type="checkbox"/> | 55 Took on too much <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 Not acquired correct quals./failed exam <input type="checkbox"/> | 20 To do with employer <input type="checkbox"/> | 41 YT <input type="checkbox"/> | 56 Course no longer related to plans <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 Course too hard <input type="checkbox"/> | 21 Lost Job <input type="checkbox"/> | 42 ET <input type="checkbox"/> | 57 Already covered area of interest <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 Not satisfied with course <input type="checkbox"/> | 22 Employer withdrew support <input type="checkbox"/> | 43 Other TA Scheme <input type="checkbox"/> | 58 Asked to leave by College <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Disliked course content <input type="checkbox"/> | 23 Changed Job <input type="checkbox"/> | 44 Personal/other reasons <input type="checkbox"/> | 59 Other personal/family reasons <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 Misunderstood nature of course <input type="checkbox"/> | 30 Chose a job <input type="checkbox"/> | 45 Deceased <input type="checkbox"/> | Course completed <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 Chose different course <input type="checkbox"/> | 31 Started a job <input type="checkbox"/> | 46 Financial reasons <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| | 32 Became self employed <input type="checkbox"/> | 47 Moved from area <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| | | 48 Illness <input type="checkbox"/> | |

Number of attendances made

Amendment raised by: _____ Date _____

APPENDIX ii
MEMORANDUM TO STAFF

MEMORANDUM



To: All Staff/Tutors of Part-time Courses
From: Mich Page
Date: 21.2.92

The Department is currently concerned about the drop-out rate. I am undertaking some research into this problem and need your help and a little bit of your time.

Could you please look through your registers and complete this form for any students who have had a prolonged absence or who appear to have dropped out of College.

STUDENT NAME	ENROLMENT NO.	COURSE CODE

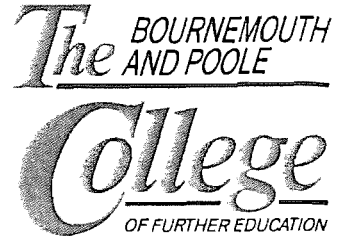
Please return to Mich Page before the end of term.

Dr/CMP/TUTORS

APPENDIX iii
SELF-ADMINSTERED MAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

Reply to

Direct line (0202) 20



Princes, Knyveton Road,
Bournemouth, BH1 3QU
Telephone (0202) 747600
Fax (0202) 205852

Centres at Bournemouth & Poole

Please forgive the intrusion of a letter from a stranger but I am writing in the hope that you may be able to help with a research project from the University of Southampton.

I understand that you were a student at the Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education, and that you left before finishing the course you had chosen. My research relates to why people should become dissatisfied with courses they had originally intended to complete. The questions, for the most part require only short answers, but there is ample opportunity for you to express your opinion if you feel it to be appropriate. All the information you give me will be in the strictest confidence and will only be used for the purpose of this research. Names will not be used under any circumstances.

Some of the questions relate to your parents and family background, if you feel it would be inappropriate or difficult to answer these questions then please omit this section - your other answers are still valuable.

Your experiences are important in developing ways of meeting the student needs of the future. Please give us this opportunity to make the College experience successful for everyone.

Please return this questionnaire using the prepaid envelope provided, as soon as possible and no later than the end of the month.

Kind regards

Mich Page BSc. PGCE MA Ed.

4e What is your mother's occupation?

4f Did your mother have any further or Higher Education either at a College or Polytechnic or University?

Yes

No

5a Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Yes

No

5b If you answered YES to question 5a, please answer the next part.

Enter the number in the box.

How many of your brothers/sisters are older than you?

How many of your brothers/sisters are younger than you?

Have any of them had experience of Further or Higher Education?

Yes No Don't know

Are any of them in paid employment? Yes

No

6a Do you still live at home with your parents?

Yes

No

6b If YES, how many people live in your house altogether?

Number

SECTION TWO - Your College experience

1a Which course did you enrol for?.....

1b Was this a.....Full time Course?
b.....Part time Course?
(Please tick appropriate box)

2a When you were at College, approximately how many miles did you have to travel?
..... miles

2b How did you usually travel to College? (please tick appropriate box)

Walk	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bus	<input type="checkbox"/>
Train	<input type="checkbox"/>	Car	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bicycle	<input type="checkbox"/>	Motor Cycle	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Please specify).....	

3. Did any of your friends from school, come to the College at the same time as you?

Yes

No

4. Can you say why you chose to go to College?

5. While you were in College:

- a) did you get on with your teachers? yes no
- b) did you receive enough encouragement? yes no
- c) did you like the teaching methods? yes no
- d) was the course what you expected
it to be? yes no
- e) did you receive enough guidance
in choosing your course? yes no

6. Did you receive any counselling on
leaving College? yes no

7. Can you say why you chose to leave before the end of your course?

SECTION THREE - Your future

1a Are you currently employed? Yes No

1b If YES, what is your occupation?

2a Do you intend to return to study in the future? Yes No
Don't Know

3a Looking back, do you think that leaving College was the right decision for you at the time? Yes No
Not sure

3b If YES, can you say why?

I would like to follow up this questionnaire with a personal interview, conducted at a mutually agreeable time and location. If you don't wish to be contacted please tick the box provided.

Signature..... Date.....

Please return this questionnaire in the pre paid envelope provided.

Thank you for your help and co-operation with this research project.

Mich Page

APPENDIX iv
CODING AND ANALYSIS

Classification for each question taken in its order of appearance on the questionnaire is as follows:-

1. Address - was entered on map - look for clustering.
Age range distribution analysis.
2. Examination already obtained.
Ordered according to Advance - A level and above
Intermediate - GCSE/O level
Other - RSA/CSE/NVQ 1 & 2 etc.

0 - 1, 1 = 2, A = 3

Then multiply by the number taken and calculate the frequency distribution from this data.

- 3a. Previous schools - cluster analysis/frequency table.
- 3b. Did you enjoy being at school - total counts.
Correlation with Q2.
- 3c. Comments - subjective analysis
- 3d. Histogram of totals
triangulate with Q 3b and 2.
4. Father's occupation - totals for part-time and full-time and type of occupation.
- 4c. Father's education - total.

APPENDIX iv Continued ...

- 4d. Mother's occupation and education totalled in the same way.
Correlate to Q2.

- 5a. Total}
frequency data ... locate position of respondent in the family
Total}

- 6a. Total Counts.

- 6b. Frequency.

Section Two

- 1a. Total - presented as frequency data cross ref. to total enrolments data from college statistics.

- 1b. Full-time/part-time totals. Look for a trend ie. are more part-time
Do's relate to data in Q 1a.

- 2a. Travelling distance - frequency, %.

- 2b. Mode of travel - totals - relate to 2a.

- 3. Total Count.

- 4. Subjective analysis - look for trends.

- 5. Total counts - useful for generalisations or descriptions of trends. Each yes scores 1, each no scores 0. Total expressed as sum over the number of questions answered.

- 6. Totals.

- 7. Comments analysed - look for trends.

APPENDIX iv Continued ...

Section Three

- 1a. Employment - totals.
- 1b. Occupations - bar graphs of totals.
- 2a. Return to study - totals - relate to open ended question. Comments - look particularly for any discrepancies in these answers.
- 3a. Totals.
- 3b. Comment analysis.

APPENDIX V
INSTRUMENT OF CONVERSION

For use with telephone follow-up of non-respondents.

Time Date.....

no. of repeat calls Name

Introduction and assurance of confidentiality.

You were recently sent a questionnaire from The College asking you about your experiences as a student. I would like to ask you a few short questions about your decision not to complete this questionnaire. If this is an awkward time for you, could you suggest a better time, when I can call again.

Time Date.....

1. Have you received any questionnaires before the one I sent you?

Yes..... No.....

2. Have you refused to respond to any of these?

Yes..... No.....

(a) If YES can you say something about why you made this decision?

Principled

Apathetic

Other

APPENDIX v Continued ...

(b) If NO can you say why you decided to refuse this one?

Principled

Apathetic

Other

3. Briefly now, I would like to run through some of the questions with you, if you feel that you would prefer not to answer some of them, please feel free to say so, as your other answers will still be of great value.

cross-ref. with questionnaire 1.

CONTEXT OF THE INTERVIEW

1. Complete Break-off

2. Ease of discussion Good
 Neutral
 Alienated

(measurement of rapport)

NOTES

APPENDIX VI
TELEPHONE FOLLOW-UP

THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Serial number

Gender M F

age 16 17 18 19 20-25 25-30 30-40 over 40

location

Statement of confidentiality/anonymity and purpose of the interview.

1. SECTION ONE

a. Do you currently have a job? YES NO

If YES:

1b. Is it full-time or part-time?

1c. What sort of job is it?

1d. Do you feel satisfied with your earnings/income YES... NO...

If NO

bii. If you are unemployed, are you claiming benefit YES... NO...

 If NO ... have you considered claiming benefit YES... NO...

cii. Are you married and/or supported by your partner YES... NO...

dii. Do you feel that your income is satisfactory YES... NO...

2a. Do you feel that you have your family's support at the moment?

YES... NO...

2b. Thinking about your situation since you left college, do you think it has changed - if so - in what way?

APPENDIX vi Continued ...

- 1e. Do you think that your family wanted you to stay on at college or did they support your decision to leave?
SUPPORT..... STAY..... INDIFFERENT.....
2. Could you rate the work in college on a scale from 1-3 where
3 = difficult
2 = OK
1 = easy
3. Would you say that you were an impetuous person?
YES..... NO..... DON'T KNOW..... COMMENTS.....

SECTION THREE

These questions relate to how you see your own future developing.

1. Thinking about the future in general, what do you suppose you might be doing in about 10 years time?
working in the same job
promoted
back to college for more qualifications
don't know
other
2. Do you think that leaving college was the right thing for you to do?
YES..... NO.....
3. Compared to some of the people who have stayed on to finish their courses, do you think you will be earning more or less than them in the future?
MORE..... LESS..... SAME.....

APPENDIX vi Continued ...

4. How do you think your family would feel if you decided to go back to college?
SUPPORTIVE..... NEGATIVE..... DON'T KNOW.....

SECTION FOUR

1. Are there any other comments you would like to add about why you left college; have you changed your mind about your feelings on leaving college?

APPENDIX vii
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Face-to-face interviews. Oblique data.

1. Curriculum model/outline.
What is the rationale behind your curriculum choices - how are these decisions made
- who made them?
2. How are the students made to feel 'comfortable' in school?
Welcome
Discipline/control
Formality/Protocol
Uniform
Competition/co-operation
Stereotyping/Role Models
Support etc.
3. Continuity - does the curriculum match that of the College?
Why?
Which features in particular - examples ... explore/
4. Catchment - describe a typical pupil.
5. Value added - what does the school give a child that other schools can't?
6. Is the curriculum - collection or integrated?
7. Any documents? Supporting evidence etc?
8. Notes on context.
9. Notes on entry/gatekeepers etc.