

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

**Curriculum 2000: The relationship between
course choice and career aspirations**

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ABSTRACT

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CURRICULUM 2000: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
COURSE CHOICE AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS

by Teresa Jane Sandison

This study explores factors influencing choices of AS and A2 courses, and post-18 progression pathways, made by the first Curriculum 2000 cohort of students in a large sixth form college in Hampshire. A high proportion of students in this college studied four or five AS levels and many chose at least one subject which they had not studied before.

Data from the College's management information system were analysed to identify and track 544 students' changing preferences for A2 courses, as stated in March and June of their first year of study, together with final choices made in the second year. Reasons for choices, and changes to these, were explored in interviews with 19 students.

A questionnaire survey, conducted in January of their second year of study, was completed by 328 students. This explored reasons for changes to post-18 progression aims which had occurred since September of their first year. Statistical analysis allowed possible links between changes in progression aims and changes to A2 course choices to be identified.

Key findings are the high degree of instability in students' choices of A2 courses, and the primacy of enjoyment and perceived potential for success in choice of subjects. It also emerged that, once they had made their A2 choices, many students prioritised between AS courses in an effort to manage workload. The influence of parental advice, both on course choices and on progression aims, was also found to be significant.

The experience of studying subjects at AS level emerged as a very strong influence on choice of post-18 destination, as students took advantage of the greater flexibility afforded by Curriculum 2000 to delay, or change, career decisions. Implications and recommendations for student guidance are suggested by the study.

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Chapter 1: Rationale and Context

1.1 Curriculum 2000

In September 2000 the sixth form curriculum in England and Wales was reformed in line with the DfEE's *Qualifying for Success* proposals, published in 1997. The new curriculum gives students more opportunity to study a greater number of subjects and to mix academic and vocational courses. Detailed discussion of the historical context of the reforms, and the discourse surrounding their introduction is in Section 3.3. The rationale for the reforms is expressed in '*Qualifying for Success. Changes to Post-16 Qualifications from September 2000. A guide for parents and guardians*' published by DfEE.

'Employers, universities and colleges providing higher education courses are increasingly looking for students who have studied a broader range of subjects and gained a wider range of skills at advanced level'.

A key feature of the new curriculum is that in their first year of the sixth form students can now take four or five AS levels (Advanced Subsidiary) which are qualifications in their own right. In their second year they are then generally expected to drop one or two of the subjects and continue the others to full A levels. The second year of a subject is known as A2, but this is not a qualification in its own right; the AS module marks are combined with the A2 marks to give an overall A level grade.

Students can also take new vocational A levels. A 12-unit AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education) is the equivalent of two A levels and is studied over two years. A 6-unit AVCE is the equivalent of one A level and may be studied over one or two years. A levels, AS levels and AVCEs all carry points which count towards the UCAS tariff for entrance into higher education.

1.2 The context for the study

Queen Mary's College (QMC) is a sixth form college in Basingstoke, Hampshire, with 1,760 16-19 year old full-time students on roll in 2001/2 and a similar number of adult part-

time students. The average point score per entry in combined A/AS/AGNVQ results in 2001 at QMC was 5.5, which is identical to the average for Hampshire and for England (DFES Performance Tables 2001).

The majority of full-time students at the College are taking AS/A levels. Some of these students combine their AS/A levels with AVCE and some are mainly taking AVCE. There are also about 120 students on one year programmes at GNVQ Intermediate level or below.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the study

The new flexibility provided by Curriculum 2000 means that students who are primarily on programmes of study leading to A level no longer have to enrol for courses which last two years. Instead they choose four or five subjects to study for one year at AS level. In September 2000 QMC offered students a choice of 40 AS levels, 38 of which could be continued to A2. In addition students could choose from a range of six AVCEs and two BTEC National Diplomas, eight GCSEs and a variety of complementary courses.

The final decision about which AS levels to continue at A2 level does not have to be made until September of the second year. However, in order to aid planning for the next academic year, QMC students are asked to make preliminary choices in March and to review those choices after they have taken AS exams in June. Some implications of the flexibility are that:

- some students may initially think they know which subjects they will drop, or continue, at the end of the first year, but may subsequently change their minds as a result of their experience on AS courses
- students may be strongly influenced in their final choice of A2 subjects by achievement at AS level and predicted achievement at A level
- experiences of study at AS level may lead to changing career aspirations
- changing career aspirations may lead to changes in choice of A2 subject

The study explores the following questions:

1. What are the influences on choice of AS/AVCE courses?
2. How much instability is there in students' proposed choices of A2 courses during the first year?
3. To what extent do students' career or higher education intentions change during the first year?
4. How do students' experiences of AS level study influence their career or higher education intentions?

The first question is important to investigate as it probes underlying reasons for initial course choice in Curriculum 2000. It is particularly interesting to explore students' rationale for choosing subjects which they have not experienced before in their schooling, and the degree to which formative career aims guide their choices.

The answer to the second question is helpful in identifying critical points of the year when students need guidance, and in revealing the degree of uncertainty faced by students in making the 'right' decisions about second year programmes of study.

The third question explores whether the greater flexibility of study afforded by Curriculum 2000 gives students a broader choice of destination, perhaps leading to an opening-up rather than narrowing-down of options.

The final question presents an opportunity to examine which factors are most important to students in making decisions about their future. These decisions include which subjects to continue to A2 level, which in turn may have a significant impact on future destinations. Factors influencing students' decisions may include negative or positive responses to subjects studied at AS level, levels of attainment at AS level and growing awareness of career options related to different subject choices. However, many other factors could be at work, unrelated to the AS experience, opening avenues to links with existing literature.

1.4 Choice of Queen Mary's College as the context for study

The principal reason for choice of QMC as the locus for research is that I am employed there as a tutor, thus making access to information relatively straightforward. During the first year of Curriculum 2000 it rapidly became apparent that the College had taken a different approach to students' programmes of study from other sixth form institutions, locally and nationally. Students entering QMC with five or more GCSE passes at grade C or above are encouraged to study five AS levels or 6-unit AVCEs (or a 12-unit AVCE with one or two AS levels). This contrasts with other sixth forms, where a more usual programme is four AS/6-unit AVCEs.

This approach has meant that students at QMC have more choice about which subjects to continue to A level, with potential for significant change to any career aims they might have when first enrolling at the College. I became aware during 2000/2001 that many students in my tutor group were vacillating between different choices of A2 courses as the year proceeded and some seemed to be experiencing considerable dilemma. This was particularly apparent in consultations held with each student after AS exams had finished, when several made significant changes to their proposed programmes of study on the grounds that they did not want to continue with subjects where workload had been heavy. I began to question whether this short-term decision-making could have greater long-term implications than students themselves realised.

I left full-time employment at the college in order to pursue this research, but was able to continue teaching three hours per week of AS level. I therefore had no further contact in a teaching role with any of the students in the study, but still had access to College records, staff and students in order to conduct research.

1.5 Responses to Curriculum 2000

As Curriculum 2000 is a new development, research into its implementation and effects is still at a very early stage. A survey carried out by UCAS (February 2001) in November 2000 showed that 69.4% of students taking GCE subjects were studying four or more AS

levels, excluding general studies, and 52.69% of institutions were encouraging students to choose subjects from different disciplines.

Hodgson and Spours presented a paper at the BERA conference in September 2001 which presented early research findings on students' experiences of the new curriculum. Their study collected data from 50 schools and colleges across England to examine changes to the curriculum offer in these institutions and to record students' perceptions of their Curriculum 2000 experience. Key findings were that students had pragmatically chosen more subjects, but had not broadened their programmes of study. They liked the idea of being able to delay specialisation, and reduce the impact of mistaken choices, but still have three A levels with which to apply to university. However, the research found that most students were studying four AS levels rather than five, suggesting that full opportunities to diversify subject choice in the first year had not been taken. The study of QMC students therefore provides an interesting comparison, and illuminates what the impact of the reforms could be if more institutions encouraged students to take five AS courses.

Some specialist subject bodies have conducted research into the effects of Curriculum 2000 on course uptake and results. Research carried out by Greater Manchester sixth form colleges' maths group revealed that 53% of students who took AS maths in 18 colleges in the area dropped the subject at the end of the first year. There is concern that this will affect numbers going on to study the subject at university (Times Educational Supplement: 16.11.01.) AS levels may well have unforeseen effects, as students drop subjects that they would previously have had to study for two years, and turn to different subjects at A2 level than they originally intended.

Figure 1 shows the results of a UCAS survey (UCAS:2002) of applications for full-time undergraduate courses starting in autumn 2002. Only the top six declines and increases in applications are shown. This indicates that there is a continuing trend away from mathematics and science subjects (with exceptions) towards more arts and social science-based courses. Growth of interest in media-related subjects, law and psychology may be linked to the increased numbers of students undertaking these subjects within Curriculum 2000.

Figure 1 Top six increases in applications for full-time undergraduate courses by 24.3.02 and top six decreases (UCAS:12.4.02)

Course	% change in applications from 24.3.02
Physical or mathematical science with social science or business	-12.6%
Mathematics	-12.0%
Biological science combinations	-11.4%
Information systems	- 9.8%
Marketing	-9.0%
Pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy	-8.4%
History by period	+15.0%
Social science or business with arts or humanities	+14.9%
Pre-clinical medicine	+14.5%
Cinematics and photography	+13.8%
Law	+11.2%
Psychology	+11.2%

The study at QMC explores whether students are dropping more traditional subjects, such as mathematics and the sciences, after AS level, and choosing to continue instead with subjects that they have only been able to study since the sixth form.

Tait et al (2001) offer advice to institutions in preparing for the second year of the new curriculum, based on work with over 40 schools, sixth form and FE colleges during 200/1002. They identify the importance of guidance to students and key factors which may affect progression. These include:

- the hierarchical nature of students' choice of AS levels
- the impact of AS results on A2 choices
- the need for colleges to predict numbers on A2 courses at an early stage
- pressure of AS coursework deadlines
- the issue of who has the specialist knowledge to help students make informed choices.

The assumption that students make hierarchical choices of AS levels, and that the hierarchy is related to career intention, has led some colleges to structure their curriculum offer. For example, Burton College, quoted in LSDA research (Tait et al:2002), has produced a timetable that matches students' intended career paths. The same research outlines the

approach taken by Esher College:

'For advanced courses, students are enrolled onto a planned learning programme in which they identify their two-year A-level subjects. They then select their 'broadening' AS-level that ends after the first year.

Such an approach inevitably makes it more difficult for students to change pathways or continue with subjects they originally intended to drop, especially if the second year timetable has been planned in advanced, with limited places available on certain courses. This tension is recognised in the LSDA report, which stresses *'the need to provide students with the opportunity to depart from year one and Key Stage 4 decisions'*. Queen Mary's College places no limitations on continuation from AS level to A2, and does not ask students at enrolment to state which courses they propose to drop after the AS level. Research into the impacts of this approach could therefore be useful in guiding policy development.

Much press reporting on Curriculum 2000 has focused on workload issues for staff, and more particularly for students. *'Sixth-formers are typically working 50- and 60-hour weeks to keep up with the demands of the new courses'* (Guardian:20.3.2001). For young people who need to socialise and to work part-time, such a workload is difficult to sustain. Pragmatic decisions to prioritize efforts in favour of some courses are therefore likely, and it is possible that subjects with the heaviest burden of work will be discontinued at the end of the first year. Students' reasons for choosing subjects at A2 level are therefore important to explore to assess the significance of the workload factor.

Early research into the implementation of Curriculum 2000 therefore highlights a number of key concerns which are examined in the context of Queen Mary's College. Four issues which have particular potential to interact with students' post-18 progression decisions are:

- the number and range of subjects students are encouraged to study
- the extent to which students see their first year courses choices as hierarchical, and whether they deviate from this structure during the first year

- whether students make pragmatic decisions to prioritise work in different subjects during the first year
- whether students choose to discontinue subjects which are often seen as significant for national economic prosperity ie mathematics and sciences, and if so, whether this is for pragmatic workload management reasons.

Chapter 2: Queen Mary's College

2.1 General characteristics

Queen Mary's College (QMC) is a large sixth form college which enrolls students from Basingstoke and a wide surrounding rural area in North Hampshire. State secondary schools within the college's catchment cater for 11-16 year olds. For some years approximately 50% of year 11 students progressing to further education have transferred to QMC, while 45% have enrolled at the town's general FE college (Queen Mary's College Strategic Plan Consultation: 2002-2003 to 2005-2006).

Basingstoke is a relatively affluent town, ranked 301st in the list of 354 most deprived Districts in the UK (Hampshire County Council). Unemployment dropped below 1% in 2001 (Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council).

2.2 Courses and students

The majority of full-time students at the college remain for two years and take AS/A levels. Some of these students combine their AS/A levels with Vocational A levels (AVCE) or BTEC courses. In September 2000 QMC offered a choice of 40 AS level courses, 38 of which could be continued to A level. In addition students could choose from a range of six AVCE courses and two BTEC National Diplomas, eight GCSEs and a variety of complementary courses.

The student population of QMC in 2000/2001 was 50.1% female and 49.9% male, with 94.2% of all students classifying themselves as white. A total of 1642 students were on roll, with 966 of these in their first year and 636 continuing into their second year.

2.3 Advice and guidance systems

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (1997) argue that the process of choosing a post-16 progression route begins at an early age. However, in QMC's partner schools formal

systems to support post-16 decision-making begin in Year 10 and are concentrated in year 11, with talks from college staff, careers guidance interviews, and open days/evenings aimed at year 11 students held on college premises. Figure 2 shows the timetable for QMC's formal system of advice and guidance on course choices for year 12 and 13. By year 11 most students have decided whether they intend to stay in full-time education and will have made a choice of institution.

Figure 2 QMC's advice and guidance timetable

Year	Term	Guidance Activity
11	Autumn	QMC Open Days and Evenings – Prospectus available Individual interviews for year 11 with senior member of QMC staff
	Spring	Individual interviews for year 11 with senior member of QMC staff QMC Open Evenings
	Summer	Individual interviews at QMC after GCSE results, to enrol on programme of study
12	Autumn	Consultations with Subject Tutors and Personal Tutors. Given minimum target grades and predictions in each course
	Spring	Consultations with Tutors to evaluate progress on courses Initial choice of A levels made in second half of term
	Summer	After AS level exams, consultations with Tutors to evaluate progress on courses. Provisional enrolment on to A2 courses. Predicted A level grades given for all AS courses, whether or not student has chosen to enrol for A level. A level courses start after AS exams end. After AS results, support and advice available on changes to A2 programmes.
13	Autumn	'Continuers Day' at start of term. Opportunity to change A2 courses in the light of AS results, or to enter for re-sits.

2.3.1 Course choice for year 12

Decisions relating to programme of study are often much less certain than those relating to institution. The first stage at which students applying to QMC are asked to make a decision on year 12 courses is when they have an interview with a senior member of staff from the college between December and March of year 11. Prior to the interview they will have been invited to an open day where they are able to talk to teaching staff, look at course materials and collect more detailed course information. The purpose of the interview is to guide students on to appropriate programmes of study in the light of predicted GCSE grades, stated career intentions (if any), references from school and preferences for subjects and courses. Course choices are recorded on an application form and this data is then used by the college for curriculum planning, timetabling and staffing for the following September.

Although staff conducting interviews are experienced and knowledgeable about the college's curriculum and entry requirements, they are not careers specialists and do not give specific advice about post-18 progression. Students are expected to seek advice of this sort from careers teachers at their schools at this stage.

Students are invited for an enrolment interview following the publication of GCSE results in August. The purpose of this is to finalise course choices in the light of results. In some cases preliminary choices will remain unchanged. In others, the level of programme may change if results are better or worse than expected. A large number of students keep the same level of programme but make changes to their subject choices, or change the number of courses in their programme (perhaps increasing from four AS courses to five). Almost all members of the teaching staff are involved in interviewing as large numbers of students must be enrolled in a period of approximately three days. This is consequently a very busy time, and although specific subject advice can always be sought for a student who is changing their proposed programme, there is little opportunity for deep reflection on the implications. Once students have started their sixth form studies they are generally discouraged from making changes to their programme until the first year is over.

2.3.2 Course choice for year 13

The formal process of A2 course choice begins in March of the first year, when students have a consultation with their Personal Tutor and select the AS courses they wish to continue to A level. These are recorded on a form and computerised so that an overall picture of course choice can be used to estimate group numbers and staffing requirements for the following year. In June, after they have taken their AS examinations, students have another consultation in which they are given asked to confirm or change their A2 choices. Their selections are again recorded and computerised. No restrictions are placed on the changes that a student can make at this stage.

It is not until early September, however, that final A2 choices are made. At this stage students have their AS level results and they may have sought advice from members of staff shortly after receiving these. As it is possible to re-sit AS modules whilst continuing

with the A2 course, students do not have to ‘cash-in’ their AS grades. In other words, a lower than expected AS grade will not automatically deter a student from pursuing the subject to A level. The College does not stipulate any entry requirements for A2 courses beyond having studied the course at AS level.

2.4 Reasons for choice of QMC as a case study

The principal reason for choice of QMC as the focus for research is that I am employed at the college, thus making access to information relatively straightforward. The use of sensitive data, publication of which might harm the College's reputation, or damage individuals, can be more openly discussed with an 'inside' researcher, thus building mutual trust. However, there are also some intrinsic features of the college and its curriculum which make it particularly worthwhile to study.

- It is a large college with expanding enrolment
- A large choice of AS levels and A levels is offered, with almost no restrictions on subject combinations (exceptions relate only to one or two courses with low numbers of students)
- Unlike many other sixth form colleges, QMC actively encourages students to study five AS levels where possible. A UCAS survey published in November 2001 gathered data from seventy-four sixth form colleges and this is compared with QMC data in figure 3

Figure 3 AS programmes of study in sixth form colleges

Percentage of year 12 students taking three or more AS levels at June/July 2001 (not including General Studies)		
<i>Number of AS levels</i>	<i>Seventy-four sixth form colleges in UCAS survey</i>	<i>Queen Mary's College</i>
3	27%	14.6%
4	68.6%	43.5%
5+	4.4%	41.9%

- The college has an open-access policy. A minimum of five or six GCSE passes at grades A-C is required to commence a programme of four or five AS levels. A UCAS

survey suggests this approach is markedly different to that in other sixth form institutions (figure 4) although directly comparable statistics are not available from QMC.

Figure 4 UCAS survey of prior achievement for students in sixth form colleges and centres

UCAS (2nd) survey February 2001 based on questionnaire responses from 1283 schools and colleges in mid-November 2000. The following data is extracted for the 71 sixth form colleges or centres included in the survey.

Average number of GCSE passes at grade C or above of those studying:

3 AS levels	5.64
4 AS levels	7.18
5 AS levels	8.15

At QMC information is only available on average GCSE point score per student on entry, as shown in figure 5.

Figure 5 Average GCSE point score of QMC students

Number of AS levels undertaken per student	Average GCSE point score on entry per student
3	4.37 (nearer D than C)
4	5.20 (nearer C than B)
5	6.16 (nearer B than A)

However, a comparison may be drawn with John Leggott Sixth Form College in Scunthorpe (a similar size to QMC) where students with 5 grades A-C at GCSE are advised to take 3 AS levels and those taking 4 AS levels must have mainly grades A and B (Tait et al:2001).

- With the exception of two AS levels (which do not have an A2 component), students are guaranteed to be able to continue any of their AS levels at A2 level (ie there are no timetabling or other constraints). There is no requirement for them to pass the subject at AS level, as re-sit opportunities are provided during the second year of study.
- Pass rates at Advanced level match national and local averages (DFES:2001a). The average point score per entry in combined A/AS/AGNVQ results in 2001 at QMC was 5.5, which is identical to the average for Hampshire and for England (DFES Performance

Tables 2001).

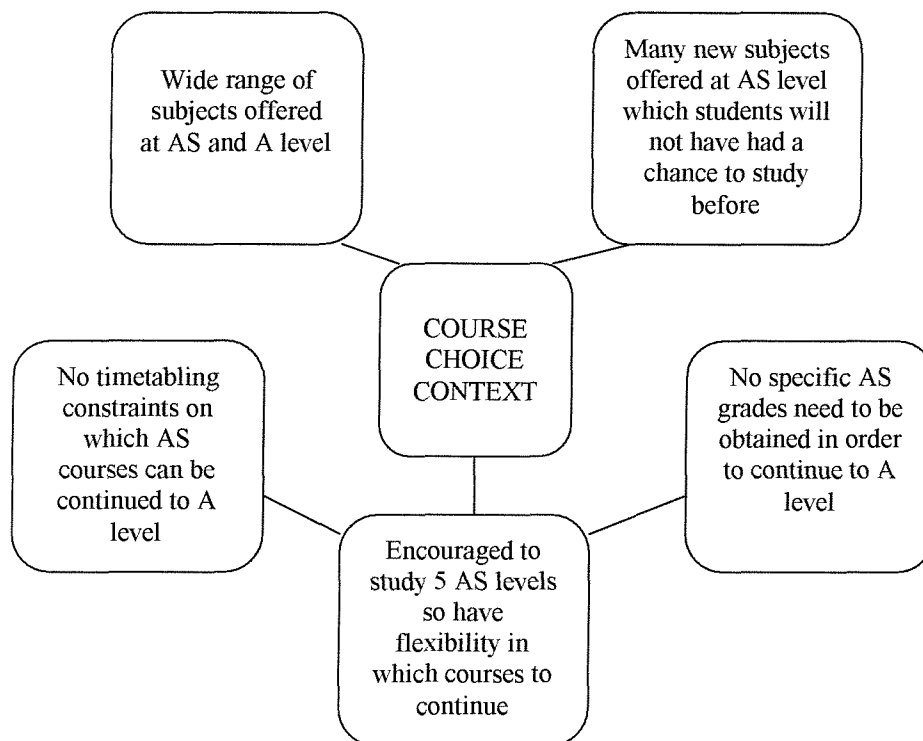
2.5 Conclusion: The value of Queen Mary's College as a case study

In summary, therefore, QMC is a large open-access sixth form college with pass rates that match local and national averages (pre-Curriculum 2000). Students have a high level of flexibility in both their AS and A2 choices, and the college encourages students to study more subjects than many other institutions. Students are accepted on to programmes comprising four or five AS levels with relatively low GCSE grades in comparison to national averages.

Research at QMC therefore offers the opportunity to study students' decision-making within Curriculum 2000 in a context which places few restrictions on student choice.

Figure 6 summarizes the decision-making context.

Figure 6 QMC's course choice context



Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Decision-making behaviour

Much has been written about the influences on people's decision-making behaviour. Differences between theoretical stances may hinge upon the degree to which it is believed that individuals act rationally and consciously within their own unique circumstances and context, with each decision setting off a cumulative chain of events, and the extent to which chance occurrences and unconscious influences stimulate behaviour. Each individual's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are shaped through the act of processing available information (Fishbein and Ajzen:1975). However, the way in which information is interpreted is subject to social meanings, so that action taken will differ from one individual to another.

The social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or by the subsumption of social events under universal laws. This is because human actions are based upon, or infused by, social meanings: that is, by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules and values. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:7)

The traditional model of rational economic decision-making rests on the assumption that individuals are self-interested, seeking to maximise the benefits gained from making choices based on '*vigilant information collection*' (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001). The best choices will be those which satisfy demand at the lowest possible cost. This may involve satisficing (Krieshok:1998), implying that the chosen alternative is not always the one which delivers maximum advantages. There may, however, be a mis-match between expected and achieved levels of satisfaction from a particular decision, with resultant '*post-decision dissonance*' (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001:40). Introspection may generate likely reasons for this (Krieshok:1998) and behaviour may be adapted to reduce perceived negative impacts of the choice. This could involve a tacit withdrawal from the choice, for example when students stop engaging in an educational course (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001).

Adaptations and modifications do not only occur in relation to behaviour, however. Meanings are also constantly renegotiated through the process of symbolic interactionism.

The premises of symbolic interactionism are that individuals act according to the meanings which they attribute to their experiences; that meanings are generated through processes of social interaction; and that they are continually reinterpreted and modified as a result of further social interaction' (Bloomer and Hodgkinson:2000)

This continual flux in an individual's understanding of the social world is viewed by proponents of social learning theory as a life-long developmental process, contributing to cumulative personality formation (Gullotta, Adams and Markstrom:1999). Decisions and actions interact with changing meanings in a continuous feedback cycle, in what Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000:3) describe as a '*reflexive project of identity-formation*'. In their view identity is shaped by '*the tensions between reflexive individualism and culture, family and community*'. Bourdieu (1990) characterises this interaction between individual and environment as a person's '*habitus*', which is their (often unconscious) disposition to different aspects of life and the way in which this influences their behaviour. Thus much decision-making is performed at unconscious levels.

Viewed in this context of life-long formation of identity and meanings systems, young people's decision-making can be considered as a transitional apprenticeship in which mistakes readily occur, but can often be rectified without lasting damage (Gulotta, Adams and Markstrom:1999).

3.2 Student decision-making in post-16 education: courses and careers

Since the early 1980s public services in Britain have been increasingly marketised. The ideology of the Conservative Government from 1979 to 1997 focused on economic liberalism, with a 'rolling-back' of the state and an increased role for competition and the operation of market forces. The prevailing belief was that the introduction of competition into public service provision would increase efficiency, effectiveness and accountability,

thus raising standards. The policies generated by this philosophy finally impacted on the further education sector in England and Wales in 1992, with the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act. This gave colleges freedom from the control of local education authorities and the ability to function as independent colleges with responsibility for their own corporate and educational strategies and resource management (Foskett and Hesketh:1996). Funding for the newly incorporated colleges now derived from 'student activity', meaning that each student recruited generated a sum of money for the college budget.

Central to the ideology of economic liberalism is the notion of consumer choice and it is clear that this continues to be a pivot upon which the post-1997 Labour Government's policies turn. In the further education sector this means not just choice of institution, but also choice of courses within a college. Students have become increasingly aware of themselves as consumers, able to pick and choose from a growing diversity of academic and vocational pathways. The need to recruit greater numbers of students, and provide a curriculum which is attractive, has therefore led to marketing becoming a major focus of management activity. This is evident not only within a locale, where competition rather than collaboration has become the normal operational environment (Foskett and Hesketh:1996), but also within colleges themselves, as departments compete for students in the micro-economy of budgets driven by 'units of activity'. Impartiality of advice and guidance has become a significant issue in FE marketing, just as it has in other educational sectors.

The supply/demand relationship in post-16 educational provision creates a number of tensions, not least of which is the provision of impartial advice and guidance to help students make wise choices. This is not only a potential problem when students are first choosing their post-16 destination and programmes of study, but also in Curriculum 2000 where new competitive forces operate when advice is given on choice of A2 courses. Retention targets do not only relate to institutions as a whole, but also to individual departments and courses, meaning that there is potential for pressure from subject tutors to encourage students to continue courses to full A level. The work of Watts and Young (1997) highlights the problems of advice given by teachers, which may be outdated and

imbued with vested interests. FEEDA research (Sadler and Reisenberger:1997) indicates that prior to Curriculum 2000 only 33% of sixth form colleges addressed how to ensure impartiality within their policies. As Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:112) summarise, there is *'tension between the needs and wants of the individual young person as 'consumer' and the institutional needs of the colleges, schools and training providers who constitute the 'supply side'*.

The Labour Government has continued the drive of previous governments in attempting to reconcile conflicting ideologies of consumerism on the one hand, and more centralized control in order to increase Britain's global economic competitiveness on the other. This is played out in further education by a concern to increase the proportion of young people staying on in education, together with a push to improve the skills-base and educational standards of the workforce. In 1993 the National Commission on Education summarized current thinking:

The expansionist market is premised on a policy view that international economic competitiveness necessitates the enhancement of educational and skill levels within the workforce.

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000:7) point out that *'blurring of distinctions between education and the needs of the labour market'* has influenced young people's understanding that qualifications are essential to obtaining success in the workplace (Bloomer and Hodkinson: 1999). This 'human capital' view (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001:5) provides a context in which the 'learning society' invokes

... 'rhetoric and reification' of a continuing demand for an upskilled, technologically literate and flexible work force which will contribute towards national economic competitiveness (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000:7).

However, market liberalism necessarily gives primacy to consumer sovereignty, creating a dilemma for policy-makers in determining to what extent educational opportunities and choice should be constrained by national economic interests. An OECD study (1996:13)

summarized the problematic links between planning for education, training and employment:

... employers in many countries are finding it hard to come to terms with change, to identify their needs, and to make the most of their workforces. At the same time, policy makers cannot assume that the job market will automatically deliver the best possible match between supply and demand of skills and qualifications, or that individual choices can be left to chance.

Much of the literature on post-16 decision-making reveals that young people, influenced by this wider educational-economic nexus, give increasing weight to utilitarian interests when making choices (Bloomer and Hodkinson:1999 and 2000; Foskett and Hesketh:1996). In the view of Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000:594), this is not surprising as young people become *'more aware of the insecurities of the employment market'*.

Marketisation of public services, including education, has encouraged young people to perceive themselves as 'consumerists' - *'when they enrol they are buying a product which can be dispensed with as soon as they have gained the skill or knowledge they require'* (Page, 1998:353). At the same time post-16 education and training providers reinforce this by marketing their 'products' directly to young people, so that they are *'formally awarded sovereignty'* (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001). The promotion of short-term consumerism, in which there are increased opportunities to make course choices on a 'just-in-time' basis, makes it less likely that providers or students will plan linear pathways to careers. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) point out that students themselves do not always anticipate how much their disposition to learning may change.

Much of the literature emphasises the complex range of factors which affect each individual's learning and career aims (Ball, Maguire and Macrae:2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson:1997, 1999, 2000; Du Bois-Reymond:1998; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:1997, 2001; Hodkinson and Sparkes:1997; Kidd and Wardman:1999; Krieshok:1998; Martinez and Munday:1998; Unwin and Welling:2001). Not only does each young person have unique life circumstances, pressures and opportunities, but they also interpret these through

their own meanings system. Personal construct theory helps to explain how this makes it difficult to provide guidance, as each individual interprets events in a different way (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:1997). The choices made are also subject to reinterpretation, reassessment and modification in the light of changing circumstances and social contexts. However, as Giddens (1991) points out, young people do not necessarily perceive the reality that structural constraints influence their opportunities for choice.

Nevertheless, research shows that traditional notions of clear, unchanging, linear pathways through education into employment are increasingly outdated. Du Bois-Reymond (1998:66) contrasts 'normal biographies' with 'choice biographies' – '*Status passages are no longer linear but synchronical and reversible*'. This implies that young people's transitions between learning and work may alternate from one to the other, as their ideas and aims and reworked through experience. However, Bloomer and Hodkinson point out that educational choices are not made using objective knowledge of self and the options available, but rather the '*discovering of new self-knowledge*'. In this way individuals are able to construct '*personal learning careers*' ... '*the ongoing unfolding of a person's dispositions to, and their engagement with, knowledge and learning opportunities*' (1997:7). In today's political rhetoric, this might suggest a process of 'lifelong learning'.

The learning career suggested by Bloomer and Hodkinson produces three categories of pattern; those which experience little change, those which undergo sudden transformations and those which evolve gradually. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) emphasise the importance of chance and interactions with other people in bringing about changes in pathway while, as we have seen, Du Bois-Reymond (1998:67) stresses that young people are frequently travelling more than one path simultaneously anyway, in a '*double life*' of learning and work, work and learning.

The provisional nature and instability of choice is explored by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), who argue that unstable educational and training decisions are normal in the short and long-term, and that research which focuses on only one choice point may suggest only a partial picture.

Choice is not an instantaneous or even short-term period of decision, but a momentary external expression of the balance between a wide range of internal and external social, cultural and economic perceptions ... expression of choice at any one moment are inherently unstable' (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001:202-3).

Krieshok posits that *'indecision does not always disappear once a decision is made'* (1998:213). Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) research involving young people's transition from school into FE and beyond showed that many had changed their choices of post-16 studies between the last term of compulsory schooling and the first term of FE. Others had changed their HE and career aspirations and decisions. This concurs with Ball, Maguire and Macrae's view that *'career decisions are often unstable or transitory in nature and not predictable'* (2000:15). For Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) it is a question of displacing previous choices with newly emergent priorities. This may include 'defaulting' to another choice as a response to failure to achieve requirements necessary for a first choice, or as a result of re-assessment of likely achievement. These requirements may be financial as well as academic, particularly in relation to decisions on participation in higher education. Those who default or have to make 'second choice' decisions are more likely to be unhappy with their pathway, causing their choices to be *'constantly subject to review and re-appraisal'* (2001:213), while the decisions of those who are able to follow an academic route into high-status careers are generally more stable.

For the privileged young people, choice at the post-compulsory point was merely another step along a well-known pathway where subjects were carefully selected in relation to content and university entrance requirements (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000:130)

Although there is considerable instability in career choice post-16, the process of choosing may begin at an early age. The influence of parents on educational and career choices has been shown to be strong in a number of studies (Ball et. al:2000; Connor et. al:1999; Davies:1994; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001; Foskett and Hesketh:1996; Kidd and Wardman:1999; Mangan et. al:2001). Although not always explicitly recognised by young people themselves, it is clear that the choices they make are often bounded by parental

perceptions and expectations. Foskett and Hesketh (1996) found that students and parents act as a 'composite consumer', with choices emerging from a frame of parental preference. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000:143) found in their study of year 11 pupils in South London that *'the family in particular emerged as a much more significant component of their social and educational lives than we had anticipated'*. However, there were strong family assumptions about the value of a university degree which gave the young people little choice but to pursue this path if they could. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:30) caution though that a calculation of 'rates of return' based on individual investment in higher education is so difficult that such models *'appear not to be a significant influence on the choices of further and higher education made by young people'*. The role of guidance services should therefore be important in helping young people to see long-term implications of early decisions.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that careers education and guidance services are not always regarded highly by young people. An OECD study (1996:16) found that *'in spite of the many different forms of advice and guidance which are on offer, very many young people (and adults too) rely on informal sources of help when making career decisions'*. Davies' (1999) survey of FE students found that, on a 5 point scale (with 5 representing highest satisfaction), 23% rated their experience of careers guidance either 1 or 2. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:192) point out that students may become *'selectively deaf'* to careers advice, as they tend to focus on enjoyment as the main criterion in decision-making. Furthermore, their research shows that young people only see careers guidance as useful when advice is sought about a single career option which has already been chosen, often on the basis of experience and enjoyment of subjects at school. As Krieshok (1998:215) puts it, individuals persist in letting in *'information that supports alternatives they are already considering (for better or for worse), and filtering out information that argues against those alternatives'*.

The focus on interest and enjoyment as a main criterion for career and educational choices is noted throughout the literature. Indeed, Du Bois-Reymond (1998:67) notes the influence of a blurring between perceptions of work and leisure:

To adolescents and young adults, types of activity which do not clearly reveal whether they are professional or leisure activities, are attractive'.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) stress the importance of predicted lifestyle gains from a given career decision, often encouraged by media and marketing influence (particularly in relation to images of higher education), together with self-perception of young people as consumers.

Young people may recognise that their choices can increase or decrease their chance of employment, but they are rarely prepared to compromise on their prioritisation of enjoyment as the key factor in job and career choice (2001:192)

The same authors stress the tension which arises between emphasis on 'interest' when making career choices, and the national need to address skills shortages in particular economic sectors. At the macro level this can be seen as a conflict between market liberalism and Keynesian ideology.

While choice makes the system more responsive to the wants and needs of individuals within society, it makes the exercising of any form of political control to shape choice much less easy and much less predictable in its outcomes' (2001:203)

The strength of interest as a deciding factor can cause significant problems when expected enjoyment does not materialise. This is more often the case when students' images of an educational programme are so embedded that they do not seek further information before embarking on a course. Martinez and Munday (1998) found that problems with transition to FE occurred when students did not fully understand what their courses entailed or when they were found to be more difficult, or carrying a greater workload than expected. Their study of students who had dropped A level courses revealed that the second most common disliked feature of a subject was that it was 'boring/uninteresting'. In addition, a comparison of students who had withdrawn from courses before completion with those who continued showed that *'evaluations of the intrinsic interest of courses strongly distinguished current from withdrawn students'* (p.43).

The literature on post-16 education and career decision-making therefore suggests that there is a very important role for guidance, both in choice of educational programme and in employment destination. The self-perceptions of young people as consumers, basing decisions on interest and enjoyment, extend not only to the educational market, but also to the labour market. In the minds of many young people the best choice may be interpreted as opportunity for short-term enjoyment and long-term lifestyle gain. However, for any market to operate efficiently demand must be matched by supply. Whilst there are competitive pressures which encourage educational providers to meet student demand with popular courses and programmes of study, the labour market is driven by national and local economic forces which necessarily restrict access to different career and employment opportunities. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (1997:105) summarise the dilemma for guidance systems which must enable young people

to come to terms with a conflicting role as a provider of skills in a labour market on the supply side, and a consumer of education and training on the demand side.

In many cases this means encouraging young people to consider alternative pathways, suggesting a divergent approach to career choice (Bloomer and Hodkinson:1997). Krieshok (1998:220) implies that this would require modification to existing careers education and guidance philosophy.

The literature consistently suggests that decidedness is the good outcome ... Interventions aimed at moving prematurely foreclosed individuals out of decidedness and back into indecision are nowhere to be found, although some might support such a proposal.

Mangan et. al. (2001) believe there is some evidence that middle and high achieving students are becoming increasingly marginalized by independent guidance services because of the current focus on social inclusion. Thus students in this category who have already expressed career or post-16 educational choices may not have these challenged. The consequences of persisting with early, perhaps misguided decisions are aptly outlined by

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001:120).

The opportunity to 'change your mind' may, indeed, be a positive rather than negative outcome for the system as well as for the individual, for the generation of unhappiness and discord as a result of having 'square pegs in round holes' is destructive of the students, their parents and friends, and the educational professionals involved, as well as wasteful of resources.

3.3 Post-16 curriculum reform

Since 1959 a succession of reviews of A levels has recommended '*a move to greater breadth, usually involving the study of a broader range of subjects*' (SCAA, 1996:21). In 1988 Professor Higginson chaired a committee set up to clarify the principles on which A level syllabuses should be based. This recommended an increase from a norm of three subjects to five so that '*students can choose a broader programme of study*' (DES, 1988:29). However, it was assumed that breadth could simply be achieved through the study of more subjects and the report '*did not consider different forms of breadth or how breadth might enhance or subtract from a student's specialist studies*' (Young and Leney, 1997:49). Furthermore, the report recommended that, although institutions should give students advice about suitable programmes which would provide breadth, they should be '*free to choose the number of subjects they take and to select the subjects which correspond with their interests, abilities and perceived needs*' (DES, 1988:13). Concern about the breadth of study offered by A level programmes has been a recurrent theme throughout the decades leading to Curriculum 2000 and since. However, an equally voiced concern has been the requirement to maintain the rigour and 'gold standard' of A levels. Professor Higginson's recommendations for five 'leaner' A levels were rejected by the Government, the proposed streamlining viewed as threatening depth of study and therefore, by implication, standards.

Tensions between competing perspectives on breadth and depth continued throughout the 1990s. A levels continued to be regarded as the apex of a hierarchy of qualifications (Young: 1999) against which others could be measured and assigned to lower-status positions in the pyramid. In 1996 the Government made clear its commitment to A levels

as the most important passport to post-18 education and employment.

'GCE A Levels are tried, tested and successful, and the Government is committed to retaining them as the main academic route into higher education and employment for 16-19 year olds' (DfEE, 1996:27).

However, whilst there had also been Government recognition of the narrowness of a curriculum which involved specialised study of only two or three subjects, and the lack of suitable preparation this provided for further study or employment (DES:1991), the post-16 curriculum remained wedded to what has been termed the 'three track approach'. This approach has created three separate routes to qualification; the academic track through A levels, a broad vocational track through GNVQs, and an occupationally specific track via NVQs (Hodgson and Spours:1997). Many attempts at reform have focused on changes within the tracks, but such an approach is founded on the notion that *'there are separate types of students suitable for separate tracks'* (Tomlinson, 1997:16). Furthermore, the hierarchical nature of the tracks, with academic routes seen as having higher status than vocational pathways, serves to assign young people to particular levels within the economic and social structure, thus perpetuating the cultural divide between academic and vocational interests (Bloomer, 1997).

Dearing's approach to curriculum reform in 1996 was therefore constrained by the need to maintain A level 'standards' and 'rigour'. To achieve this he proposed that not less than 30% of the total marks should be allocated to a final exam and that this should test understanding of the whole syllabus. Furthermore, he recommended a limit on the number of re-sits for a module. However, Dearing was also required to consider issues of breadth within a context where post-16 curriculum reform had been continually underpinned by the principle of voluntarism. The development of GNVQ, which combined aspects of academic and vocational study, relied on student choice and Dearing, in his 1995 report (SCAA,1995:8), stated that *'Decisions on the choice of qualifications ... should be based on a view of which would be most effective in developing the potential of the individual'*. In other words, students and their parents could choose qualification pathways from the range of options presented by the school or college, with no national prescription or compulsion

to ensure each individual studied a broad, balanced curriculum. By 1995, however, the Government was asking questions which would provide a framework for Dearing's review of 16-19 qualifications. In particular *'Is there scope for measures to achieve greater coherence and breadth of study post-16 without compromising standards?'* (SCAA, 1996:42). The challenge was therefore how to balance standards and breadth against the need to keep young people in education and training after the age of 16 without *'antagonising'* them (Hodgson and Spours, 1997:13).

Dearing's review recommended that breadth should be delivered by creating a national framework which would keep the three distinct tracks, but would enable students to combine elements from more than one track by explicitly defining equivalences, and matching units of study from general 'Applied A levels' (later to be named Advanced Certificates of Vocational Education) and AS/A levels in terms of their size. A levels were also redesigned to allow AS levels to be taken at the end of one year of study. Since AS level assessments were designed to test understanding at a lower level than the full A level, students would be able to study four or five subjects in the first year of the sixth form, continuing with only three or four in the second year. Whilst this would in theory allow a broader range of study, in practice, without prescription, individual students' choices could be as narrow or as broad as they wished and there was no compulsion to combine academic and vocational tracks. However, Dearing also proposed a National Advanced Diploma which would include assessment of the three key skills, thus adding a dimension of breadth at least in skill development. This proposal was ultimately dropped in the development of Curriculum 2000.

The Dearing review and its outcomes in the form of Curriculum 2000 have therefore been characterised as a 'framework' approach, and indeed were outlined as such in the review itself *'A first step towards coherence is to bring the present academic, applied and vocational pathways into a common framework covering all achievements'* (SCAA, 1996:6). The review built on ideas outlined in the 1991 White Paper (DES:1991) and provided the flexibility to mix academic and vocational study without fundamental reform to existing qualifications and pathways.

Curriculum 2000, and the Dearing review which underpinned it, has been subject to considerable criticism from another school of thought on post-16 reforms. This group has become known as 'unifiers' (Hodgson and Spours:1997) and their argument is for a single qualifications structure with less voluntarism and more breadth within a core curriculum. This perspective is not new, for as Young (1997:28) points out *'The 1991 White Paper appeared at a time when a powerful movement for a unified system was beginning to emerge'*. Arguably the most influential publication to reflect this approach was that produced by Finegold et al (1990). This promoted the idea of a British Baccalauréate, with a single Diploma at 18 and *'a unified framework of modular academic and vocational courses'* (Tomlinson, 1997:15). The central idea is that a unified system would overcome the academic-vocational divide and would encourage a *'late selection-high participation'* system of education (Finegold et al, 1990:5) through the development of a modular curriculum with a common core and specialised choices. Domains of study would be established in broad subject areas, with students required to choose modules from each, consisting of core, specialised and work/community-based modules. It is argued that this 'supply-led' approach would help students *'develop capabilities which include technical and generic skills that allow them to make an innovative contribution at work'* (Finegold et al, 1990:22). In this way breadth and coherence would be encouraged, with opportunities for specialisation. In addition students would study both theoretical and practical modules within the core, thus enhancing their skills and knowledge.

The proposals for a unified curriculum have gained considerable support (Tomlinson, 1997:15), not least because many believe that giving students free choice has led to incoherent programmes, or what Bloomer terms the *"lego curriculum"*, *where each component is selected only for reasons of its intrinsic (or extrinsic) appeal at a given point in time and without any necessary regard for the wider implications of the educational development of the young person concerned ...'* (Bloomer, 1997:201). The requirement of an overarching unified Diploma for a common core, which encompasses breadth and implies some measure of compulsion is argued by the 'unifiers' to be necessary *'for increasing participation rates, as well as meeting the knowledge demands of economies in the next century'* (Hodgson and Spours, 1997:13). Furthermore, Young and Leney argue that a unified curriculum would provide better preparation for inter-disciplinary studies in

higher education, as well as enabling students to focus on new knowledge emerging at the boundaries of subject specialisms. However, it is recognised that such fundamental reform cannot be brought about in one step, but that a 'framework stage' (Hodgson and Spours: 1997) would allow a more gradual move towards strengthening 'professional control' (Bloomer: 1997) and weakening voluntarism.

3.4 Curriculum 2000: the new AS and A2 curriculum

Curriculum 2000 was therefore conceived and implemented as a response to long-standing concerns about the narrowness of England's post-16 curriculum, and the failure of young people leaving full-time education to meet employers' demands for relevant transferable skills (SCAA 1996; DfEE 1998a). Concerns focused particularly on A level courses which, although regarded as the 'gold standard' of academic success, were proving inappropriate for significant numbers of students and yielding high drop-out rates (Audit Commission/Ofsted: 1993).

In the words of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2001:4), Curriculum 2000 was designed to:

- 'provide a range of qualifications from which learners can choose broad programmes that meet their needs and aspirations
- enable learners to attain a high level of key skills
- enable learners to combine academic and vocational studies and to specialise as required for progression'.

A levels remained, for these were still regarded by Government ministers as '*a crucial benchmark of quality*' (Morris, LSDA press release July 2001). Principles of voluntarism were still firmly embedded, with no requirement for students to follow broad programmes of study. Arguments in favour of a unified curriculum were disregarded, but Curriculum 2000 instead provided a framework for a national qualifications structure, which may provide a *first step towards unification in the future*.

Curriculum 2000 split the A level course into six units, with the first three of these comprising the new AS level qualification at a lower level of study than the second three units. This allows certificates to be obtained at the end of the first year of post-compulsory education, and early research shows this aspect of the reforms has been welcomed by students and staff alike (Savory:2000; Association of Colleges:2001).

Reviews undertaken during the first and second year of Curriculum 2000's implementation (Spours, Savory and Hodgson:2000; Association of Colleges:2001; QCA: 2001; Hargreaves:2001; Tait et. al:2002) showed general support not only for the choice and flexibility embedded in the reforms, but also for the underlying principles.

The Association wishes to stress to the Department for Education and Skills that the sector wholly endorses the aspirations and principles underpinning Curriculum 2000 It believes that broader curriculum, more choice and underpinning Key Skills has brought real benefits to the individual learner. (Association of Colleges:2001)

... students themselves were overwhelmingly positive about the reforms. (Hodgson and Spours, 2001:10)

The majority of students taking at least four AS levels seem to regard this as a substantial benefit. They endorse the greater breadth of study and value the increased choice and flexibility. Early indications are that retention rates have improved – a key objective of the reforms. (Hargreaves:2001)

... the new curriculum and qualifications remain well supported by students and professionals alike. (Tait et. al, 2002:I)

Students were particularly positive about the flexibility afforded by the opportunity to review which subjects to continue to A level at the end of the first year. *'For students it was an opportunity to delay specialisation and to have more choice'* (Hodgson and Spours, 2001:28). However, reform of the curriculum did not include prescription of breadth, and

the fact that the post-16 curriculum was '*elective and voluntarist*' (Hodgson and Spours, 1999:1) was not perceived by policy-makers as a barrier to implementation of the reforms. The careful balance required between prescription and choice in curricula was highlighted in an OECD study:

Young people should not have doors closed to them as a result of making irreversible decisions when they are still relatively immature – yet an effective system should also avoid alienating pupils by forcing them to study subjects in which they have no interest or ability (1996:28).

In designing Curriculum 2000 the UK Government hoped instead that '*young people would become the "battering rams" of the reforms by establishing a new and broader advanced level curriculum without the need for national prescription*' (Hodgson and Spours, 2001:2). However, although there was no legal or financial incentive or prescription to ensure breadth of study, further education institutions (but not school sixth forms) were initially financially rewarded for increasing the number of courses followed by each student.

Nevertheless, the possibility of studying more courses was well received by students, not because they sought breadth, but because this provided '*a safety net in case one subject went wrong and the possibility of accumulating more qualifications*' (Hodgson and Spours, 2001:32). These findings confirm a 1992 study by Brown (outlined by Mangan et al:2001), who developed an 'uncertainty of outcome' approach to curriculum choice. In this he suggested that initially parents and pupils are uncertain about their abilities and aspirations and therefore seek to avoid undue specialization. However, as abilities and career preferences become clearer, the potential benefits from specialisation become greater and the associated risks lower.

Hodgson and Spours found evidence that Curriculum 2000 students had elected for complementary rather than contrasting subjects:

... students were generally not prepared to experiment and to set new trends in broadening study. Moreover, they were sceptical or hostile towards

prescriptiveness. (2001:33)

and that very few institutions were prescribing combinations of subjects. At the same time, however, Hargreaves found that teachers *'endorse the greater breadth of study'* (Hargreaves, 2001). Clearly 'breadth' is a matter of interpretation, and is not necessarily implied by simply increasing the number of subjects studied. Indeed, many senior managers felt that more coherence and compulsion was desirable (Savory:2000) and one college which advocated some prescription took an approach which *'is based on a notion of curriculum as a total package – akin to a baccalaureate –but tailored to individual needs'* (Tait et. al, 2002:49). It is clear, therefore, that Curriculum 2000 increased the number of subjects studied by students, but that breadth of study cannot be guaranteed unless there is some element of compulsion within a unified curriculum.

Interviews with students at 50 schools and colleges across England carried out by Hodgson and Spours (2001) revealed that they had chosen first year courses on the basis of how interesting and useful they perceived subjects to be, and how well they had achieved in subjects at GCSE. However, four AS levels had become the norm rather than five or three. Tait et. al.'s (2002) study found that some institutions were asking students at initial enrolment to identify which subjects they would continue for two years and which would be the 'broadening' AS level to be discontinued at the end of the first year. Students were directed to select the fourth AS from a contrasting faculty area, thus taking a more 'unified' approach to programmes of study and using an element of prescription to encourage breadth of study. However, because students were being required to commit to a two-year package, this reduced flexibility and made it more difficult for students to change their minds, particularly in the light of AS level results. This therefore diluted one of the attractive features of Curriculum 2000, namely that AS level examinations *'provide early feedback on whether students' choice of subjects and qualifications is appropriate and allows them to decide which subject to take to full A level'* (QCA, 2001:9). While QCA found that most institutions asked students to make a provisional decision about A2 courses during the second term of their first year, Tait et. al. (2002:25) stress the need for flexibility, *'schools and colleges report on the need to provide students with the opportunity to depart from year one and Key stage 4 decisions'*.

It soon became clear that one of the reasons why students might want to change their choice of A2 courses was that there was considerable variation in difficulty and workload between different AS levels. Media attention was drawn to problems with AS maths in particular. *'The inability of examination boards to pitch the AS mathematics examination at the right level meant a large number of failures in the first exam and led to more students than usual dropping the subject'* (Education Guardian: 23 April 2002). *'Pupils shun maths for "softer" subjects'* (Times Educational Supplement: 9 August 2002). Professional bodies also expressed concern about consistency of level *'Some subjects, specifically mathematics, and also other subjects, for example modern languages and law, are considered to be disproportionately difficult at AS level'* (Association of Colleges:2001).

The review of Curriculum 2000 carried out by David Hargreaves on behalf of QCA at the end of the first year resulted in the identification of three key areas for immediate action.

- 'The excess of content in the new specifications in a few subjects
- The level of demand – claimed in some cases to be too high and in other cases too low – in examination papers and coursework in a few subjects
- Poor correspondence between specifications and actual examinations in a few cases'

(Hargreaves:2001)

Given general agreement that the assessment demands of Curriculum 2000 were excessive (TES 8 February 2002; Association of Colleges:2001), it was perhaps unsurprising that students chose to discontinue the subjects they perceived to be most difficult. This was compounded by mixed messages emanating from universities about the value of AS levels in gaining admission to undergraduate courses. The emphasis from selector universities was on gaining three good A level grades rather than points gained from breadth of study at AS and A level (Hodgson and Spours:2001), so students acted cautiously in choosing to continue subjects in which they hoped to get the highest A level grades.

However, the need to provide support and guidance to students when making choices is recommended by Tait et. al. (2002), with an emphasis on impartial advice. In particular,

they note the fact that some institutions are reviewing GCSE requirements for entry on to particular Curriculum 2000 programmes and that *'the volume of study undertaken by students in year one is increasingly determined by sophisticated scoring of GCSE results'* (2001:25). In other words, there would appear to be more careful consideration of which students should enrol for five or four AS levels.

3.4 Summary of literature and relevance to this study

There is general consensus in the literature that young people make decisions which are self-interested and which emerge from individual circumstances, habitus and disposition to learning (Bloomer and Hodkinson: 2000). As circumstances change, so do choices, sometimes on the basis of chance occurrences. While structural constraints, particularly those relating to social situatedness, frame opportunities available to each individual, young people act as consumers in a post-modern society seeking to maximise the benefits and minimise the costs of the choices they make. As they negotiate their way through post-16 education, training and employment pathways, the experiences young people encounter help to shape self-identities which may in turn lead to further choices and destinations.

It could therefore be argued that the literature on young people's educational and career decision-making appears to provide support for the principles underlying Curriculum 2000. The reforms have met with approval from young people, who appreciate the increased choice and flexibility available, not only in initial course choice, but also in deciding which subjects to continue for two years. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to gain more qualifications and to achieve short-term gratification through successful completion of some courses at the end of one year. These developments serve to meet the needs of 'consumerist' (Page: 1998) behaviours, but also provide flexibility to meet changing individual circumstances and dispositions to learning, perhaps partially explaining why student retention has improved. The provisional nature of selections made when deciding on progression from year one to year two, means that Curriculum 2000 can be argued to better suit the needs of young people who make transitory career choices. Research on career decision-making increasingly points towards the desirability of discouraging young people from narrowing down options too early. In Curriculum 2000 'post-decision

dissonance' (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2000) can now be reduced by dropping an unsatisfactory course choice after one year.

However, early research on the implementation of Curriculum 2000 reveals that its impacts have been muted by institutional and individual interpretations and behaviours. In particular, the breadth of study envisaged in its conception has not been achieved. Hodgson and Spours (2001:37) argue that *'the Government has managed to combine voluntarism and prescription in the wrong way'*. What they mean by this is that while schools and colleges are given incentives through inspection (and funding in the latter case) to broaden programmes of study, there is no such incentive for students, particularly as the higher education sector has been ambivalent about the value of AS level qualifications. Students are therefore strongly influenced by interest and enjoyment when making their subject choices, rather than being guided by 'rational' concerns about the usefulness of a package of qualifications to their future employability or higher education destination. When combined with the experience of differential workloads and levels of difficulty between subjects at AS level, it is not surprising that decisions about continuation to A level are influenced by perceptions of likely success and enjoyment in a second year. It is also debatable, though not widely explored in the literature, that advice and guidance given to students about the implications of course and career choices will be impartial, particularly in the marketised context of further education. Careers education and guidance services do not seem to be highly valued by young people (Davies:1999) and many of them turn instead to parents, friends or tutors (Kidd and Wardman:1999) for advice. This may reinforce family patterns of higher education and workforce participation, or may lead in the direction of unwise choices based on partial information.

As Hodgson and Spours point out *'learners have played an important role in shaping Curriculum 2000'* (2001:4). In their view, governments make assumptions about how young people make choices which are not always founded in reality. A key tenet of the reforms was to give students a choice of broad programmes which *'meet their needs and aspirations'* (QCA, 2001:4). This would seem to imply that, firstly students know what their needs are, and secondly that they make their decisions in a calculated, rational manner in order to satisfy long-term goals. As we have seen from the literature, such long-term

planning is uncommon, with provisional, transitory choices much more likely. Those who advocate a unified curriculum argue that since it is very difficult for young people to make rational choices, it is wise for them to continue with broad programmes until the age of 18. In this way the knowledge, skills and understanding gained from different domains will equip them better for the future, and give them a firmer foundation on which to base career decisions post-18.

The tension which underlies institutional responses to the reforms involves the degree to which students should have free choice in their selection of courses. One college identified in Tait et. al.'s study (2002:49), which has opted for some prescription in students' programmes, states that it has designed its curriculum offer to avoid *'the fragmented pick-and-mix approach, which sacrifices coherence to the consumerist notion of students as customers who can reselect commodities at will'*. Clearly this college would favour a more unified approach to curriculum reform.

The longer term implication of this is whether choices based more on self-interest and enjoyment than on potential value to employers, will serve national economic needs in a globally competitive environment. However, it may equally be argued that students already perceive themselves as consumers, and in a post-compulsory phase of education restrictions on choice may be viewed as unnecessarily constraining and out-dated. Indeed, Hodgson and Spours (2001:33) found that students were *'sceptical or hostile towards prescriptiveness'*. Given this expectation of free choice, it is likely that any move towards a more unified curriculum would be reliant on the provision of incentives through selection procedures for higher education and training.

Early research on Curriculum 2000 is necessarily limited in scope and depth. Much of it has focused on institutional responses and national take-up of different programmes. Research with students has largely concentrated on assessing their reactions to the reform itself, but there has been little attempt to explore potential longer-term impacts on post-18 progression beyond analysis of data on university applications.

Research at Queen Mary's College could therefore be of value in examining links between

course choice and changing career intentions in an institution which has deliberately avoided prescription. The college allows students a great deal of freedom to choose almost any subject combination while encouraging them to study at least four AS levels, and very often five. In this context it could be argued that the college has taken a 'consumerist' approach with programmes of study frequently emerging from students' notions of interest and enjoyment, rather than from designer-led packages of contrasting or complementary courses. Although there is no guarantee of breadth emerging from freedom of choice, the fact that so many students at the college study five AS levels or 6-unit AVCEs does imply more contrast in programmes than might be expected where four courses are the norm. This case study could therefore be useful in exploring the opportunities and tensions between freedom of course choice in Curriculum 2000 and outcomes in terms of post-18 progression. Furthermore, it may provide some insight into whether prescription might be more or less desirable or helpful in supporting young people's decision-making. However, the case study is limited in that the College only provides courses from two of the three curriculum 'tracks' and no conclusions can be drawn about the potential effects of free choice across programmes including more vocational options.

Chapter 4 Methodological considerations

4.1 Study design

The research methods used in this study are both quantitative and qualitative. Much of the quantitative research makes use of existing college data gathered for curriculum planning purposes between March and September 2001. Students were asked to state their preferences for A level courses firstly in March/April of their AS year, and again in June after AS level examinations. Information was also readily available about students' final choices of A level courses. All this information was analysed using a database to identify those students who changed their decisions between March and September, and those whose decisions remained stable.

The next stage in the methodology was a questionnaire survey of all students in January of their second year of study (2002) to find out their state of 'decidedness' in relation to career/university aspirations. The questionnaire was piloted with eight students drawn from four tutor groups. The purpose of the survey was to discover whether students had changed their minds about future plans during their sixth form studies and if so, why. No pre-set/pre-coded categories were given as I did not want to lead students in their answers at this stage or minimize the complexity of their choice processes (Foskett:2000). Open-ended questions asked students to describe on blank lines their reasons for change in career intention. An influence on my design was Unwin and Welling's (2001:ix) contention that *'some express their views as well in writing as others do in speech, hence the value of relying on two methods of collecting data'*. Data from the survey were added to the database so that it was then possible to identify each student's changing career and A level course intentions. However, while analysis could suggest associations between the two facets, causal connections could not, of course, be made. The purpose was rather to allow insights to emerge and to mine the data for hypotheses. As Glaser and Strauss suggest:

In order to saturate all possible findings for suggesting hypotheses, the analyst may take his core concepts and run them with literally every other questionnaire item in the survey that seems remotely relevant to his area of interest' (1967:194).

The key method to obtain 'rich' qualitative data was interviews. Initially a one hour tape-recorded pilot group interview was held with the same eight students who completed the pilot questionnaire survey. The interview was ethnographic in style with an outline guide to areas of questioning, but allowing the students to explore in some depth their experiences of AS study and the influence of these on progression intentions.

Themes which emerged from the group interview, and from questionnaire responses, guided the design of 'focused' group interviews intended to be carried out with 32 students in eight groups of four. The number of students was limited by the fact that questionnaire results would not be fully analysed until early February and students were not available for interview after May 2002. Stratified sampling was used to create groups with strong homogeneity in terms of stability or instability of choices of A level courses and career pathways. The interviews were designed to last 40 minutes and were tape-recorded. Key reasons for changes in progression intentions were identified and classified to discover the significance of factors associated with AS level courses, but findings were reported in students' own words as far as possible so that their *'interpretations of reality are accessed directly'* (Merriam, 1998:203).

Full details of all methods are given in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

4.2 Choice of research approach

4.2.1 Case study

This study is based entirely at one college, examining one year group of students – the first to experience Curriculum 2000. The research approach can therefore be regarded as case study analysis, as it is a *'bounded system'* (Stake:1980), or in the words of Merriam (1998:193) *'an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit'*. Hitchcock and Hughes add the dimension of time-boundedness to their definition of case study (1995:317)

Case studies evolve around the in-depth study of a single event or a series of linked cases over a defined period of time. The researcher tries to locate the 'story' of a certain aspect of social behaviour in a particular setting and the factors influencing the situation.

This definition is also relevant to the study at Queen Mary's College, as it focuses on one group of students in their progression from year one to year two of Curriculum 2000, using data collected between September 2000 and May 2002.

As a teacher-researcher it is logical and convenient to undertake case study research in my own institution, but in order for this to be useful to others outside the setting, there is an obligation *'to provide enough detailed description of the study's context to enable readers to compare the "fit" with their situations'* (Merriam, 1998:211). This is particularly important for a study which examines some of the early impacts of a major curriculum reform, as each institution will vary in its interpretation and implementation of change, as well as being subject to unique socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, as Merriam (1998:321) also points out:

Case studies have one thing in common – some commitment to the study and portrayal of the idiosyncratic and the particular as being legitimate forms of inquiry in themselves.

In order to be able to compare findings relating to experiences and perceptions of students at QMC with those of students in other sixth form institutions, it is important to enable readers to judge *'how typical the program, event, or individual is compared with others in the same class'* (Merriam, 1998:211). I have therefore attempted to describe methods and findings in detail, with signposting to indicate significance of associations and emergent themes, and how these might be shaped by unique features of the college and its context.

4.2.2 Quantitative and qualitative methods

The methodological design of this study can be argued to sit within an

interpretive/constructivist paradigm in which an attempt is made to understand the '*complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it*' (Schwandt:1994) and the goal is to understand '*the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge*' (Mertens, 1998:11). Although this approach generally favours qualitative methods, Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that quantitative methods can be used within the paradigm when appropriate. My argument is that in this study a comparison of data gathered by quantitative and qualitative methods is the most suitable methodology for discovering new knowledge. As Glaser and Strauss suggest:

In many instances, both forms of data are necessary – not quantitative used to test qualitative, but both used as supplements, as mutual verification and, most important for us, as different forms of data on the same subject, which, when compared, will each generate theory (1967:18).

The combination of a case study approach with the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods can therefore be argued to fit comfortably into the post-positivist tradition (Hitchcock and Hughes:1995).

However, whilst I felt that quantitative analysis was appropriate for investigating underlying associations between student characteristics and patterns of course/career decision-making behaviour, I was also keen to use qualitative methods to explore the feelings and perspectives of students. I was strongly influenced by the views of other researchers in post-16 education, who argue that students' voices must be heard, particularly in relation to new policy initiatives.

... the learner's experience is a valid and under-utilised source of evidence in a reform process which depends so much on the curriculum choices they make (Hodgson and Spours, 2001:4).

If we are to support young people in their decision making and ensure that policymaking responds to their needs, then we have to listen to young people as they articulate the world as they see it. We have to listen to them interpret much of

the rhetoric that is perpetrated on their behalf. (Unwin and Welling:2001).

Nevertheless, I felt that information gathered by the college for administrative purposes could provide a way of measuring instability in course choices with some accuracy, as the data were gathered 'live' at critical decision-points and did not depend on students' memories or post-hoc interpretations. Group interviews gave students the opportunity to give reasons for changes made to decisions about A level courses and post-18 pathways, although I was aware that the time-lag between choice selection and exploration of reasons at interview could lead to problems of unreliability. As Foskett and Hemsley-Brown state:

What will be reported is what the individual believes was the nature of the influence, but this may or may not be a reflection of the processes that actually operated (2001:163).

4.2.3 Inductive data collection and analysis

The original idea for the study arose during the second term of the implementation of Curriculum 2000 and was triggered by my observation of the apparent difficulties students were having in deciding which AS courses to continue to A level. At this stage, however, I had no working hypotheses to guide me towards a particular research approach in order to 'test' theory. I simply wanted to find out what factors were influencing this instability in students' choices and whether there might be longer-term implications. I knew that there was already a data-bank relating to students' choices which had been gathered by the college for administrative purposes, and that this could be a very useful source to mine for preliminary analysis. I felt I could then use the results of this analysis to see if there were particular characteristics associated with students who changed their choices, compared with those who did not. Any emerging factors could then be explored in relation to further information gathered through more qualitative methods using open-ended questionnaires and interviews.

My general approach was therefore inductive, with generalizations emerging from the data rather than being hypothesized in advance. Whilst some might refer to this as grounded

theory, I hesitate to make this claim because the study generates insights worthy of further exploration, rather than theory per se. I am conscious of Strauss and Corbin's cautions that *'researchers are still claiming to use "grounded theory methods" because their studies are "inductive"'* and that grounded theory *'mandates the development of theory'*. However, my approach was chosen so that I could analyse data in order to categorise emergent themes and issues in a way which created some meaning, for *'at the beginning of a study the researcher is uncertain about what will ultimately be meaningful'* (Merriam, 1998:179). It was helpful to analyse findings from the database and questionnaire survey before designing the interview guide and deciding on methods of group sampling. The open-ended questionnaire yielded a range of reasons for change to post-18 progression intentions and I was able to use these to construct categories for exploration in group interviews.

My justification for using inductive analysis, was therefore broadly in agreement with Hitchcock and Hughes:

... there is a positive advantage in developing data collection and analysis side by side as it enables one to try out different explanations of the fit between data, theory and ideas as the project proceeds' (1995:97).

4.3 Ethical issues

For any teacher, conducting research within one's own institution carries with it a range of ethical issues which must be resolved before research begins, or as soon as potential conflicts arise (Hitchcock and Hughes:1995). It was therefore necessary for me to explain the nature and proposed methods of research to the college Principal and gain his agreement before proceeding. The most important consideration was to conduct research in such a manner that no harm would occur to students, staff or the reputation of the institution itself. However, I also needed to be aware of potential conflicts which could arise when researching within the competitive and political arena of post-16 education, for as Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:40) put it:

As the world of education becomes increasingly politically contested, the potential for conflict between professional integrity and the demand of policy become more acute.

In other words, I needed to guard against the possibility that my findings could be distorted, either through my own desire to enhance the reputation of the college and my place within it, or through post-publication re-analysis and selective dissemination by others for the same purpose.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:53) point out the dilemma for teacher-researchers arising from

the tendency of organizations studied to expect some 'pay back' in the form of value-free and quantifiable 'facts' or 'remedies' often to support their existing or future policies.

All methods used in the study carried potential for ethical problems to arise, and these needed to be addressed in the research design. Access to college data concerning students' personal details, programmes of study, results and course choices was negotiated through key members of staff, particularly those responsible for compliance with the Data Protection Act. I had to ensure that data was used only for agreed purposes, but because I was an 'in-house' researcher agreement was easier to reach than it might have been for an 'external' researcher. However, I was mindful that students were unable to withdraw from the research because they were not aware at this stage that it was being conducted.

The questionnaire survey was designed to be completed during a timetabled tutorial period. A notice inviting participation, and the survey forms, were distributed via Personal Tutors who received a separate letter from me asking for their co-operation and explaining the purpose of the survey (see chapter 6 for details). These methods, chosen for practical reasons of efficiency, raise ethical considerations. Whilst students could refuse to take part in the survey, they were obliged to attend the tutorial session. This might therefore have conveyed the strong message that non-participation would be frowned upon, and to some extent my chosen method of distribution exploited the possibility that students would make

this interpretation. It could be argued that I was therefore playing on the fact that I was someone with an unequal share of power, information and resources (Cohen et. al., 2000:142).

The questionnaire requested students to give their names and tutor group, as this was essential for analysis and for linking information to details already in the database. However, I made it clear in the accompanying notice that responses would remain anonymous in my report. Two students did not include their names, but as each tutor group's responses were returned to me in one envelope I was able to work out who these students were, partly through a process of elimination and partly by checking how many AS levels they said they had studied in answer to the first question. It could be argued that this was an unethical approach, as it was the students' choice to remain entirely anonymous.

In order to carry out interviews I needed to send a letter of invitation home to each student outlining the purpose of my research and interview arrangements (Appendix VI). Permission to send it was granted by the Vice-Principal. The letter made it clear that participation was voluntary and students were given an opportunity to decline on the attached consent form. I also contacted Personal Tutors to obtain permission for students to miss the relevant tutorial.

The invitation letter stressed that although the interview would be tape-recorded, no-one else but me would listen to the tape and students would not be named in the research report. However, I was aware that confidentiality could not be guaranteed in a group interview situation as I would have no control after the interview over any comments made by students about what had been said. I therefore attempted to make sure, at the beginning of each interview, that students understood their obligations to each other in maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity.

Further ethical issues arose when deciding how to report contributions to interview. I had decided to use verbatim quotations whenever appropriate so that the voices of the students themselves could be heard by the reader. However, I was aware that even if I attempted to convey their views in this way it would still not be authentic, for as Fine explains '*when*

"we" allow the Other to speak, when we talk about or for them, we are taking over their voice' (1994: 503). Comments which sounded articulate and well thought-out in the discussion sometimes looked incoherent and disjointed on paper, leaving me with a sense of patronising the students and somehow belittling their observations. I was uneasy that I had the power to devalue the students' opinions and feelings through my interpretation on paper (even though students were given pseudonyms). Mun Wong's (1998:184) observation echoed my concerns:

the transcription process flattened any affect – the laughter, the cries and the angst in their voices.

Case study research, particularly where the case is intimately implicated in the researcher's own employment, requires a high degree of attention to subjectivity (Peshkin:1998), as it would be easy to select findings which support a favoured theory (Merriam:1998).

However, as Simons (2000:41) cautions, the researcher must

pay due regard both to the individual participants in the case (and their right to privacy) and to those beyond the case who have a right to the knowledge generated.

It is therefore important to achieve a balance between on the one hand safeguarding the rights of participants in the study and their need to be heard, and on the other hand a disinterested stance which attempts to portray the truth of the situation.

4.4 Validity and reliability

Problems with research methods can stem from technical procedures and also from the researcher's own beliefs in relation to theory. Grbich (1999:65) points to the central role of reflexivity on the part of the researcher, which is described as

a process of self-awareness that should clarify how one's beliefs have been socially constructed and how these values are impacting on interaction and interpretation in research settings.

The study draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods, which in part help to increase reliability and address issues of bias through triangulation. To suggest that any of the methods used could be value-free, however, would be to deny that the researcher is a social being who *produces* knowledge.

While statistical methods are widely used in the study to measure associations between different factors and suggest tentative explanations, Glaser and Strauss (1967:201) point out that '*merely being statistically significant does not mean that a relationship is or should be of theoretical relevance*'. Chi-square is used to test the statistical independence of variables (Mertens:1998). The test allows comparison of observations with chance expectation, or with expectations based on specific hypotheses (Oppenheim:1992), but conclusions drawn from the results run the risk of diverting attention away from '*theoretically interesting relationships that are not of sufficient magnitude to be statistically significant*' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:200).

Open-ended questions in the questionnaire survey, and loosely structured interviews, provide qualitative data for the study, with findings reported as categorised verbatim quotations. It may be argued that the strength of these approaches lies in the fact that students' responses bring us '*closer to reality*' (Merriam, 1998:203), thus enhancing internal validity. In this case, as Mertens (1998) argues, the reader is able to draw conclusions about the generalizability of the case study to other situations. Hitchcock and Hughes suggest that this provides

qualification of actions, ideas, values and meanings through the eyes of participants rather than quantification through the eyes of an outside observer (1995:26).

The goal is then '*whether the results are consistent with the data collected*' (Merriam, 1998:206), rather than whether findings can be replicated. However, those who favour more quantitative research methods criticise loosely structured interviews on the grounds that there is too much scope for bias, both on the part of researcher and interviewees. The debate is aptly summarized by Wilson (1996:119) who states

Less-structured methods minimize procedural reactivity and allow the freer exploration of respondents' meanings and beliefs. They do this at the possible expense of reliability.

Most of the criticisms stem from the fact that interviews are social interactions which yield knowledge and understanding that is personally constructed. Bias lies within the respondent's own interpretation of the questions and issues raised, which is filtered through their own set of meanings, beliefs and experiences. They have their own unconscious '*biographical baggage*' (Cohen et. al. 2000:121) through which their experiences are filtered to become '*reconstructed stories*' (Scott and Usher 1999:17). Although the groups in my own study were to be carefully selected to produce students with similar criteria for each interview, there was no guarantee that another four students with the same criteria would generate the same findings.

An obvious criticism of any research method in which 'subjects' know they are being researched is that this fact alone can change behaviour and expressed beliefs in a manner which produces results that are artificial (Wilson 1996:95). In the case of my own research study it is possible that students may have wished to denigrate the experience of AS levels because the way in which they have been implemented has received much public criticism. They may have believed that I had some power to bring about modifications or to publicly voice their concerns. This may then have coloured their responses to my questions, as may have any number of other factors, some of which could be unique to the individuals concerned. When combined with the way in which students may have been influenced by my own characteristics (eg gender, language, style etc) it may be argued that the 'response effect' (Borg 1981:87) could damage the validity of methods and findings.

I have, therefore, attempted to be open about the problems inherent in my methods so that the reader can more easily judge the validity and reliability of findings. Mertens points to the importance of 'confirmability' when working within the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, which is made possible by leaving open an audit trail.

Data can be tracked to its sources, and the logic used to assemble interpretations can be made explicit in the narrative. (Mertens, 1998:13)

This approach strengthens internal validity because factors internal to the design of the study (Eisenhart and Howe:1992) which may have led to certain findings can be taken into account by both researcher and reader.

Chapter 5: Database of student information

5.1 Methodology

5.1.1 Objectives

The purpose in constructing a database was to bring together information about all students in the study into one easily interrogated source, for as Schleicher (1997:349) puts it:

The purpose of a database management system is to store information relevant to a certain area of activity and to manipulate, analyse, and report that information in order to provide answers to specific questions related to that information.

In this way information about A2 course choices could be mapped against gender, prior attainment at GCSE, attainment at AS level, number and type of subjects taken at AS/AVCE level, clarity of career aim at the start of the first year and degree of change to this. Similarly stability or instability in career aim could be mapped against the same characteristics. Using Microsoft Excel enabled searches to be made and calculations to be carried out so that associations between different categories could be measured and tested for significance.

5.1.2 Database design and sources of information

To establish the degree of change in students' A2 course choices during their first year, it was necessary first to identify those students studying three or more AS level or 6-unit AVCE courses at March 2001 when A2 preferences were first expressed. The College's Management Information System Manager supplied a database of all students on Level 3 programmes as at 1 October 2000, with details of their name, gender, average GCSE score on entry, courses of study for 2000/2001 and A2 courses started in September 2001. Those studying less than three AS/6-unit AVCE courses were then filtered out, together with those studying 12-unit AVCEs or BTEC National Diplomas. This left a total of 544 students.

This database was then exported into Excel and used as the basis for building all subsequent information gathered about each student. Figure 7 outlines the steps undertaken to refine and enhance the database during the course of the research. Work on building the database began in December 2001 and continued to April 2002, when questionnaire data was added.

Figure 7 Database development

ACTION	PURPOSE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive MIS data, including names, gender, average GCSE score, courses of study for 2000/01 and A2 courses started in September 2001 for all students in the first year of Level 3 programmes on 1 October 2000. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To establish base data To enable later analysis of associations between, on the one hand course and career changes, and on the other hand gender and prior attainment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Filter out students studying less than 3 AS levels/6-unit AVCEs and those studying BTEC National or 12-unit AVCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To restrict research to students studying 3 or more AS levels/6-unit AVCEs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calculate and record mean GCSE score (excluding students for whom data not available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable national comparisons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and code those studying General Studies or Critical Thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To facilitate national comparisons, as data does not always include General Studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record A2 course choices made in March/April 2001 using data from forms completed at consultations. Yes/No entries were made against each subject according to whether the student chose to continue it. Record as x those who had left since September, or for whom data not available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To establish a baseline against which to measure future changes in selections. This was the first time students were asked to make A2 choices.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record A2 course choices made in mid-June 2001 using information from forms completed at student consultations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable a comparison to be made with March/April choices and with the actual A2 courses started in September 2001
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add AS level grades and calculate as points scores. Calculate and record mean AS score for each student. (Students did not take exams in the first year of 6-unit AVCEs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable analysis of any association between AS grades and final A2 choices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and code students who left between October 2000 and September 2001 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To exclude from questionnaire sample and statistical analysis in spring 2002
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Add questionnaire data from survey carried out in January 2002. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To analyse possible associations between characteristics of students in relation to degree of stability in course choices and career aims

The full database design, with field contents, is given at Appendix I.

5.1.3 Validity and reliability

Except for questionnaire data (which is dealt with separately in Chapter 6) all the

information in the database was sourced from centralised systems within QMC. The information was of two types. Firstly, base data regarding students was obtained from the College's computerised management information system. This data included personal details and programmes of study for each student's first and second year in college. Data in the MIS system is used to supply information to the Learning and Skills Council in order to obtain funding and is therefore regularly audited externally. It can therefore be regarded as a reliable source, with one exception – GCSE score on entry. Although students are required to bring actual results slips into the College so that GCSE grades can be verified, there are some problems. A small number never actually bring their slips so their recorded grades cannot be regarded as completely reliable. Additionally, some students appeal against the grades they have been awarded. Re-grading information is not available until later in the autumn term and does not always filter through to student records. Finally, GCSE scores were not recorded for 44 students, probably because they joined the College late and did not go through normal enrolment processes.

The second type of information was records of students' choices of A2 courses, obtained at consultations in March/April and in June. Although this information is later computerised, I was allowed access only to the paper documents used at student consultations. It was therefore necessary to add the records to the database by keying them in. This created potential for errors. However, it was possible to cross-check records of March/April choices, as the forms on which June choices were recorded already had pre-printed information relating to March/April. There was no opportunity to cross-check June records directly, but interviews held with nineteen students in the second year revealed no errors in their database entries. All the paper-based consultation records were signed by students and staff, thus confirming that these were correct. One problem, however, was that no course choice data was available for some students either at March/April, or at June (possibly due to absence, or because at that particular point students were not planning to continue into the second year). In total data was missing at one of the decision points for 42 students, although all of these expressed preference at one of the two consultations, and for a further three students who did not express a preference in March/April or June.

Students who left between April and the start of the second year were excluded from analysis of course changes, even where they had stated preferences at one date. This was to simplify data and retain a focus on those continuing for two years.

As data capture was 'live', that is obtained and recorded at critical times such as enrolment for the first year, re-enrolment for the second year, and student consultations at specific times during the first year, there was no possibility of deterioration in accuracy over time. These sources were therefore the most valid for measuring and assessing changes in students' course choices. The reliability and validity of questionnaire data, added later to the database, is discussed in Chapter 6.

5.1.4 Methods of analysis

Base data, obtained from the College's MIS system, allowed the following analyses to be carried out.

- Overall proportion of males and females
- Mean GCSE score on entry
- Mean GCSE score on entry for those continuing to second year
- Mean GCSE score on entry for those studying five, four or three AS levels/6-unit AVCEs
- Proportions of students studying five, four or three AS levels/6-unit AVCEs at October and at April of the first year
- Proportions of students studying General Studies or Critical Thinking, analysed by the total number of AS levels in their programmes of study
- Mean AS grade achieved (for all students and for those continuing to the second year)
- Number of students leaving after the first year, or re-starting the first year

Course choice data, obtained from student consultation forms in March/April and in June, together with base data on students' A2 programmes of study, allowed the following analyses.

- Proportion of students changing their A2 choices between March/April and June, between June and September, and between March/April and September
- Proportion of students who changed their choice of at least one subject at A2 level between March/April 2001 and September 2001, analysed by gender, number of AS levels studied and mean AS grades
- Students' final choices of A2 subjects analysed by grades they obtained in each AS level
- Proportion of students changing their choices of A2 subjects after the publication of AS level results
- Whether or not students changed their course choices between April and June analysed by mean GCSE score and mean AS score
- Whether or not students changed their course choices between June and September analysed by mean GCSE score and mean AS score

Questionnaire data made it possible to analyse stability or instability in career aims by changes in A2 course choices, gender, and number of AS levels studied. This is discussed in Chapter 6.

5.1.5 Summary of methods

Construction of a database was essential in allowing possible associations between changing course choices and changing progression aims to be identified and analysed for 544 students. Base data were obtained from the College's own records, which are regularly audited both internally and externally for accuracy. Information relating to course preferences was drawn from data capture forms, completed at student consultations and signed by both students and staff. Questionnaire data were added at a later date and is discussed in Chapter 6.

Possible errors may exist in GCSE scores and there are no data on GCSE scores for 44 students. Data on course choice are missing at one of the two decision points for 63 students. Omissions have, however, been accounted for in calculations of means and percentages.

5.2 Database findings

The total number of students studying more than three AS levels/6-unit AVCEs in March 2001 was 544. Of these, 498 continued into a second year in September 2001 (although seven of these re-started the first year). However, no data on course choice prior to September were available for three students. It is likely that these students did not intend to stay on, only changing their minds after June, and therefore not making course choices in March or June.

5.2.1 'Choice change' between March/April and September

Course choice information was available for 488 students who moved into a second year in September 2001. 272 students (55.7%) showed no instability in choice, not changing from their original choices to the ones they actually started in September 2001. 216 students (44.3%) changed their choice of at least one A2 course between March/April and September.

There was no significant difference in stability of choice between males and females, as shown in figure 8.

Figure 8 Analysis of course choice change by gender

	Changed choice	Didn't change choice	Total
Male	103 (43.6%)	133 (56.4%)	236
Female	113 (44.8%)	139 (55.2%)	252
Total	216	272	488

$\chi^2 = 0.132$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

When stability of choice is analysed by the number of AS levels/6-unit AVCEs studied at April of the first year, some differences are noted. Those studying five or more courses appear to be more likely to change their A2 choices (47.5% compared with 44.3% of all students), but the difference is not statistically significant, as shown in figure 9.

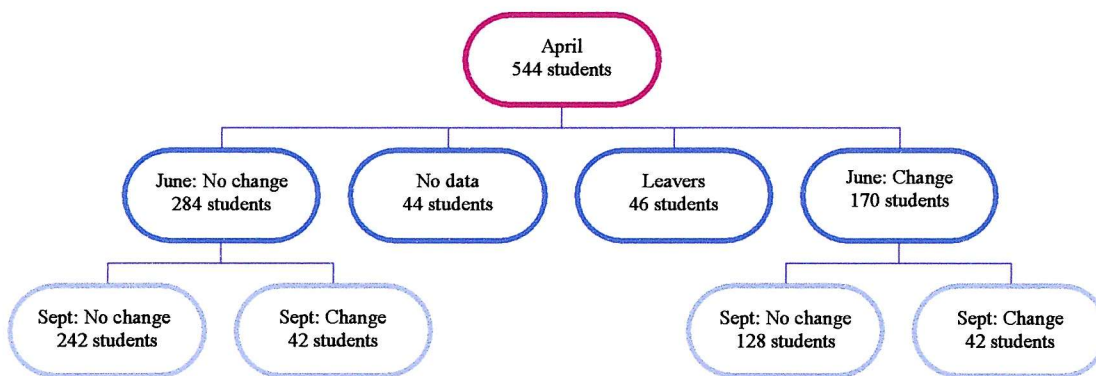
Figure 9 Analysis by number of AS levels/6-unit AVCEs being studied at April of first year

	Changed choice	Didn't change choice	Total
5+ AS levels	135 (47.5%)	149 (52.5%)	284
4 AS levels	71 (39.7%)	108 (60.3%)	179
3 AS levels	10 (40%)	15 (60%)	25
Total	216	272	488

$\chi^2 = 2.48$ (2 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

Degree of change between dates on which preferences were expressed is shown in figure 10.

Figure 10 When changes in course choices occurred (excludes students for whom data were not available at all three dates)



Insufficient data were available for 44 students, either in March/April or in June to assess whether they had changed their choices between these dates. Percentage calculations are therefore based on 454 students for whom data were available at all three decision points, and who did not leave before September. 491 students actually started A2 courses, 46 left the college before September 2001 and seven re-started first year courses.

Figure 10 shows that the greatest amount of choice change occurred between April and June, with 170 students (37.4%) changing at least one subject. In September 84 students changed at least one course (18.5%).

5.2.2 Choice change between March/April and June

Statistical tests were carried out to see whether there might be an association between change in course choices and overall ability. This was done by comparing the mean GCSE score of students who changed their choices in June with the score for those who did not change their choices. Z-scores were calculated, which allow standardization of data from two or more distributions. The formula to calculate z-scores is:

$$Z = (\text{observed value} - \text{mean value}) / \sigma$$

Figure 11 gives this information, along with a similar test for the AS scores achieved in June.

Figure 11 Analysis of those changing course choices between March/April and June and those not changing course choices

	Changed choice (284 students)		Didn't change choice (170 students)		All students continuing to 2 nd year	
	Score	Z-Score	Score	Z-Score	Score	St Deviation
Mean GCSE	5.78	-0.07	5.86	0.02	5.84	0.859693
Mean AS	2.67	-0.03	2.78	0.05	2.71	1.284688

(GCSE data not available for 10 students)

Figure 11 shows that the mean GCSE score of those not changing their choices in June was 0.8 points above the mean for those changing their choices. This could suggest that more able students are more decided about their A2 courses at an earlier stage. This is also supported by AS scores, where the mean score for those not changing choices was 0.11 higher than that for those changing choices. However, neither differences in GCSE scores nor AS scores show enough statistical significance to draw firm conclusions.

5.2.3 Choice change between June and September

Changes between June and September are probably influenced by the publication of AS level results in August. A total of 84 students changed their choices by at least one subject

at this stage (18.5% of all students for whom data were available). Figure 12 shows that there is little difference between mean GCSE score and mean AS score for changers and non-changers, although those changing their choices again had slightly lower mean GCSE scores. However, in contrast to April-June data, mean AS scores were very slightly higher for those who changed course choices. There is a very strong possibility that these findings are due to chance.

Figure 12 Analysis of those changing course choices between June and September and those not changing course choices

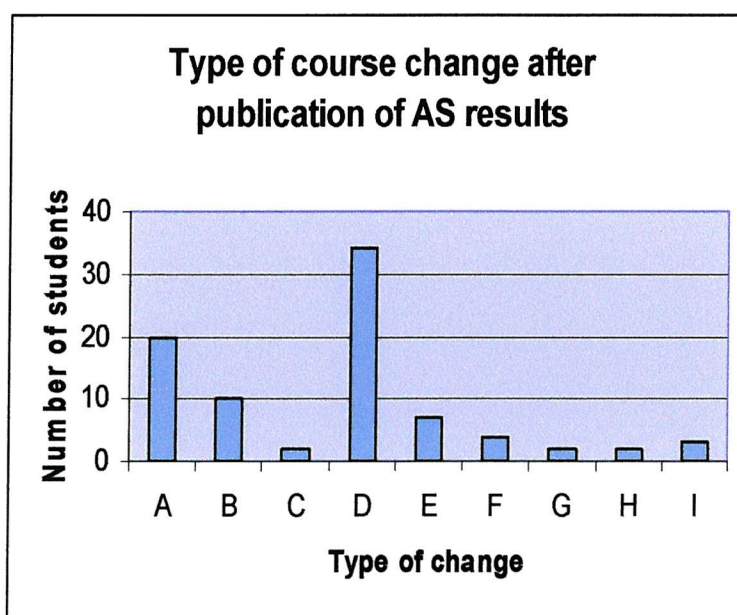
	Changed choice (84 students)		Didn't change choice (370 students)		All students continuing to 2 nd year (491 students)	
	GCSE/ AS Score	Z-score	GCSE/ AS Score	Z-score	Score	St Deviation
Mean GCSE	5.82	-0.02	5.86	0.02	5.84	0.8578
Mean AS	2.72	0.008	2.70	-0.008	2.71	1.279914

(GCSE data not available for 10 students)

An analysis of the type of course changes made is shown in figure 13. This shows that 69 students (82.1% of June-September changers) made selections which are likely to have been AS grade-related. The categories of changes where this assumption is made are:

- Switching from a subject with a lower grade at AS to a subject with a higher grade (20 students)
- Adding an additional A2 course and continuing with other choices (10 students)
- Dropping an A2 course in which a lower AS grade was obtained, but continuing with other choices (34 students)
- Dropping an AVCE course (2 students)
- Dropping all A2 choices and starting the first year again (3 students)

Figure 13 Type of course change after publication of AS results



Key to figure 13

A Switched from subject with lower AS grade to subject with higher grade	20
B Added an additional A2	10
C Switched from subject with higher grade at AS to subject with lower grade	2
D Dropped an A2 in which a lower AS grade obtained	34
E Dropped an A2 in which a higher AS grade obtained	7
F Dropped an A2 in which a middle AS grade obtained	4
G Switched between courses with the same grade at AS	2
H Dropped an AVCE course	2
I Dropped all subjects and started 1 st year again	3

5.2.4 The effect of studying new subjects at AS/AVCE level

The database was analysed to see how many students had chosen to study subjects at AS level which they would not previously have been able to study at school, or outside school, in any formal way. It would then be possible to see whether there was any possible association between inclusion of these in programmes of study, differences in GCSE score on entry and instability in A2 course choices or career aims. The following subjects were defined as new:

Photography	Film Studies	Media Studies
Economics	Music Technology	Psychology
Philosophy	Accounting	Politics
Spanish for beginners	Sociology	Law
Travel & Tourism	Leisure & Recreation	Health & Social Care

There were, of course, likely to be students studying other courses for the first time (eg Business Studies) but it was likely that a number of students in these groups would have had prior experience of the subject, and it was not possible to disaggregate those who had not. The total number of students studying at least one 'new' subject at April 2001 was 421 (77.4%), with 123 (22.6%) not studying any 'new' subjects.

Figure 14 shows the number of 'new' subjects included in students' programmes of study. This is then analysed by mean GCSE score in figure 15. It is clear that two-thirds of students chose one or two 'new' subjects in their first year of study. It would also appear that, with the exception of students with programmes of study including four 'new' subjects, the less the number of 'new' subjects studied, the higher the GCSE score.

Figure 14 'New' subjects included in programmes of study at April 2001

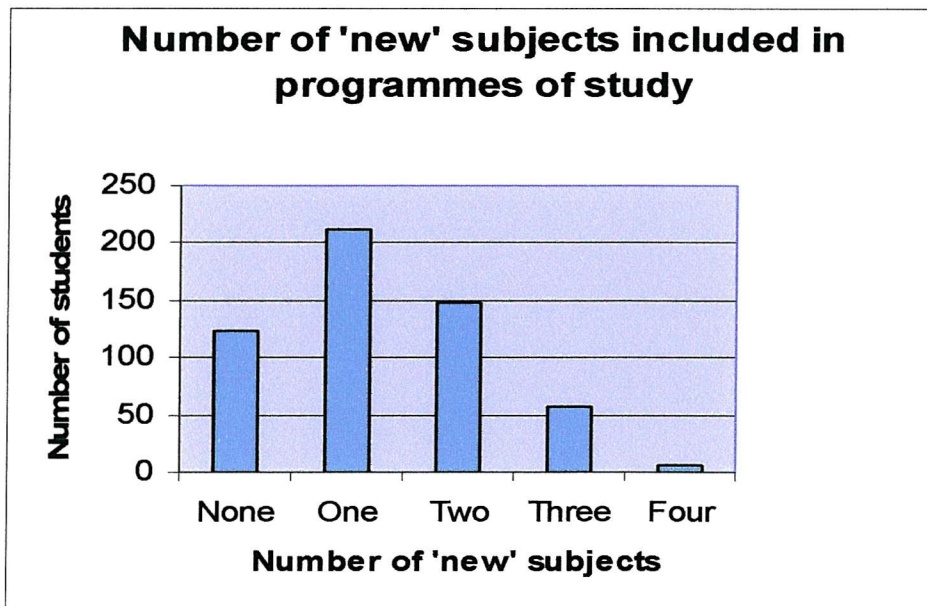
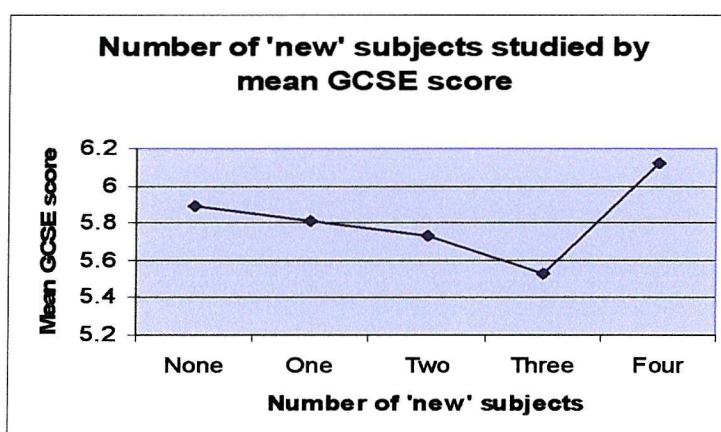


Figure 15 Number of 'new' subjects included in programmes of study in March/ April 2001 analysed by mean GCSE score

Number of new subjects studied	Students		Mean GCSE score	Mean GCSE score (All students)		Z-score
	Number	%		Score	St. Dev.	
4	5	0.9	6.12	5.84	0.859693	0.33
3	56	10.3	5.53	5.84	0.859693	-0.36
2	147	27.0	5.73	5.84	0.859693	-0.13
1	213	39.1	5.81	5.84	0.859693	-0.03
0	123	22.7	5.89	5.84	0.859693	0.16

Figure 16 Analysis of number of 'new' subjects studied by mean GCSE score



Data were analysed to investigate any possible association between students leaving before the second year, or re-starting the first year, and the inclusion of 'new' subjects in programmes of study. Results are shown in figure 17. This shows that there would appear to be a significant link, and that those leaving or re-starting the first year were more likely to be studying 'new' subjects than those continuing.

Figure 17 Analysis of leavers and continuers by whether they studied 'new' subjects

	Not studying 'new' subjects	Studying 'new' subjects	Total
Leavers/re-starters	6 (11.3%)	47 (88.7%)	53
Continuers	117 (23.8%)	374 (76.2%)	491
Total	123 (22.6%)	421 (77.4%)	544

$$x^2 = 4.64 \text{ (1 d.f.)}$$

Significant at 95% level

To find out whether students studying new subjects showed more instability in their choice of A2 courses, analysis of choice change between March/April and September was carried out. This is shown in figure 18. The analysis shows that there is no significant association between course choice instability and whether or not students were studying 'new' subjects.

Figure 18 Analysis of those studying 'new' subjects by whether they changed their A2 course choices

	Not studying 'new' subjects	Studying 'new' subjects	Total
Changed choice of A2 courses	54 (47.4%)	162 (43.3%)	216
Did not change choice of A2 courses	60 (52.6%)	212 (56.7%)	272
Total	114	374	488

$\chi^2 = 0.59$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

However, when one looks at the type of course choice changes which occurred between March/April and September made by those studying 'new' subjects, some interesting patterns emerge.

Figure 19 Types of course choice change between March/April and September made by students studying new subjects

	Number of students	%
Substitution of 'new' subjects for familiar ones	31	19.1
Substitution of familiar subjects for 'new' ones	6	3.7
Switch between 'new' subjects or between familiar subjects	125	77.2
Total	162	100

Although it is difficult to draw conclusions from figure 19, it is interesting to note that 31 students who originally chose to continue with a 'familiar' subject in March/April subsequently changed their minds and switched to a subject which they had only studied since the previous September.

5.3 Discussion of findings from database

5.3.1 Stability and instability in students' choices of A2 courses

A key finding from the college's record forms is the overall high degree of instability in students' choices of A2 courses. 44.3% of students changed their choice of at least one A2 course between March/April and September of the first year. Some of these students would have expanded or contracted the number of A2/6-unit AVCE courses they wished to follow, some would have settled in September on the choices they originally made in March/April, others would have switched between different choices.

The choices of male and female students were equally unstable and prior attainment at GCSE showed no significant effect. However, figure 5 indicates that those with lower GCSE scores studied fewer subjects at AS level, and figure 9 shows that those who studied five or more subjects experienced more instability in choice. It is feasible, therefore, to suggest that those with lower GCSE scores experienced less choice-change because they were choosing between a smaller range of subjects.

Students' choices were most unstable in the period between March/April and June, when 37.4% of all students changed their course selections. It is during these months that students are under most pressure from coursework (usually due for completion by early May) and examinations (in May and June). As choices in June were made after AS examinations, it is possible that self-assessment of performance in examinations, together with feedback from tutors on the quality of coursework, were important factors influencing students at this time.

5.3.2 Influence of AS results on final choices of A2 courses

In the period between June and September 18.5% of students changed their choices. Although other factors may have been in play, it is likely that the strongest influence on change at this time was the publication of AS results. (Students were not entered for 6-unit AVCE exams at this time.)

There is insufficient evidence to suggest an association between mean AS score and changes to A2 programmes in September and it was not possible to analyse results at individual subject level. However, figure 13 would seem to suggest that most changes students made were grade related (82.1% of all who changed at this time). 30 students (categories A and B) either substituted or added subjects in which they obtained a higher grade, while 36 students (categories D, H and I) dropped subjects in which they obtained a lower grade.

These findings may, however, under-state the influence of examination and coursework performance, as students may already have assessed their own performance and likely grade when making choices in June. Furthermore, interviews (Chapter 7) revealed that many students managed their workload by giving more priority to some subjects than others, thus implying that publication of AS grades may have had less importance than self-assessment of what these were likely to be in advance.

5.3.3 Choice of new subjects at AS level

Although certain assumptions are made about prior study, it appears that a high proportion of students (77.4%) chose to study at least one subject at AS level which they had not studied before, with more than a third of all students taking two or more 'new' subjects. Reasons for this were explored in interviews with students (Chapter 7). However, it would appear from figures 15 and 16 that those with lower GCSE scores were more likely to study more new subjects in their first year.

No association is evident between inclusion of new subjects in programmes of study and instability of A2 choices. However, significantly more of those students who left during the first year had included at least one subject at AS level that they had not studied before (88.7% of those leaving, compared with 76.2% of those continuing). It is inappropriate to suggest any causal link because, as stated above, those studying 'new' subjects tended to have lower GCSE scores. Difficulty with level of study is therefore more likely to be a reason for leaving before the second year.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the study of 'new' subjects did have some impact on changes to second year course choices. Thirty-one students (19.1% of all those studying new subjects and changing course choices) who chose in March to continue with one or more 'familiar/traditional' subjects, switched at least one of these by September to a subject they had only studied for the first time at AS level. This compares with only six students (3.7%) switching from 'new' subjects to 'familiar/traditional' ones. Reasons for this were explored in interviews with students (Chapter 7).

5.3.4 Summary of discussion

Key findings from the database are:

- A high degree of instability in A2 course choices
- Although not statistically significant, the degree of choice-change may have been related to the number of AS/6-unit AVCE courses studied, with more subjects giving more flexibility in choice
- Most change in course choice occurred between March/April and June, suggesting that examination and coursework experience may have been significant. Students' own predictions of their performance may have been important in making changes in June.
- Between June and September there is evidence to suggest that AS level results were the greatest influence on choice-change
- A high proportion of students studied 'new' subjects at AS level
- Students who left before the second year were more likely to have included 'new' subjects in their programmes of study. However, these students may simply have found study at AS level too demanding
- Those including 'new' subjects in their programmes of study were more likely to change their course choices to select these in the second year, than to drop them in favour of 'familiar/traditional' subjects

Chapter 6: Questionnaire survey

6.1 Methodology

6.1.1 Objectives

The objectives of the questionnaire survey were to find out:

- whether students had career or higher education aims when they first started AS/AVCE courses in September 2000 and if so, how clear these were
- whether their aims changed or became clearer between September 2000 and January 2002
- why their aims changed or became clearer

As the survey included students' names it was then possible to carry out secondary analysis using information from the database. This level of analysis allowed the existence and strength of associations between the following characteristics to be identified:

- clarity of aim in September 2000 and gender
- clarity of aim in September 2000 and number of AS/AVCE levels studied
- clarity of aim and GCSE score
- clarity of aim and type of subjects studied (ie whether 'new' or 'traditional/familiar')
- change or clarification of aims and gender
- change or clarification of aims and stability/instability of A2 course choice, including type of subject (whether 'new' or 'traditional/familiar') and AS grades

Open questions, inviting students to state reasons for changes or clarification of aims, allowed a frequency tally of the range of responses prior to coding classification (Cohen et. al:2000). Reasons could then be analysed to identify any associations between how clear students' aims were at the start of AS courses, how these changed, and the importance of subject-related concerns, including AS grades.

As well as enabling a large amount of statistical analysis, the questionnaire was also designed to allow categorisation of students into particular types according to their stability or instability in progression aim and course choice. Once this had been done, it would then be possible to identify individuals and invite them to participate in group interviews with other students of similar 'type'.

6.1.2 Benefits and limitations of questionnaires

Although questionnaires can be used to obtain some qualitative data, through open questions, they are not suitable for obtaining detailed, in-depth 'rich' data which is available through methods such as interviews and observations. Respondents often fill them in quickly and give their answers little thought, especially when the survey is not administered personally by the researcher. Particularly where open questions are used, it is difficult sometimes to interpret respondents' meaning.

However, a questionnaire survey is a relatively low cost, efficient means of obtaining information from a large number of respondents. A questionnaire which is well designed is easy to complete and easy to analyse. It is possible to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, depending on the researcher's purposes and the way questions are constructed.

A questionnaire survey of a large population can provide a 'broad-brush' picture within which to situate the detail obtained about a sample by some other method, thereby helping to identify bias and to increase reliability through triangulation. Furthermore, the broad-brush approach may help to clarify issues for further exploration and to identify interesting categories of respondent for follow-up investigation.

6.1.3 Structure of questionnaire and content

As the questionnaire was designed to be administered during the weekly tutorial period, certain conditions needed to be met:

- Personal tutors to be able to understand the purpose of the survey and why it was necessary
- Students to be persuaded that it was worthwhile to participate
- The survey to take as little time as possible
- Instructions and meaning to be as clear as possible to both tutors and students

The questionnaire was designed to fit on to one side of A4 and to take no more than four or five minutes to complete. This had the added advantages that it was cheap to produce and easy to analyse. The final version used is at Appendix II.

The first question was factual, and the second multiple choice with filtering to either question 3 or 4. Questions 3 and 4 also contained filtering, with space for free-flowing answers as appropriate. Students were then asked to print their name and tutor group and to state date of completion. Names and Tutor Groups were needed so that it was possible to enter questionnaire data into the larger database, thus enabling associations between progression aim, course choice and other factors to be teased out for analysis. After piloting an earlier version (Appendix III) I decided to insert a question at the start asking students to state the number of AS levels they opted to study in September 2000. This then enabled me to quickly exclude those who took less than 3 AS levels, without having to publicly exclude them by not giving them the questionnaire at all.

It might have been possible to use a multiple-choice, closed style for questions 3 and 4. This would have speeded up completion time and made analysis simpler. However, I did not want to suggest possible categories to students, as this might have limited the range of their responses and prevented students from explaining which reasons were most important to them. In Cohen et. al.'s words (2000:106), I wanted to analyse data *'inductively rather than using a priori categories'*. I also wished to capture the *'gems' of information that otherwise might not have been caught in the questionnaire'* (Cohen et. al:2000).

6.1.4 Pilot study and resultant changes to questionnaire

The questionnaire was piloted with eight students, drawn from four tutor groups, in

December 2001. These were the same students who participated in a pilot group interview. This was a convenience sample, making use of my relationships with the four staff concerned to identify second year students who would be willing to participate in both the interview and the survey. I made no attempt to stratify the sample, other than to ensure that I had an equal balance of males and females and that all of them had studied at least three AS/AVCE levels. I knew that the questionnaire piloting might be contaminated by the fact that they would have already met me and been involved in a group interview. However, I did not want a different set of students to complete the pilot questionnaire as there was a limited total population to draw from. I also felt that the questionnaire was simple enough for contamination not to be of major concern.

I issued students with the pilot questionnaire and accompanying instructions. Apart from asking them to complete the questionnaire, I also asked the students to give feedback on some of the questions raised by Bell (1993:85):

- How long did it take you to complete?
- Were the instructions clear?
- Were any of the questions unclear or ambiguous? If so, will you say which and why?
- Did you object to answering any of the questions?
- Was the layout of the questionnaire clear/attractive?
- Any comments?

It was apparent from the feedback that the survey took between two and five minutes to complete and that the layout, instructions and covering note were clear and inoffensive. However, there were some problems. Firstly, none of the students ticked the box for 1a (clear aim). One of the students stated that he thought very few students would say they had a clear aim, as 'even if you've decided on your career area, you probably won't know what specific career you want to follow'. In the light of this comment, I decided to change the wording to 'fairly clear'. Even though this was closer to the second category 'rough', I felt that the ranking of the three options as a, b and c would indicate an ordinal scale and might overcome the problem of few students classifying themselves as 'a'.

Two students questioned why I had not allowed the full space available for answers to questions 2 and 3. I felt this was valid criticism and therefore extended the lines on the final version. Finally, one of these students also expressed unease about the lack of anonymity and felt this could limit the response rate. However, I needed to be able to identify students so that I could fully analyse associations with other characteristics. I therefore left this section unchanged. Before my final re-print of the questionnaire I realised that it would be helpful to know how many AS levels students had studied.

6.1.5 Sampling frame, distribution and collection

The questionnaire was intended to be completed by all second year students who had studied at least three AS/6-unit AVCEs. No sampling from the total population was therefore needed. There were two possible ways of distributing it, either by post or via Personal Tutors. The former would have been expensive and probably less likely to elicit a good response. The latter had the advantage of low cost and speed. Tutor groups consist of students who are all in the same year of study, so it was possible for me to distribute batches to second year Personal Tutors with a covering letter explaining the purpose and return mechanism.

I felt that the support of Personal Tutors would be essential in encouraging students to complete the questionnaire. The Director of Student Services agreed to add the survey to the published tutorial programme, so that staff had advance warning and could plan ahead. Instead of producing a covering letter for each student, I devised an invitation which could be read to the whole group (Appendix V). and contained an assurance regarding confidentiality of responses. I felt that students might give the questionnaire more attention if the notice was formally read to them, but ensured that the notice was worded as a request. Instructions on how to return the questionnaire were given in both the memo to Personal Tutors and the notice to students. To make it easy for everyone concerned, I supplied a large envelope to each Tutor, and a box in the staffroom to which batches of completed questionnaires could be returned.

The survey was conducted in the second week of January. Most Tutors returned their envelopes within three or four days. I was able to record returns from individual students on the database and to identify which Tutors had not returned their envelopes. Two weeks later I therefore personally approached the Tutors who had not returned anything, to ask them to do so. At this stage I also compiled a list of students who had not responded and issued this to Tutors with a further batch of blank questionnaires. By 8 February 328 questionnaires had been returned. At this point it was necessary to begin analysis. A further 15 responses were received after this date (10 of these in May!) but these were not included in the findings.

6.1.6 Validity and reliability

In order for results to be valid it was desirable for the questionnaire to be completed by a significant proportion of all second year students in the study although, as Cohen et al. (2000: 105) point out, *'at best we strive to minimize invalidity and maximize validity'*. However, for reliability it was also important that those who participated were representative of all students in terms of their personal characteristics, because of the likelihood *'repeatedly confirmed in practice – that people who do not return questionnaires differ from those who do'* (Moser and Kalton 1971:267-8).

By 8 February 66.9% of all those still in their second year had returned completed questionnaires. There was no significant difference between the gender balance of those who responded and those who did not respond (figure 20).

Figure 20 Gender balance of questionnaire respondents

	Male	Female	Total
Respondents	156 (47.6%)	172 (52.4%)	328
Non-respondents	80 (49.1%)	83 (50.9%)	163
All students	237 (49.3%)	254 (50.7%)	491

$$x^2 = 0.202 \text{ (1 d.f.)} \quad \text{Not significant at 95\% level}$$

However, in other respects there were some significant differences. Figure 21 shows that mean GCSE score was higher for those who did respond, at 5.92, compared with 5.65 for those who did not respond. However, the difference was less than half a grade.

Figure 21 Mean GCSE score of questionnaire respondents

	3 to 4.59	4.6 to 6.0	6.01 to 8	Mean score	Total
Sample (data not available for 6 students)	14 (4.4%)	174 (54.0%)	134 (41.6%)	5.92	322
Non-sample (data not available for 4 students)	16 (10%)	95 (59.8%)	48 (30.2%)	5.646	159
All students continuing into 2 nd year (data not available for 10 students)	30 (6.2%)	270 (56.1%)	181 (37.6%)	5.84	481

$$x^2 = 9.65 \text{ (2 d.f.)} \quad \text{Significant difference at 99.9\% level}$$

The number of AS levels studied was also higher, as shown in figure 22.

Figure 22 Number of AS levels studied by respondents at April of 1st year

	3 AS levels	4 AS levels	5+ AS levels	Total
Respondents	12 (3.7%)	106 (32.3%)	210 (64.0%)	328
Non-respondents	13 (8.0%)	74 (45.4%)	76 (46.6%)	163
All students continuing into 2 nd year	25 (5.1%)	182 (37.1%)	284 (57.8%)	491

$$x^2 = 14.483 \text{ (2 d.f.)} \quad \text{Significant difference at 99.95\% level}$$

Students who responded to the questionnaire survey therefore had higher levels of achievement at GCSE, and had studied more subjects at AS level. It could be that these students were more regular attenders at weekly tutorials and were therefore more likely to be given the questionnaire to complete. However, if I had continued to press students to return more questionnaires, it is likely that the achieved sample could have been even more different from the overall population, as the 'hard-core' of students not attending tutorials, and not receiving the questionnaire, might well have been those with lower achievement levels at GCSE.

Results from the questionnaire survey must therefore be interpreted carefully. Findings which were associated with levels of attainment at GCSE or AS level, were likely to be biased. Reliability of the findings also depends heavily on students' memories and honesty, as they were being asked to state the clarity of their progression aims in September 2000 at a date 17 months later. The issue of time-lag could not be addressed within the short span of the study. It is also not possible to know whether Personal Tutors influenced responses in any way.

6.1.7 Methods of analysis

The first stages in analysis involved checking for completeness and accuracy (Cohen et al: 2000). Three questionnaires had to be amended as students had answered both questions 3 and 4. This was done by examining question 2 and deleting the inappropriate response.

Students who returned a questionnaire were coded as such in the database, to enable comparisons to be made with non-respondents. All data for questions 1 and 2 were entered directly into the database, making it easy to analyse these in relation to other characteristics such as changes to course choice, gender, number of AS levels studied, AS grades, type of subjects studied. If students answered 'no' to either questions 3 or 4, this was also quick and easy to record and analyse.

Students answering 'yes' to questions 3 or 4 were required to give unstructured answers in the form of reasons. A draft coding frame was constructed based on expected answers, and when expected responses were encountered, these were coded according to the frame. The number of responses falling into each code was tallied. Sometimes responses were vague, for example *'the subjects I took'*. It was therefore necessary to amalgamate any answer relating to subjects or courses within one code. When an unexpected response occurred only once, this was coded as 'other'. Some useful information was therefore potentially lost through coding (Oppenheim: 1992). However, as Cohen et. al. (2000) observe, it is unlikely that responses will be so similar that they can be tightly aggregated. The content of answers to questions 3 and 4 was further analysed to identify particular themes and produce verbatim quotations to illustrate students' thinking.

Although it became apparent that the achieved sample was different in some respects to the total population, I decided not to apply weightings to the statistical analysis, but simply to acknowledge bias when discussing findings (Oppenheim: 1992). In this way I could present more transparency in analysis.

6.1.8 Summary of methods

- The questionnaire survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data, which were analysed statistically and by content
- The response rate was good, at 66.9%, but the achieved sample was biased in favour of those with higher GCSE scores and those who had studied more AS/AVCE subjects
- There was heavy reliance on students' memory and perception
- Problems of validity and reliability need to be taken into account in interpretation of findings. However, interviewing (Chapter 7) acts as a method of triangulation, and all statistical data are subjected to significance testing with results accepted as statistically significant only if their chi-square value is at least 95%.

6.2 Questionnaire survey findings

6.2.1 Existence of progression aims

Seventy-eight percent of all questionnaire respondents stated that they had a fairly clear or rough career/HE aim at the start of their AS level/AVCE courses (figure 23).

Figure 23 Clarity of progression aim at start of AS/AVCE levels

Fairly clear aim	128 (39%)
Rough aim	128 (39%)
No idea	72 (22%)
Total	328

Figure 24 indicates that clarity of progression aim was not significantly linked to gender, although marginally more females (41.9%) said they had a fairly clear aim than males (35.9%) and slightly fewer females than males had no idea of their progression aim.

Figure 24 Clarity of progression aim at start of AS/AVCE levels analysed by gender

	Male	Female	All students
Fairly clear aim	56 (35.9%)	72 (41.9%)	128 (39%)
Rough aim	64 (41.0%)	64 (37.2%)	128 (39%)
No idea	36 (23.1%)	36 (20.9%)	72 (22%)
Total	156	172	328

$\chi^2 = 1.22$ (2 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

The number of respondents studying three AS/6-unit AVCE levels was small, at only 12, and this makes it difficult to analyse any association between clarity of progression aim and number of courses studied per student. However, figure 25 shows that although there is no statistically significant association, clarity of progression aim appeared to be greater among those who studied more AS/AVCE levels.

Figure 25 Clarity of progression aim at start analysed by number of AS/AVCE levels studied

	Fairly clear aim	Rough aim	No idea	All students
5+ AS/AVCE levels	86 (41.0%)	86 (41.0%)	38 (18.0%)	210 (64.0%)
4 AS/AVCE levels	40 (37.7%)	36 (34.0%)	30 (28.3%)	106 (32.3%)
3 AS/AVCE levels	2 (16.7%)	6 (50.0%)	4 (33.3%)	12 (3.7%)
All students	128 (39%)	128 (39%)	72 (22.0%)	328 (100%)

$\chi^2 = 7.09$ (4 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

An analysis of GCSE score by clarity of progression aim reveals that the mean GCSE score of those with no aim is below the mean for all students continuing into the second year. The mean GCSE score of those with at least a rough aim is above the mean. The differences are not statistically significant, however, as shown in figure 26 (using z-scores to standardize data).

Figure 26 Progression aim in September 2000 analysed by GCSE score

	Fairly clear	Rough	No idea	All students continuing to 2 nd year
GCSE score	5.96	5.99	5.74	5.84 (S.D. 0.859693)
z-score	0.02	0.023	-0.02	

6.2.2 Stability and instability of progression aims

To analyse the stability of progression aims, it is necessary to categorise students according to their stated level of certainty at the start of the first year.

6.2.2.1 Analysis of students who had a **fairly clear** progression aim at the start of AS/AVCE levels

One hundred and twenty-eight students stated that they had a fairly clear career/HE aim in September 2000. 109 (85.2%) of these said that they still had the same aim 17 months later, while 19 students (14.8%) had changed their aim.

When the A2 course choices of this group of students are analysed, there are some clear differences. Figure 27 shows that significantly more of those students who changed their course choices also changed their progression aim. Similarly, significantly more of those who did not change their course choices maintained the same progression aim. In this group of students there would therefore seem to be a strong association between changes in course choices and changes in progression aims.

Figure 27 Changeability of progression aim analysed by stability of course choice – students who had a fairly clear progression aim in September 2000

	Still same progression aim	Changed progression aim	All students
Changed A2 choices	42 (38.5%)	12 (63.1%)	54 (42.2%)
Did not change A2 choices	67 (61.5%)	7 (36.9%)	74 (57.8%)
Total	109	19	128 (100%)

$\chi^2 = 5.0$ (1 d.f.) Significant at 95% level

An examination of those students who kept the same progression aim, but changed their A2 course choices, reveals that 25 of the 42 (59.5%) had changed the number of subjects selected, rather than switched between subjects, suggesting that key subjects related to career choice remained in place. Most of these students had dropped a choice (18), while

seven students had added a subject. A further 10 students switched between 'traditional/familiar' subjects.

There is no significant gender difference in stability of progression aims within students who had a fairly clear aim in September 2000, as shown in figure 28.

Figure 28 Students with a fairly clear progression aim in September 2000 analysed by gender

	Male	Female	All students
Changed aim 17 months later	7 (12.5%)	12 (16.7%)	19 (14.8%)
Same aim 17 months later	49 (87.5%)	60 (83.3%)	109 (85.2%)
Total	56	72	128

$\chi^2 = 0.516$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

6.2.2.2 Analysis of students who had a **rough** progression aim at the start of AS/AVCE levels

One hundred and twenty-eight students stated that they had a rough career/HE aim in September 2000. 110 (85.9%) of these said that they had clarified their aim 17 months later, while the aims of 18 students (14.1%) were no clearer.

Figure 29 indicates that when the A2 course choices of this group of students are analysed, there is no significant association between clarification of progression aim and instability of course choice.

Figure 29 Changeability of progression aim analysed by stability of course choice - students who had a rough progression aim in September 2000

	Clarified progression aim	No clarification of progression aim	All students
Changed A2 choices	50 (45.5%)	9 (50.0%)	59 (46.1%)
Did not change A2 choices	60 (54.5%)	9 (50.0%)	69 (53.9%)
Total	110	18	128

$\chi^2 = 0.30$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

There is no gender difference within this group of students in terms of clarification of progression aims, as shown in figure 30.

Figure 30 Students with a rough progression aim in September 2000 analysed by gender

	Male	Female	All students
Clarified career aim 17 months later	55 (85.9%)	55 (85.9%)	110 (85.9%)
No clearer career aim 17 months later	9 (14.1%)	9 (14.1%)	18 (14.1%)
Total	64	64	128

$\chi^2 = 0$ (1 d.f.) Observed and expected are identical

6.2.2.3 Analysis of students who had **no idea** regarding their progression aim at the start of AS/AVCE levels

Seventy-two students stated that they had no idea regarding career/HE aim in September 2000. 48 (66.7%) of these said that they had clarified their aim 17 months later, while 24 students (33.3%) still had no idea.

Figure 31 shows that there is no significant association between clarification of progression aim and instability of course choice in this group of students.

Figure 31 Changeability of progression aim analysed by stability of course choice - students who had no idea of progression aim in September 2000

	Clarified progression aim	Still no progression aim	All students
Changed A2 choices	22 (45.8%)	11 (45.8%)	33 (45.8%)
Did not change A2 choices	26 (54.25)	13 (54.2%)	39 (54.2%)
Total	48	24	72

$\chi^2 = 0.16$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

However, it is interesting to note that there is a significant gender difference in clarification of progression aim within this group. While 77.8% of females had clarified their aim by

January 2002, this was true for only 55.6% of males. However, the total number of students in this group is small, with 36 males and 36 females.

Figure 32 Students who had no idea of progression aim in September 2000 analysed by gender

	Male	Female	All students
Clarified aim 17 months later	20 (55.6%)	28 (77.8%)	48 (66.7%)
Still no aim 17 months later	16 (44.4%)	8 (22.2%)	24 (33.3%)
Total	36	36	72

$$x^2 = 4.06 \text{ (1 d.f.)} \quad \text{Significant at 95\% level}$$

The database was analysed to see whether GCSE score was a more significant factor than gender within this group. Results are shown in figure 33 and indicate that there is no significant association between clarification of aim and GCSE scores when compared with the expected GCSE scores for males and females who continued to the second year. However, whilst the difference in mean GCSE score is small between males and females in those who clarified their aim (0.32), it is much greater between those who had not (1.08). Furthermore, the difference in mean score between males who had clarified or not clarified their aim is 0.3, whilst between females it is 1.7.

Figure 33 Students who had no idea of progression aim in September 2000 analysed by gender and mean GCSE score

	Mean GCSE score		
	Clarified aim	Still no idea	All students
Male	5.72	5.42	5.64
Female	6.04	4.34	5.94

$$x^2 = 0.887 \text{ (1 d.f.)} \quad \text{Not significant at 95\% level}$$

6.2.3 Stability and instability of progression aims for students including 'new' subjects in programmes of study

Of those responding to the survey, 252 had studied 'new' subjects at AS level. Their responses were analysed to see whether there was any association between the study of 'new' subjects and clarity of progression aims at the start of the first year. Figure 34 shows that there was no association, with little difference between those studying 'new' subjects and those studying 'familiar/traditional' subjects.

Figure 34 Clarity of progression aims in September 2000 analysed by whether students included 'new' subjects in programmes of study

	Students studying 'new' subjects	Students not studying 'new' subjects	All students
Fairly clear aim	98 (39%)	30 (39.5%)	128 (39%)
Rough aim	96 (38%)	32 (42.1%)	128 (39%)
No idea	58 (23%)	14 (18.4%)	72 (22%)
Total	252	76	328

$$x^2 = 0.80 \text{ (2 d.f.)} \quad \text{Not significant at 95\% level}$$

Analysis was then carried out to see if students studying 'new' subjects were more or less likely to clarify or change their progression aim during the first 17 months of sixth form study. It is clear from figures 35, 36 and 37 that there is no association between the inclusion of 'new' subjects in first year programmes of study and changeability of progression aims.

Figure 35 'New' subjects and changeability of progression aims – students who had a fairly clear progression aim in September 2000

	Students studying 'new' subjects	Students not studying 'new' subjects	All students
Changed aim	16 (16.3%)	3 (10.0%)	19 (14.8%)
Kept same aim	82 (83.7%)	27 (90.0%)	109 (85.2%)
Total	98	30	128

$$x^2 = 0.97 \text{ (1 d.f.)} \quad \text{Not significant at 95\% level}$$

Figure 36 'New' subjects and changeability of progression aims – students who had a rough progression aim in September 2000

	Students studying 'new' subjects	Students not studying 'new' subjects	All students
Clarified aim	84 (87.5%)	26 (81.25%)	110 (85.9%)
Aim no clearer	12 (12.5%)	6 (18.75%)	18 (14.1%)
Total	96	32	128

$$x^2 = 0.42 \text{ (1 d.f.)} \quad \text{Not significant at 95\% level}$$

Figure 37 'New' subjects and changeability of progression aims – students who had no idea of their progression aim in September 2000

	Students studying 'new' subjects	Students not studying 'new' subjects	All students
Clarified aim	39 (67.2%)	9 (64.3%)	48 (66.7%)
Still no idea of aim	19 (32.8%)	5 (35.7%)	24 (33.3%)
Total	58	14	72

$\chi^2 = 0.11$ (1 d.f.) Not significant at 95% level

6.2.4 Reasons for changes in progression aims

Open questions allowed students to give reasons for changes or clarification of progression aims. No pre-coded categories were given, so students could give any relevant reasons, and any number of these. Students who said they had fairly clear aims in September were asked to give reasons for any changes to these. This group consisted of 19 students. Students who said they had rough aims or no idea of their intentions in September 2000 were asked to give reasons for clarification of aims. 158 students fell into these categories. Overall reasons for changes or clarification are given in figure 38. Some students gave multiple reasons. Figures 38 and 39 therefore show the number of times each reason was given.

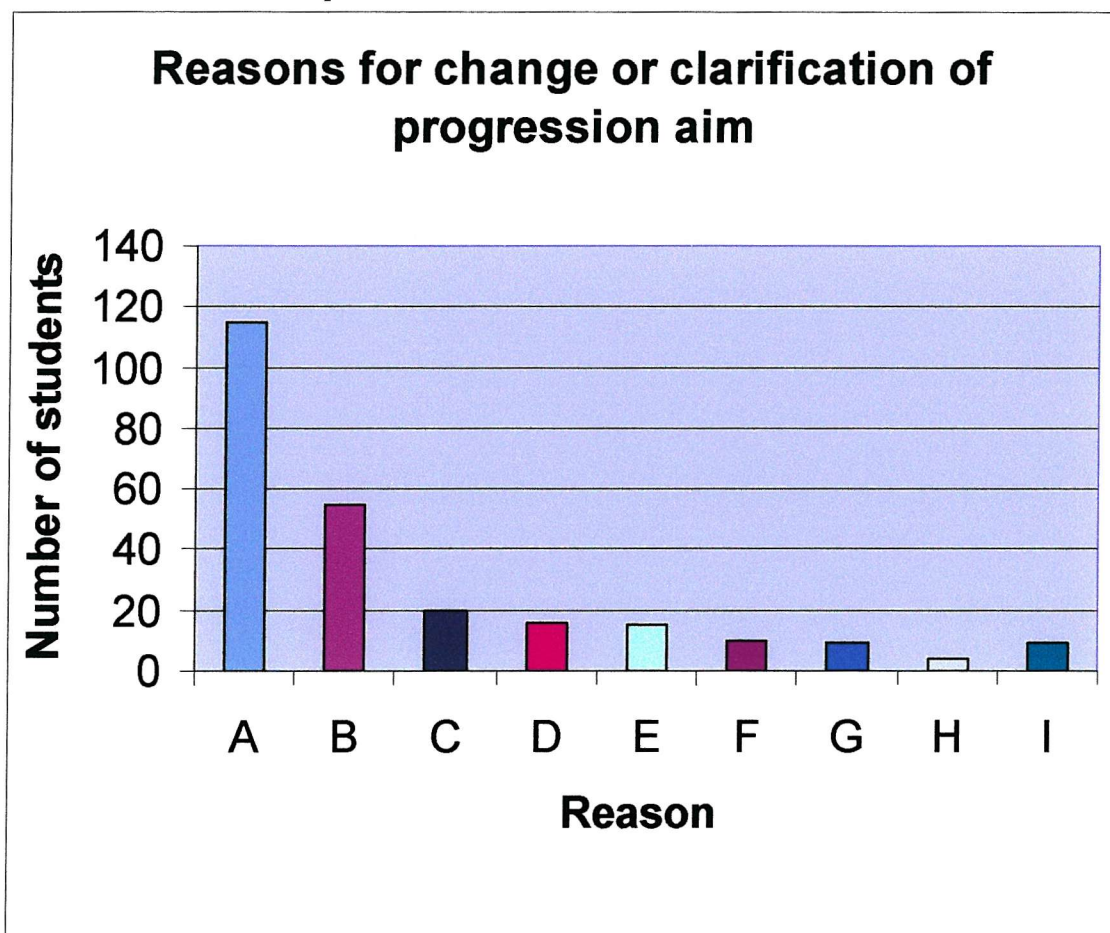
Figure 38 Number of times reasons were given for change or clarification of progression aims

Reason	Number	Reason	Number
Subject-related	115	Advice from family	10
Careers/HE research	55	Advice from friends	9
Careers interview	20	Work experience	4
AS grades	16	Other	9
Advice from tutors	15		

Key to figures 39-42

- | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| A Subject-related | D AS grades | G Advice from friends |
| B Careers/HE research | E Advice from tutors | H Work Experience |
| C Careers interview | F Advice from family | I Other |

Figure 39 Reasons given for change or clarification of progression aim since September 2000



6.2.4.1 Subject-related reasons for change mainly made reference to enjoyment of particular subjects. The following extracts are typical.

'Discovering which of the subjects I was studying I found most enjoyable and was best at. I knew I wanted to go into higher education but now I know what I want to study'

'As my courses progressed, I realised more clearly what my strengths and weaknesses are and what I get pleasure from and therefore that is why I have chosen to pursue photography at university'

'Mainly the enjoyment of certain subjects over others. I would like to continue studying subjects I am interested in'

'How much I have enjoyed, and been good at, a subject at A level has influenced my decision to study it further at university'

'Geography coursework in Weymouth gave me interest in marine management'

'Enjoyment of the subjects has helped me decide what I want to do'

'I have thought about what subjects I enjoy and have looked at what courses and careers these could lead to'

Other students had clearly gone through a process of ruling out their least favourite subjects.

'I've grown to love two of my A2's, hate one, and Biology's useless without chemistry'

'Ruled out one option because I couldn't stand the subjects, and kept my other because I loved the subject'

'I realised accounting was really boring and law was better'

The opportunity to study 'new' subjects at AS level had been an important influence on some students' changing progression aims.

'I knew that I wanted to go to university but was undecided exactly what I wanted to study. What has helped me to decide, I think, was simply studying different, non-compulsory subjects and seeing and experiencing the variety of subjects open to me'

'Studying a previously unknown AS level and exploring other paths. Basic enjoyment of the subject'

'Taking an extra AS level that I had never done before'

'Taking media at college. I didn't have the option of taking media at school and liked it when I took it at AS'

'After taking media studies as an AS, I found it to be something I was passionate about'

There was very little difference in the proportion of students citing subject-related reasons for changes or clarification of aims when analysed by whether they had fairly clear, rough or no idea of intentions in September 2000. Between 60 and 68% of students in each group gave subject-related reasons for changes. Analysis of reasons for each of the three groups is given in figures 40-42.

Figure 40 Reasons for changes to progression aims given by students who said they had a fairly clear aim in September 2000

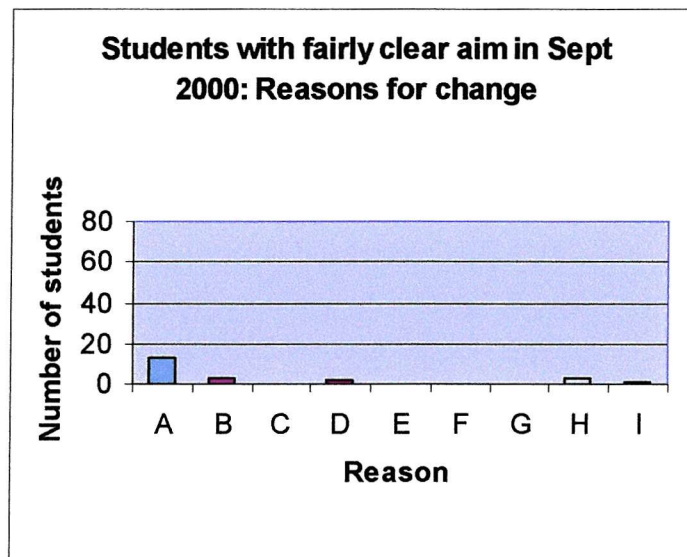


Figure 41 Reasons for changes to progression aims given by students who said they had a rough aim in September 2000

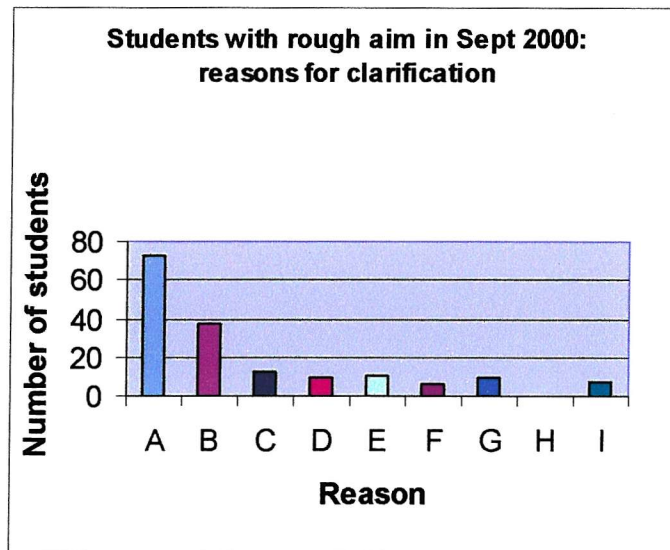
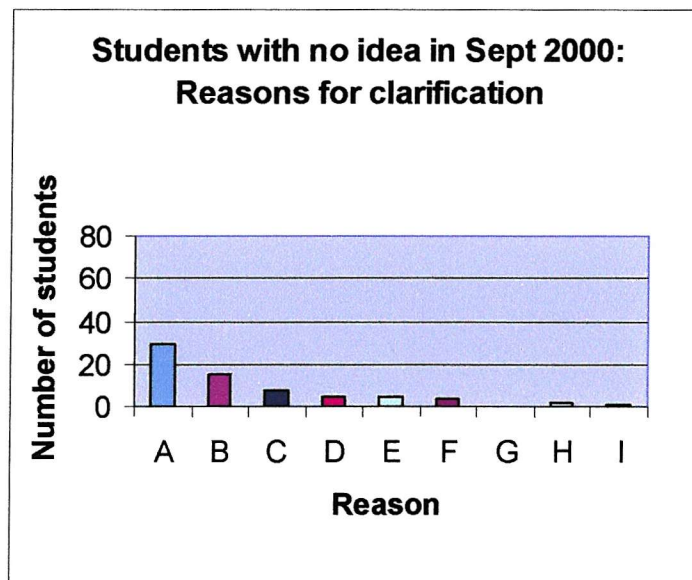


Figure 42 Reasons for clarification of progression aims given by students who said they had a no idea of aim in September 2000



6.2.4.2 Careers research and interviews had been a deciding factor for many students, including research into university courses. Careers interviews had been very important to 20 students, particularly when making higher education choices.

'The careers advisor has helped me to take a look at the option of university. I have also learned that uni has a great importance to any career option I decide to take'

'I knew I wanted to go to university but was unsure of the exact course I wanted to take. As time dragged on I began getting worried I was dragging behind so I went to see the careers adviser. Through several meetings with her she helped me choose my course'

'Career Advisor has been of great help to me, who helped me decide in what direction should I lead my career'

6.2.4.3 AS grades were an important influence on progression for a total of 16 students. In some cases this was because they were higher than expected.

'I have now decided to apply to university. In the first year I had ruled this opportunity out, but because my AS results were surprisingly higher than I expected I have changed my mind'

However, the majority of comments show that grades were one of several factors taken into account, and that consideration of results was secondary to enjoyment of subjects.

'It depended on which subjects I most enjoyed and partly my AS results in this subject. I knew I wanted to go to university but I didn't know what I wanted to study'

'My AS level results helped me to decide as well as how much I enjoyed each of my subjects'

'I didn't do business studies at GCSE and when I enjoyed it and did well at AS level I decided I wanted to study it at university'

6.2.4.4 Advice from others was significant for a number of students. A total of 15 students cited the importance of advice from tutors, while 9 valued advice from friends and 10 from family members. In all cases advice from others was given as just one influencing factor.

'The subjects that I am taking, along with what other friends at university have said about what they study and how good it is'

6.2.4.5 Uncertainty continued to feature for some students. Several indicated that although their aims were no longer the same as those they had in September 2000, they had not necessarily clarified. These students were still trying to reach a decision about their futures.

'I chose very academic subjects but realised recently that I want to do music, but I don't know what to do about it, whether to do music or IT or media!!'

'Although I am still considering my previous aim (languages at HE) I am now hoping to do a third year of AS levels and further explore my options'

6.3 Discussion of questionnaire survey results

6.3.1 Existence of progression aims

More than three-quarters of all respondents had some idea of their post-18 progression aim when they started their first year at the college. However, it must be acknowledged that the sample was biased towards those with higher GCSE scores. If more students with lower GCSE scores had responded, the overall existence of progression aims may have been less pronounced, as figure 26 suggests that those with no idea regarding their post-18 progression had marginally lower GCSE scores.

Although 78% of respondents said they had at least a rough aim, only 39% claimed that this was fairly clear. When this is considered alongside the fact that 44.3% of all students changed their A2 course choices between March and September 2001, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that the 'AS year' gives students a chance to explore options and keep them open for much longer than in the pre-2000 A level curriculum.

6.3.2 Stability and instability of progression aims

6.3.2.1 Students with fairly clear progression aims

Students who stated they had a fairly clear progression aim in September 2000 showed a high degree of stability, with 85.2% maintaining the same aim through to January 2002. There were no significant gender differences in stability or instability of aim. In spite of their stability in career aim, however, more than a third made changes to their A2 choices during the first year. When the course changes of this group are analysed in detail, however, it is apparent that most of them were changes to the number of courses, rather than switches between subjects.

Significantly more students who changed their aim also changed their A2 course choices, suggesting that for these students either A2 course choice is influenced by changing progression aim, or course choice at A2 influences career decisions. However, the small number of students in this group (12) makes it very difficult to draw conclusions regarding any association.

In summary, therefore, it appears that students who commenced their AS studies with a fairly clear progression aim were likely to maintain this, although during their first year they may have been undecided about the number of A2 courses to undertake.

6.3.2.2 Students with rough progression aims

A high proportion of the 128 students who said that their progression aim in September 2000 was rough had clarified their aim by January 2002 (85.9%). Of those who had clarified their aim, marginally more had kept the same A2 course choices, but the difference is not significant. There were no gender differences in stability or instability of aim.

In summary, therefore, students who commence their AS studies with a rough progression aim were likely to clarify this by January of the second year. There was no obvious association between clarification of aim and stability in A2 course choice.

6.3.2.3 Students with no idea of progression aim

Sixty-seven percent of the 72 students who stated that they had no idea regarding progression aim in September 2000 had clarified their aim by January of the second year. This is a lower proportion than for students who had a rough aim. Like students with a rough aim, there was no obvious association between clarification of aim and stability in A2 course choice amongst students who had no idea of aim.

However, unlike students who had at least a rough progression aim, there is a significant gender difference in clarification of aim (figure 33). A higher proportion of females clarified their aim (77.8%) than did males (55.6%). When mean GCSE grades are compared for males and females who clarified or did not clarify their aims, it may tentatively be concluded that girls who have no idea of their progression aim when they commence AS level studies, and who have a low GCSE score, were less likely to clarify their aim by January of the second year. Conversely, girls who did not have a progression aim, but had a high GCSE score, were more likely to clarify their aim. For boys the difference was much less marked.

6.3.3 Stability and instability of progression aims for students including 'new' subjects in programmes of study

Whether or not students included 'new' subjects in their first year programmes of study appeared to have no association, either with clarity of progression aims at the start of the year, or with the degree to which these changed by January of the second year.

6.3.4 Reasons for changes in progression aims

The most frequently occurring reasons given for change or clarification of progression aim were subject-related. 115 students gave reasons of this type, with most of them placing emphasis on how enjoyment of particular subjects had influenced their choice of post-18 progression. Many students had chosen university courses on this basis, or because they had ruled out courses in subjects they did not enjoy at AS or A2 level. However, subject-enjoyment was not given as a reason for pursuing a particular career – most students seemed only to consider subject-enjoyment in relation to higher education choices.

The study of new subjects at AS level had helped a number of students to clarify their aims. However, since students who had not changed their progression aims were not asked to give reasons for this, it is not possible to state how many students might have felt the same about 'traditional/familiar' subjects.

The second and third most commonly cited reasons for change or clarification were related to careers research or interviews. However, the significance of careers guidance interviews for 20 students is interesting, as there is evidence from research literature (Davies:1999; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001) that this is not often the case. There may be a number of reasons for this, for example the skills of the Careers Advisor, the influence of Tutors in encouraging take-up of interviews etc, but these are not explored in the study.

AS grades were an important influencing factor for 16 students, but only as one of a number of considerations. It is more likely that grades influenced course choice than progression aim, as indicated in Section 5.3.2.

Advice from others played a part in the decisions of 34 students. However, this is probably understated and relates only to more direct forms of advice and discussion. Previous research by Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) stresses the importance of social processes from a very early age in forming young people's ideas of suitable careers. The family is shown to be a particularly strong influence on choice of pathways. These more covert and longer-term forms of advice may not be recognised by students themselves.

Finally, there is evidence from some students of the difficulty they face in coming to decisions about future pathways. Whilst their aims changed in the 17 months under consideration, they still had not settled on a post-18 destination. Many previous studies (Ball et. al:2000; Bloomer and Hodkinson:1997; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:1997; Unwin and Welling:2001) have pointed to the fluidity of students' career choices as they seek to identify themselves and their place in the world around them.

6.3.5 Summary of discussion

Most students had at least a rough progression aim when they commenced sixth form study in September 2000. By January 2002 only 24 (7.3% of respondents) claimed still to have no idea of their future progression, although there is evidence that others were still not finally decided. However, it is possible that more non-respondents might have been uncertain of their aim, as respondents had an above average GCSE score.

Students who had the clearest aims at the start generally maintained these, but 42 of these students still made changes to their A2 course choices, often changing the number of courses selected. Although the database showed that 44.3% of all students changed their A2 course choices, there is little evidence to suggest that this was linked to changing progression aims.

The study of 'new' subjects was not statistically associated with clarity or change in progression aims, and neither was gender, except among girls who had no idea of progression aim in September 2000. Girls who had low GCSE scores had more difficulty formulating an aim.

According to the reasons given by students for change or clarification of progression aim, the most important factor was enjoyment (or not) of particular subjects. This was most important when choosing higher education courses. For some students there was an association with the study of 'new' subjects, which open up different opportunities to those previously considered.

However, given that the database showed no link between change or clarification of progression aim and instability in A2 course choices, this could suggest that changes to progression aim occurred before students made their preliminary choice of A2 courses in March/April of the first year. As will be seen in Chapter 7, students do appear to make fairly early decisions about which AS/AVCE courses they do, or do not enjoy, and this could bring about a speedy change in progression aim. If this was the case the results of the study would show a change or clarification of progression aim, but stability in course choice from March/April to September. However, the fact that there is considerable instability in course choice suggests that 'key' subjects which are associated with the new progression aim remain unchanged from March/April to September, while 'peripheral' subjects, chosen for other reasons such as AS grades, are more likely to change.

The significance of advice from 'others' (particularly the Careers Advisor and family members) and of the wider context in which students live their lives, cannot be over-stated, however. Chapter 7 reveals the importance of social processes in helping students to form self-identities and decisions about the future. Quantitative data can only highlight part of the picture and suggest associations which need further exploration through qualitative means.

Chapter 7: Interviews

7.1 Methodology

7.1.1 Objectives

Group interviews were planned and designed with the following objectives:

- To explore in-depth students' underlying reasons for changes in A2 course choices and progression aims
- To test theories, already emerging from database and questionnaire findings, by gaining students' perspectives on:
 - Reasons for choice of AS levels, especially 'new' subjects
 - Reasons for switching between A2 choices of 'familiar/traditional' subjects and 'new' subjects
 - Factors influencing changes to course choice and progression aim, particularly self-assessment of performance on AS courses, AS results, careers advice and research, advice from others
 - The particular nature of subject-related reasons for changes to progression aim (eg intrinsic enjoyment of subject content, teaching/learning methods, relationships with tutors)
- To increase reliability of findings by triangulating quantitative data

7.1.2 Benefits and limitations of interviews

The aim of conducting interviews is to gain information on the perspectives, understandings and meanings constructed by people regarding the events and experiences of their lives (Grbich 1999:85). The information gathered from interviewing is generally much richer in detail and depth than that obtained from questionnaire surveys, as the interview is '*a shared, negotiated and dynamic social moment*' (Cohen et. al. 2000:122).

As Brown and Dowling (1998:69) point out '*Questionnaires are not always good for exploring how people think or how people construct meanings*'.

The more open the structure and style of an interview, the more it can be regarded as a naturalistic method which allows issues, opinions and concerns to emerge, free from the constraints of pre-coded assumptions on the part of the interviewer. However, most interviews are managed by the interviewer who sets the agenda, probes deeper into issues of interest, and records and interprets the data. The problem is aptly summarized by Wilson (1996) who states '*Less-structured methods minimize procedural reactivity and allow the freer exploration of respondents' meanings and beliefs. They do this at the possible expense of reliability.*' Group interviews are more difficult to structure, but their main advantage is in allowing a wide range of responses. The interviewer has less control over discussion but the issues and concerns arising may help to focus the research findings in a way which cannot be achieved as easily by other methods.

Bias can enter into the research method through the role and influence of the interviewer. My own research design was influenced by that of others such as Martinez and Munday (1998), and Hodgson and Spours (2001) working in the field of post-16 research, whose findings are based on extensive interviews with young people, and whose interpretation is founded in narrative analysis. A common justification for this approach is that the technique allows the 'researched' to speak for themselves, but as Scott and Usher (1999: 17) point out '*the researcher hides under the cover of those 'empowered' voices whilst doing the empowering*'. The voices of my interviewees are filtered through my own perceptions and assumptions, and are subject to my own interpretive self.

7.1.3 Sampling methods

In order to discover any links between changing career aspirations and choices of A2 courses it was helpful to identify categories of students from the questionnaire survey and from the college data on course preferences. If these criterion groups could then be grouped and interviewed together it might reveal whether there were any common patterns

in their processes of decision-making which differentiated them from other types of student. In this way any links between AS experiences and changing career aspirations could be teased out for analysis.

The process for categorising interview groups is shown in Figure 43. Once students fitting each group were identified from the database a sample of four students was taken, two male and two female. Individuals were randomly selected from the database using their enrolment number. The type of sampling used was therefore stratified random sampling – a probabilistic technique whereby elements of a population are divided into non-overlapping groups (Schofield 1996:28). It was not, however, designed to be a proportionate sample, as some of the overall categories contained more students than others. The chosen group size was four as this could be evenly split between male and female (potentially avoiding gender bias or domination in discussion).

Figure 43 Sampling process for group interviews

No idea of progression aim in Sept 2000				At least some idea of progression aim in Sept 2000			
Still no idea of aim in January 2002		Clearer idea of aim in January 2002		Same aim in January 2002		Aim changed or no clearer in January 2002	
Changed choice of A levels <i>Group 1</i>	Did not change choice of A levels <i>Group 2</i>	Changed choice of A levels <i>Group 5</i>	Did not change choice of A levels <i>Group 6</i>	Changed choice of A levels <i>Group 7</i>	Did not change choice of A levels <i>Group 8</i>	Changed choice of A levels <i>Group 3</i>	Did not change choice of A levels <i>Group 4</i>

7.1.4 Invitation to interview and problems arising

Once groups had been selected a schedule was drawn up with one group to be interviewed during each academic week between 28 February and 2 May. Sequencing of the groups was determined so that those with the least clear aim were to be interviewed first, as I wanted to capture their thoughts before these changed. I was limited to interviewing only

once a week as I needed to use the weekly tutorial slot when all students would, theoretically, be available.

I selected my sample and gained permission to send a letter home to each student (Appendix VI), explaining what my research was about, the participation I sought, and arrangements for the interview. I explained that I wished to tape-record the discussion but that only I would listen to it. A consent form was appended for return. To make things simple I arranged for an envelope to be held at the College's Reception so that students could hand in replies on their way in or out of the building. I also contacted Personal Tutors to obtain permission for students to miss the relevant tutorial.

Every student was contacted at least two weeks in advance so that I had time to find a substitute if consent was not forthcoming. Each week I checked my return envelope for replies, but the response rate was disappointingly low. If students had not replied within a week of their scheduled date I sent a note via their Personal Tutor to ask whether they wished to participate. I also managed to find most students in person by waiting for them at the end of lessons. Only four students told me that did not wish to take part.

In practice, however, a total of only 19 students arrived for interview, with four groups of three, three groups of two, and one student interviewed individually. I was not contacted by any of the students who had indicated willingness and then failed to arrive. Reasons for non-attendance are therefore not known.

7.1.5 Achieved sample

It was not only in terms of number of interviewees that the achieved sample differed from design. I also found on questioning that only eight of the students met the criteria for the group for which they had been selected. Figure 44 shows the mis-match between students interviewed and group criteria. As a result I had to modify each interview guide on the day in order to match student characteristics.

Figure 44 Match between sample design and achieved sample

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of students who arrived on day	1	3	3	3	2	2	2	3
Number of students who fitted group on day	0	0	2	3	0	0	2	1
Number of students interviewed who fitted criteria	0	0	2	6	1	2	5	3

It is clear from figures 43 and 44 that far more students who had at least some idea of progression aim in September 2000 were interviewed than those who had no idea (ratio 16:3). Eight of the students had changed their choice of A2 courses and 11 had kept the same choices.

No students were interviewed who had no idea of progression aim in September 2000 and who still had no progression aim. This was because when being interviewed, the 4 students who should have met this criterion said that they had now clarified their aim. This was partly due to the time-lag between questionnaire completion and interview (five to six weeks) and partly due to deeper reflection when probing questions were asked.

Eight males were interviewed and 11 females. The mean GCSE score of interviewees was 5.84, compared with a year group mean of 5.79. Number of AS levels taken in June 2001 is shown in figure 45. Full details of all interviewees are given at Appendix VII.

Figure 45 Number of AS levels taken in June 2001 by interviewees

Number of AS/AVCE levels	Number of students
5	11
4	6
3	2

The achieved sample therefore differed significantly from design and this must be taken into account in interpretation of findings. However, there is reasonable representation of those who changed A2 course choices and those who did not, and only five of the sample had kept the same progression aim. Reasons for changes to course choice and progression aim could still therefore be explored in depth with a range of students.

7.1.6 Choice of type and format for interview

The sampling method was intended to lead to 'focused' group interviews. Cohen et al (2000: 290) state that '*the distinctive feature of the focused interview is the prior analysis by the researcher of the situation in which subjects have been involved*'. This enables the interviewer to test hypotheses or focus on apparently significant factors. In the case of the eight groups for this study, each interview was planned to start by testing assumptions based on data already identified for each student. Thus each interview would contain differences in the sequence and content of the questions asked. The schedule of questions is given at Appendix VIII. It will be seen from this that two sets of questions would be used with each group.

It was when testing assumptions at the start of each interview that it became apparent that a number of students did not meet the criteria for intended group. Questioning therefore proceeded using a 'guided' style, having a loose structure but allowing a fairly '*freewheeling discussion*' (Powney and Watts, 1987:102). This had always been the intention, but the 'guide' had to be used with intuition and flexibility. The choice of interview format was influenced by review of the literature of post-16 decision-making in education. Hodgson and Spours (2001:4), who undertook one of the first reviews of Curriculum 2000, argue strongly that the complexity of the learner's experience can only be understood by letting their voices be heard '*We argue that the learner's experience is a valid and under-utilised source of evidence in a reform process which depends so much on the curriculum choices they make.*'

Group interviews were chosen for their practical advantages, including the opportunity to discuss the issues with a greater number of students within the time constraints, and with as little disruption as possible to normal college activities. It could, of course, be argued that it would have been quicker still to send out a more detailed questionnaire, but this would not have yielded the rich data obtainable from interviews. Furthermore, group interviews may seem less intimidating to young people than the exposure of a one-to-one setting. It was possible too that more genuine responses could emerge as students shared experiences, rather than students feeling that they ought to be giving certain types of answers to an

interviewer perceived as having authority. Whilst power relations within a group interview are still asymmetrical in favour of the interviewer, they are redressed to some extent by the greater number of respondents.

7.1.7 Conduct of interviews

Interviews were held in a centrally located room, during a period which was scheduled as a tutorial for all students. The rationale was that students would not feel they were giving up free time, and also all group participants would be available at the same time. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and was tape-recorded, with students' permission, for later transcription. This saved me having to take detailed notes, which could have interrupted the flow of discussion. However, I did make notes of key points during the interview.

7.1.8 Validity and reliability

The aim of all methods is to obtain valid and reliable data on which credible conclusions can be based (Wilson, 1996:98). The methodology for this research study was a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. While the design was primarily pragmatic, making use of existing data where possible, group interviews were helpful in validating quantitative findings. The mixture of methods also lent 'convergent validity' (Cohen et. al, 2000:121) through triangulation. If similar reasons for changes in career aspirations were given by students to those stated in their questionnaire responses it could be argued that there was data triangulation. Similarly, apparent connections between change of A2 choices and changing career intentions could be tested to see if inferences could reliably be drawn. Nevertheless, such inferences needed to be treated with great caution for, as Hammersley and Atkinson state (1995:7) *'The social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or by the subsumption of social events under universal laws.'*

However, the greatest strength of the interviews is that they enabled me to explore the social world and motivations of the students, and the reasons for responses given in the questionnaire survey in more depth (Cohen et al., 2000:268). Furthermore, I could ensure

that students all understood questions in the same way, especially in the group setting where misunderstandings could become more transparent as students listened to each other.

The guided structure to the interviews avoided the inflexibility of pre-set questions (Scott and Usher, 1999:108). Furthermore, responses could be developed and clarified (Bell, 1993:91) through the use of follow-up questions which probed more deeply. Open-ended questions '*are important in allowing the respondents to say what they think and to do so with greater richness and spontaneity*' (Oppenheim, 1993:81). This was particularly important as the social situation and educational experience of each student is unique and imbued with their own interpretations, meanings and beliefs. Open-ended questioning also allowed me to obtain the full range of responses from each group, including unexpected answers and relationships between ideas, before attempting to categorise the responses into classes (Wilson, 1996:101). This reduced the temptation to fit data to theory and assumptions, but increased the possibility of grounding theory in the data.

A clear weakness is the small sample – 19 interviewees from a total of 328 who completed the questionnaire. Furthermore, there was unequal representation of criterion groups, leaving me open to the charge that my findings are biased. In hindsight it might have been better to stratify my sample using unchanging criteria such as number of AS/AVCE courses studied or types of subjects studied.

7.1.9 Pilot interview

A pilot interview was held on 15 November. The purpose of this was to begin to explore the issues with a group of students so that questions could be devised both for the questionnaire survey and group interviews which were to follow. Overall, however, it was to give me a feel for the complexity of the issues and help to clarify the research focus. Eight students drawn from four second year tutor groups were invited, with one male and one female from each group.

Invitations gave details of the date, time, venue and my contact details (E-mail address and internal pigeon-hole). The letter also briefly outlined the purpose of the discussion and

asked for permission for contributions to be tape-recorded. This invitation acted as a pilot for the one finally used in the research study (although reply details differed).

The interview lasted 60 minutes and was transcribed in full. It was as a result of comments made by students in the pilot that I realised it would be valuable to explore associations between the study of 'new' subjects and changing career aims and course choices. This meant that in addition to its usefulness in modifying questions, the interview also helped in suggesting alternative ways of interrogating the database.

7.1.10 Methods of analysis

Through group interviews I hoped to understand how students had reached their current state of decidedness about future careers, and to what extent this was associated with experience of different subjects at AS/AVCE level. However, Cohen et. al. (2000) caution against making the assumption that individuals have insight into the cause of their behaviour. In any case, behaviour may not be rational or easy to articulate. This may be particularly true in the case of young people, for as Gullotta et. al. (1999:77) postulate '*in the search for identity, the adolescent experiments with many roles, shifting back and forth in an attempt to find the "real me"*'. This suggests that, in asking students to consider decisions made a year or more earlier, they may have rationalised these through the filter of their present 'self' rather than how they were then, for as Cortazzi (1993:55) states '*past recollections are not so much reports as selectively modified recollections fitted to a current view which a respondent is willing to share*' (1993:55). Students' responses therefore cannot simply be taken at face value, but need to be interpreted since '*subjects are multiply situated; their perspectives are full of social contradictions*' (Scott and Usher 1999:17). However, it was necessary to find a way of analysing interview data by classifying significant aspects of students' experiences around the '*central organising concept*' (Powney and Watts 1987:105) of the relationship between AS experiences and career aspirations. To make sense of the data involved '*consolidating, reducing, and interpreting*' (Merriam 1998:178) what students had said.

As all the interviews had been tape-recorded, my first step was to transcribe key sections

which gave insights into students' decision-making. These were word processed and then analysed by content so that specific verbatim sections could be categorised. Categories were devised to match particular research questions and to identify reasons for decisions relating to progression aims and course choices. My method of category construction was therefore *'largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves'* (Merriam 1998:179). I then used these categories to organise the written analysis and explanation of findings, illustrated by verbatim quotations where appropriate so that the distance between students' voices and readers' interpretation and understanding could be reduced.

It is, however, important to note that transcription is not a simple transference of interviewees' responses to paper. A tape-recording is already decontextualised, filtering out non-verbal communication. This means that even if a transcription is verbatim it is already selective. Some people do not interview well in group situations, remaining silent if they disagree or feel uncomfortable (Oppenheim 1992:79) meaning that only limited sets of views may be reflected in the data (Grbich 1999:115). My handwritten notes, taken during the interviews and word-processed the same day, were helpful in bringing to mind some of the unspoken communication which had passed between us in the form of tone of voice and facial expression.

To protect the interests of teachers concerned, names of subjects have been omitted in some sections of the transcripts of students' comments. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

7.1.11 Summary of methods

A study which seeks to uncover reasons for complex behaviours and attitudes must involve a means of probing as deeply as possible into meanings, identities and ideas. Face to face conversation is the most effective way of negotiating an understanding of another's beliefs and actions, and of identifying patterns between different individuals. Group interviews are probably less effective than in-depth individual interactions, but my research was

constrained by time and cost, both to me and to my 'subjects'. A 'guide' approach to questioning enabled me to gain insight into the factors which had influenced students' decision-making, and allowed me not only to validate findings from statistical analysis of the database and questionnaires, but also to explore the meanings of these at a deeper level and from students' perspectives.

My rigorously designed sampling procedures broke down in practice. Partly this was due to a lower than expected response rate, but it also illustrated the fluidity of students' 'decidedness'. An interval of five to six weeks is a long time in the life of a sixth former. The sample was biased towards those who had at least a rough progression aim at the start of their AS/AVCE courses. However, there was a reasonable balance between those who had changed their choices of A2 courses and those who had not (8:11), therefore allowing key questions to be explored from a range of perspectives, albeit with a smaller number of participants than anticipated.

7.2 Interview findings

7.2.1 Factors influencing choice of AS/AVCE courses

Students gave a wide range of reasons for choosing their AS/AVCE courses at the start of the first year. Most gave multiple reasons, with up to four reasons per student. Figure 46 gives a frequency tally of reasons.

Figure 46 Reasons for choosing AS/AVCE courses

Reason	Number of times cited
Good grade at GCSE	9
Needed subject for future career/degree course	9
Wanted to study 'new' subject	8
Enjoyed subject at GCSE	8
Wanted a range of different subjects	6
Parents' advice	4
Course sounded interesting	4
Generally useful for employment	3
Found subject easy at GCSE	3
Thought I'd do well at subject	2

Linked with other subjects	2
Had extra-curricular interest in subject	2
Miscellaneous reasons	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Always liked going on holiday – AVCE Travel & Tourism ▪ TV programmes – AS Psychology 	

7.2.1.1 Instrumental and career considerations

Figure 46 shows that when first choosing their courses, therefore, many students seem to have made rational choices based on future progression aims, relevance to employment and likelihood of success in the subject, the latter often based on grades achieved at GCSE.

'I chose IT because I just thought it would be a useful thing to have' (Lisa)

'Because I did want to be an actress when I was really young and I thought the media would be good for that.' (Sue)

'Well, I wanted to be a pilot and I thought I'm going to have to take some core subjects, which would be like physics and maths' (Anthony)

'The reasons for choosing history was that I wanted to go into law, and I was told history would be a good subject to have for law' (Rona)

'I needed to get the best A level results and I thought I'd do better in history' (Jack)

'I picked geography because I got a good grade at GCSE, so I thought I must have been alright at it' (Steve)

'Maths is ... for me anyway ... I find that quite hard, but it is something I feel I should do, you know because I was quite good at GCSE, so I think, you know, it's a really useful subject' (Todd)

7.2.1.2 Potential enjoyment

Enjoyment at GCSE or in extra-curricular experience was also very important, together with judgement about how enjoyable the course would be at AS/AVCE level. Some students, as illustrated by the following exchange, chose all their courses almost entirely on the basis of enjoyment and interest.

Interviewer: *What made you choose history?*

Tony: *Coz I did it at GCSE and was just generally interested in it.*

Interviewer: *So it was purely interest really?*

Tony: *Yeah, and I'm quite good at it.*

Interviewer: *And sociology?*

Tony: *Um ... just coz the course looked fun. It looked interesting. I was choosing between sociology and psychology and I chose sociology because it was less mathematical ... I wanted to learn, kind of, about people.*

Interviewer: *And photography?*

Tony: *Well ... I've always been interested in taking photos and developing them*

Interviewer: *And music tech?*

Tony: *Um ... just really coz of the music ... a lot of people want to do straight practical music at A level but I wanted to know more about recording.*

Interviewer: *So mostly you were choosing your subjects on the basis of interest, not career?*

Tony *Yeah.*

Judgements about potential enjoyment of AS levels, however, is sometimes based on quite thin knowledge and experience. It may just depend on a printed course description ...

Interviewer: *Why did you choose accounting, not sports studies or ...*

Steve: *I don't know – I just saw it and then I was given a description of what the course was going to be like and it sounded quite interesting, and I thought well I might be able to do that'*

... or a vague idea of the subject.

Interviewer: *How about you Tania, why did you choose psychology?*

Tania: *I'm interested in that ... I don't know ... I thought it was different to what it was ... I thought it would be more about learning how your mind works and stuff, but it's really different to that'*

7.2.1.3 Breadth of programme

A number of students considered their whole programme of study, with some deliberately choosing diverse courses while others chose those which were complementary.

Interviewer: *Those five subjects are very diverse aren't they ... was that an aim?*

Jack: *Yes ... part of it was I didn't want to take three sciences or three humanities subjects. I just thought I'd do both. I basically understood that that's what people were looking for and I thought that's one of the points of the new system really'*

'I just chose art as a break – a different kind of activity, and because I like art' (Georgia)

'I chose biology because I thought it linked with psychology' (Linda)

'I thought that biology would go well with sports studies, coz that was what I was told at my interview at school' (Holly)

7.2.1.4 Advice from parents

It is interesting to note the influence of parents on students' initial course choice.

Interviewer: *Why did you choose history?*

Clive: *I was following in my Dad's footsteps really. He was at home and I was going through a lot of things and he said 'well you like history and documentaries and stuff'.*

Two students said that their parents were particularly keen for them to study a foreign language, and that they had followed this advice. (It is interesting to note, though, that both had later regretted their decision.)

'French I chose because I had one option left and I couldn't make up my mind what I was going to do and my Mum was saying 'Oh you should do French – that would be a good one to have' (Rona)

'When I first came to the college for my consultation I was going to do just the four – IT, Business Studies, Maths and Physics ... but German ... I was just sitting there and he goes "what about a fifth AS level?" and I was kind of possibly pushed into taking it, and of course both my parents were there as well and my Dad's quite keen for me to do German, so I kind of said "yeah I'll do it"' (Anthony)

7.2.2 Factors influencing choice of A2 courses

Selection of second year programmes was sometimes based more on positive choice of courses to continue, and sometimes related more to negative reasons concerning courses to be dropped.

Figure 47 gives a frequency tally of reasons. All students gave multiple reasons for dropping or continuing different courses.

Figure 47 Reasons for choosing A2 courses

Reason	Number of times cited
Did not enjoy subjects dropped	12
Subjects dropped were too difficult	8
AS grades	6
Enjoyed the subject(s) chosen	5
Advice from tutors	4
Subjects dropped were too time-consuming or had too much work	4
Chose subjects which gave greatest chance of success	3
Did not like tutor in subjects dropped	3
Didn't like teaching methods in subject dropped	3
Never intended to continue subject	2
Advice from parents	1
Chose easier subject	1
Chose subject which was different from others	1
Chose subject which was relevant to career	1
Dropped subject which was not relevant to career	1
Chose subject with coursework in second year	1
Chose subject with no coursework in second year	1
Course did not relate to another subject as expected	1
Deterred from subject by advice from students in year above	1
Dropped subject which was too similar to another	1

Students were not given any prompts, so reasons emerged naturally in discussion.

However, it is possible that some were influenced by what others in the group said. It would appear that more students chose on the basis of which subjects they wanted to drop, than on which they wanted to continue.

7.2.2.1 Enjoyment (or not) of subject

Enjoyment, and lack of enjoyment, continued to be important themes in A2 course choice. Often this involved a process of weighing one subject against another.

'I really, really love psychology, and I was alright at PE but I just didn't find it very interesting' (Jody)

'I changed basically chemistry to history ... I got a B in chemistry and I got quite a decent B in history ... and I just realised I enjoyed the subject more' (Jack)

'Biology wasn't what I expected at all. It was really boring' (Holly)

'I didn't like English anyway ... I didn't really like the books and stuff that we were doing' (Liz)

'I dropped music tech. because it was too computer-based and I didn't really enjoy it' (Tony)

7.2.2.2 Difficulty of subject, AS results and workload

Students generally did not choose to continue subjects which they had found difficult. This was not always a matter of dropping AS courses in which lower grades had been obtained. Sometimes a choice was made between two courses where grades were similar, but where one was perceived to be more difficult than the other.

'I did want to take on business studies, and I was going to drop geography, but, um, I really was thinking about results ... I was thinking, well, depending which one's got the higher grade I'll probably take that on. But I don't know how it happened, but they both got the same grade and the same number of marks ... I thought well, I did find business studies hard all year – I did find it quite difficult. But then geography – I seem to have got along with it – I fairly enjoyed the work in geography' (Steve)

'I decided I didn't want to go on with IT once I got my grade really. I realised that even though I had got quite a good grade in IT, I thought ... oh I did really work hard on that course' (Todd)

In other cases students had simply found it too difficult to cope.

'I thought chemistry was too hard and I didn't really want to carry on' (Georgia)

'I was reasonably good at French at school, but as soon as I walked into the French class at college it was just French talking and a lot of the people in there were very strong at French. They either had a French-speaking parent or things like that, or were just really, really good at it ... So I suppose I thought it was kind of like maths – that even if I'd worked my hardest I wouldn't have come out with a good grade' (Rona)

'In the second term of accounting we started doing some tests and things and I just kind of found myself just sitting there ...I carried on for a bit, just sitting there not answering questions ... and you know just scraping by, not doing the homework and stuff ... and then I just stopped going really' (Todd)

'I originally wanted to go on with Spanish this year, but then I got an E and my teacher felt that it was going to be hard going straight into the A level from that grade' (Sue)

7.2.2.3 Relationships with tutors and teaching methods used

Dislike of tutor, and dislike of teaching methods, were each mentioned three times. Names of subjects have been omitted on ethical grounds from the following illustrations.

'My teacher said I probably could have come out with a good grade for (subject), but I just hated the teacher so much that I thought I'd just go for it in geography instead' (Liz)

'(subject) was just too complicated and the teaching methods were really boring' (Linda)

7.2.2.4 Career considerations

Career considerations only seem to have guided choice in two cases:

'I knew I wasn't going to carry on art because it was nothing to do with what I wanted to do' (Georgia)

'Geography is classified as a science subject for university ..., because I need to have two sciences and one of them is geography' (Jody)

7.2.3 Factors influencing progression aims

Figure 48 shows the decisions students had made, at the time of their interview, about progression from college, together with their stated reasons for these choices.

Figure 48 Reasons for choice of career

Student	Career/Progression decision	Reasons
Matt	Employment in business	Has part-time job in sales and feels he is good at it. Father has encouraged him – he works in finance
Holly	Unclear	Family are all 'sporty', so is considering work in this area
Noel	Gap year, then university	Not sure what subject to study. Has always intended to go to university
Linda	Gap year, then probably tourism degree	Travel industry is growing. Wanted to work as 'air hostess' for a long time
Jilly	Gap year, then possibly photography course at college of art	Grades not good enough for university. Has always wanted to get degree but is not ready to leave the family home. Photography is 'best' subject
Todd	Civil engineering traineeship	Saw job advertisement and decided to find out what the career involved. Might only do it for a year and then do an art foundation course
Rona	Gap year, then degree in history or law	Family want her to do a vocational degree (law). Will do history if A level grades are not good enough for law
Jody	Degree in psychology then	Father is a psychologist and has encouraged her. Likes idea of teaching but is afraid she might be a



	possibly teaching, marketing or PR	'bad teacher'
Georgia	Degree in environmental protection at FE college	Brother benefited from getting degree. Wanted to do a geography-related subject, but in a college near home
Steve	Possibly work-based training in computing. May go to university some time in future.	Father works in IT and has stressed opportunities for high pay. Aware of skills-shortages in IT and demand for qualified staff
Lisa	Gap year, followed by degree in psychology	Financial advantages from having a degree. Careers interview made her decide to choose the subject she most enjoyed
Sue	Tourism management degree	Mother works in tourism and encouraged her into this, rather than previous choice of actress. Careers interview persuaded her to consider university
Tania	Travel agency employment	Wanted to be 'air hostess' but is too short.
Tony	Humanities degree, then possibly primary teaching	Parents are both teachers and mother said he was 'good with kids'. Had considered photography degree, but will not get good enough grade
Liz	Gap year, then criminology degree	Decided during year 11, probably because she had seen programmes on TV about it
Clive	Degree in history and international relations, then possible career with FCO	Maths grade not good enough for meteorology. Parents have encouraged him to go to university. SAS father, civil servant mother, both encouraging diplomat-type career
Jack	Degree in politics, then journalism	Interest sparked by GCSE integrated humanities. Has taken advice from journalists and careers interview.
Fiona	Degree in genetics	Feels that study of genetics suits her logical mind
Anthony	Degree in business studies, then possibly marketing	Wanted to be pilot, but put off by events of Sept 11 th . Also thinks grades will not be good enough. Talks at college, and careers interview encouraged him to consider university. Father supports this because graduates earn more money. Interested in marketing because he likes working with people.

7.2.3.1 Advice from family and friends

Analysis of figure 48 shows the importance of family, and parents in particular, in students' decision-making. Parental occupations and career paths played a significant part in influencing student choices.

'My Dad has been moved up into a division where he's working on the company's web-site and he was, like, telling me stories about these people that came in and helped with their network and the amount of money they're getting paid for that on temporary contracts' (Steve)

'I'd always thought about doing something in that field in the Foreign Office. My Mum used to be a civil servant and she said it would be quite an enjoyable job to do... My parents' experience was that it's better to go and get a degree at university ... coz my Mum went to night college and she did it that way, but she never went to university ... I mean, she went into the civil service after she finished night college and she worked up to a certain level, but she couldn't get any higher. She watched all these people coming in with degrees going up. My dad, he left school and joined the Army and from there he just went through the Army scheme that way, but his advice as well was you should go to university, because obviously he'd seen a lot of people come out into, say the Officers Corps and go through quite quickly, but he started at the bottom and kind of worked all the way up and then saw these young people come'. (Clive)

'Neither of my parents went to university, but my Dad's girlfriend did and now she's doing much better than him, just because she's a graduate' (Jilly)

'I've always thought about business. My Dad works in finance and he's told me which subjects they're looking for' (Matt)

The following extract from Rona shows the pressures faced by some students in pursuing their own goals in the face of advice from friends and family

'I had a big argument with my boyfriend's Dad last night, because he was saying "people who go to university – it's a waste of time unless you're doing a degree that has relevance to a career"'. And he said 'don't do history – if you're going to do a degree do law' and my Dad's the same. My Mum and Dad said 'we don't want you just doing a general degree'. They want me to do a degree that has relevance to a career..... It's kind of influenced me really but I don't know – I've always taken into account what they're saying but it hasn't

really, really influenced me but it may be slightly.... One of my Dad's friend's daughter's – she's done lots of different things at university and she's still ended up in just a general admin job I suppose really. So I suppose that's influenced my Dad and, um, neither my boyfriend's Dad nor my Dad didn't go to university or anything, so I suppose they think it's a waste of time because they've done quite well and they didn't go to university.'

This degree of parental influence concurs with that found in a number of previous studies (Ball et. al:2000; Connor et. al:1999; Davies:1994; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001; Kidd and Wardman:1999).

Those students who had decided against going to university had a range of reasons, as shown in figure 49, but these were primarily concerned with financial aspects and lack of family history of higher education.

Figure 49 Reasons for deciding against degree course

Student	Reasons
Holly	Never considered it. None of family have been to university
Todd	Mother is a single parent. Brother dropped out of university because he was in debt
Steve	Needs a break from education and feels he can earn enough money without going to university
Tania	Has never wanted to go to university. None of family have been.
Matt	Didn't enjoy first year at college, therefore did not consider staying on post-18. Wants to earn money while training

7.2.3.2 Advice from tutors

None of the students mentioned advice from tutors when discussing why they had chosen different progression paths, although clearly tutor advice was important to some when choosing second year courses, and this will have influenced their post-18 decisions.

7.2.3.2 Careers advice

Careers advice was sought by 15 of the students during their two years of sixth form study. Figure 50 summarizes when and why it was sought, together with outcomes.

Figure 50 Careers advice

Student	Timing	Why advice sought	Outcome
Matt	Middle of 1 st year	Considering leaving college	Decided to stay at college
Holly	Early in 2 nd year	To explore career options	Not helpful
Linda	Early in 2 nd year	To explore university options	Decided to apply later
Jilly	End of 1 st year	To help choose A2 courses	Helped with course decisions
Georgia	End of 1 st year	To help choose A2 courses	Advised to do chemistry but changed her mind later
Steve	December of 2 nd year	To reconsider going to university and look at other options	Decided university might be appropriate later, after a period of employment
Lisa	Nov/Dec of 2 nd year	Gap year information and to decide what to do at university	Based university course selection on subjects she most enjoyed
Sue	Nov/Dec of 2 nd year	To explore career options	Changed mind and decided to go to university
Tania	Nov/Dec of 2 nd year	To explore tourism industry options other than 'air hostess'	Not helpful. Was told that travel industry may be insecure after Sept 11 th . Decided on travel agency work anyway
Tony	October of 2 nd year	To decide what to do at university	Came out with more questions than answers. Decided later
Liz	Early in 2 nd year	To find out if a law degree was the right choice	Was advised against law but decided to apply anyway
Clive	Early in 2 nd year	To decide whether he should do meteorology or international relations degree	Advised that he would need maths A level for meteorology, therefore decided on history and international relations
Jack	End of 1 st year	To choose universities at which to study politics	Confirmed the choices he had already made
Fiona	Summer of 1 st year	To choose universities at which to study genetics	Helpful in making choices
Anthony	Early in 2 nd year	To find out about applying to be a pilot	Decided against being pilot and to go to university to study business studies instead

Figure 51 indicates that the key time for seeking careers advice was during the summer term of the first year and the autumn term of the second year. This is the time when students choose and prepare university applications. Seven students sought advice about university options, while two needed specific occupational advice. Four students needed general help in deciding on a future pathway.

It is interesting to note that students did not always respond positively to the advice they received. Three students decided against the advice they were given (Georgia, Liz and Tania). However, two-thirds found the advice helpful in reaching some kind of resolution.

Only two students sought advice on choice of A2 courses. It would seem, therefore, that students were more inclined to seek careers advice in the light of the AS/A2 courses they had chosen, rather than to look for guidance on which course choices would match future career intentions.

7.2.3.4 Workload management

Many students commented on how demanding they had found their AS/AVCE year. Ten students said that, as a result, they had managed their workload by giving less priority to some courses than others, particularly in terms of revision.

Interviewer: You said you decided right from the beginning that you didn't want to go on with performing arts? So did you give that less priority?

Sue: Yes definitely ... I thought 'oh I don't enjoy this. I don't care if I don't pass'. But I did towards the end think 'oh well, I've got this far' and I did try and work ... I did all my coursework but I didn't really do any revision

'I really got into sociology, but I just didn't enjoy the biology, so I stopped working so much for it after Christmas ...I mean I still did the coursework coz I thought that might make up for bad exam results. I didn't do much revision for it but I still managed to get an E. I definitely worked much harder for my other three subjects' (Linda)

Interviewer: *Did you prioritise your workload at all in the first year?*

Rona: *Um ...mainly geography a little, mainly because of the fact that I didn't really enjoy it so I would always ... if I had lots of college work ... I would always tend to go to history and English because I enjoyed doing that*

It therefore seems that students who prioritised their workload in this way were effectively making active choices about continuation to A level which would become self-reinforcing once AS results were published. This could help to explain why more changes to course choices occurred between March and June of the first year than between June and September. By June students probably had a fairly clear idea of which subjects they would get their best grades in.

Some students appreciated the flexibility afforded by Curriculum 2000 in being able to 'try' subjects for one year, and others felt this flexibility had led to changes in their progression aims.

'I think the system itself is quite good because in theory you can just study something for year and still have a qualification, which you can quite easily change to something else'
(Todd)

'I think AS's are a good thing coz after the first year if you don't want to do it and you drop it and you have passed you've still got an AS level' (Sue)

Interviewer: *If you were in the old system and you had only studied 3 subjects for 2 years, would you now be doing something different in terms of your progression from college?*

Lisa: *I think I would be doing English language, music and history. I don't know where that would have taken me, but I think maybe I would have carried on with the history and be doing history at degree level, but I'm glad I didn't. It's purely because I'd studied all*

those subjects before – you know, I was familiar with them – and so I wouldn't have been taking chances

Steve: I'd still be doing the same thing, because it was basically what I was thinking when I came to college. But I think that the new curriculum – it did help to change my mind about business studies. I think it was a hard subject and now I'm glad I did make the decision to do geography in the second year.

Georgia: 'Probably not ... I would have found it a bit harder to choose between the caring career and an environmental career, so I'm glad I had that choice'

7.3 Discussion of interview findings

7.3.1 Choice of AS/AVCE courses

Key factors influencing initial choice of AS/AVCE courses were previous success in a subject at GCSE and perceived likelihood of success at A level. In other words, for subjects which had been studied before, the prime consideration was how easy it would be to achieve high grades at AS/A level. At the same time, however, students expressed a clear desire to study some 'new' subjects. Thirteen of the 19 students interviewed had included at least one 'new' subject in their first year programmes of study.

Within these choice parameters, the most important principle in selecting between subjects was actual, or potential, enjoyment and interest in the subject. In some cases this led to courses spanning a range of disciplines, while in others it was deemed more important to study related subjects.

Parents exerted some influence over AS/AVCE selection, particularly in relation to fifth choices and when there was parental presence at the enrolment interview.

7.3.2 Choice of A2 courses

The overwhelming considerations in A2 course choice were enjoyment of the subject, perceived workload and level of difficulty. Workload issues were more significant than success at AS level for a number of students.

Enjoyment of a subject was damaged for some students by a negative relationship with a tutor, or the perception that teaching methods were 'boring'. This had deterred them from choosing A2 courses in these subjects.

Career considerations were apparently of little importance to most students. In general it seems that students based their post-18 decisions on the courses they had chosen to follow at A level, rather than choosing courses suitable for progression to a particular career.

7.3.3 Choice of post-18 pathway

This group of students seems to have been strongly influenced in their post-18 decisions by parental advice and circumstances. This was particularly apparent in decisions about progression to university. Many students stated that their parents had encouraged them to apply for degree courses. In other cases, students were deterred from higher education for financial reasons, or were pointed in particular vocational directions. Parents often used their specific knowledge of occupational sectors to advise students to follow in their footsteps, and students seemed to accept the validity of this advice.

Most students saw value in seeking professional careers advice, and most of them found this helpful in reaching decisions. However, only two of the students sought advice about which A2 courses to choose. This suggests that options may already have been narrowed before careers advice was sought.

Career/HE options may also have been narrowed by the way in which students managed their workload during the first year. More than half the students admitted to prioritising some subjects over others, particular in relation to exam revision. Presumably these

students had already decided which subjects they would drop at the end of the first year and this may well have affected AS results. As most students did not seek careers advice until at least the second half of the summer term, the implications of dropping or continuing subjects may not have been fully considered.

7.3.4 Summary of discussion

Only 19 students were interviewed. It is feasible to assume that those students who did arrive for interview were in general more co-operative and compliant, which may partially account for the surprisingly strong influence of parents on their decision-making and the fact that so many were willing to seek careers advice. However, the questionnaire survey also showed that many students had found careers interviews important when changing or clarifying their aims, and advice from tutors, family and friends was also valued, so perhaps the interview group was not so unrepresentative.

Career or employment considerations did seem to have importance for a number of students at the point when initial choices of AS/AVCE courses were made. However, the link between course choice and career aims was more tenuous in the transition between AS and A2 level. Enjoyment of a subject, calculation of its workload and self-assessment of potential achievement were much more important choice factors for second year courses. Moreover, achievement in different courses may have become a self-fulfilling prophecy as students actively managed their workload and prioritized some subjects over others.

Most students experienced significant uncertainty in intentions regarding future career/HE progression until at least the end of the first year, with some still uncertain at the time of interview. This is interesting, as 16 of the 19 students had had at least some idea of their progression aim in September 2000. Many of them sought professional advice or talked their options through with parents. A number had decided on the interim step of a degree course, with only vague ideas about where this might lead them. Some had chosen to enter employment, but had not ruled out the possibility of returning to full-time higher education later.

Curriculum 2000 does seem to have enabled students to be more adventurous in their first year course choices, and in Lisa's terms to 'take chances' with subjects they had not studied before. Seven students had chosen to start new AS levels in their second year, and all the subjects chosen were 'new' (Appendix VII). It also seems from this very small sample that 'new' subjects tended to be carried on to the second year more often than 'familiar/traditional' subjects, sometimes on the grounds that the former were less difficult.

However, the study of 'new' subjects does not seem to have had any significant effect on career decisions. Most decisions seem to be based on self, or others', perception of aptitude, potential for earning a good income, or long-held interests in a particular vocational area (often influenced by family connections). Most importantly, however, career choices were made within a framework provided by overall programmes of study and how this constrained or provided opportunities for different pathways. Course choice was rarely directly driven by career aim.

Chapter 8: Summary and Conclusions

8.1 Factors affecting choice of AS/AVCE courses

The reasons most frequently given by interviewees for choice of AS courses were those relating to likelihood of success (often based on grades obtained for the same subject at GCSE), or need to study the subject for career/HE purposes. Questionnaire responses revealed that most students had at least a rough post-18 progression aim when they commenced sixth form studies, and it seems that career/HE considerations were more important when choosing AS/AVCE subjects than when deciding on A2 courses. This is likely to have been because the transition between GCSE and AS level is not cumulative in terms of final achievement of a grade, unlike the transition from AS level to A2 when it is more important to build on progress and interim achievement. In other words, students can afford to think of AS courses as a fresh chance to select subjects which will steer them towards particular careers and lifestyles, but in choosing A2 courses it is more important to think of short-term achievement and maximization of chances for success.

Other factors were also important in choice of AS/AVCE, including the desire to study a range of different subjects and enjoyment of particular subjects at GCSE. However, the study shows that a high proportion of students chose to study at least one subject at AS level which they had not studied before, with more than a third of all students taking two or more 'new' subjects. It seems, therefore, that the opportunity to study four or five subjects resulted in an overall framework of rational choices, but within this many students decided to 'take a chance' with more adventurous options as part of their overall programme of study. Students made judgements about how interesting or enjoyable they thought a subject would be and this was an important factor in course choice. However, when selecting 'new' subjects the information on which these judgements were based was sometimes incomplete and not well researched.

Parental influence was also important for some students, particularly when they attended enrolment interviews. When parents did give advice it often sprang from a desire to persuade students to study subjects which they thought would be helpful in gaining

employment, such as languages or IT. As Mangan et. al (2001:47) suggest '*practitioners need to recognize that the parent is still a fairly active partner in the decision taking*'. However, the study did not explore how often parental advice had been rejected.

8.2 Stability and instability in choice of A2 courses

A significant proportion of students (44.3%) changed their choice of A2 courses between March/April of the first year and September of the second year. However, it seems likely from discussion with students that decisions were made early in the first year about key choices of A2 (perhaps two subjects) which then remained unchanged. It was more often a question of choosing between the remaining two or three AS subjects, sometimes on the basis of potential for success in the subject at A level. There was some evidence, though not statistically significant, that the more AS subjects a student undertook, the more likely they were to change their selection of A2 subjects, probably because they had more flexibility of choice.

The strongest influences on choice of A2 subjects were enjoyment of the AS course, predicted workload involved in the A2 (the more the load, the less likely a choice), perceived difficulty of the subject at A2 and self-assessment of likely achievement at A level. Most of the change in A2 choices occurred between March/April and June when differential workload between subjects became apparent, particularly relating to coursework, and when students had formed an idea of how well they had performed in examinations. However, it was clear from interviews that a number of students had prioritized their efforts in different subjects in order to keep the overall workload manageable. This was particularly the case in revision for examinations, and therefore would have influenced AS grades to some extent by reinforcing the likelihood of a lower grade in a subject which would not be continued to A level. It is reasonable to assume that, given the number of students who changed their choices between March/April and June, problems of workload and difficulty in particular courses did not become apparent until late in the course, at a time when coursework deadlines and preparation for examinations coincided in all subjects.

When the changing choices of students studying a mixture of 'familiar/traditional' and 'new' subjects were analysed, it was apparent that substitution of 'new' subjects for 'familiar/traditional' ones was much more common than vice versa. Interviews with students revealed that this was often because 'new' subjects were seen as less difficult and therefore more likely to yield a higher grade at A level. These findings are in line with much of the press coverage following publication of A level results in August 2002. For example:

If they do badly in an AS, they can choose to go on to take their A2s in 'easier' subjects. The exam boards have reported a large rise in the number of pupils taking 'soft' subjects such as drama and psychology this summer, balanced by an equivalent drop in the number taking maths' (The Times 12.8.2002)

Analysis of the database and questionnaire showed little evidence to suggest that instability in course choice was related to instability in progression aims, whether or not students studied 'new' subjects. It is therefore possible to conclude that, in general, students chose careers or HE courses that fitted with their A level course choices, rather than choosing A level courses needed for particular post-18 pathways.

8.3 Key factors leading to choice of post-18 progression

The questionnaire survey showed that most students had at least a rough career or HE aim when they started AS courses. Few students had still not reached a decision by January of the second year. However, students who were interviewed indicated that they experienced considerable uncertainty about post-18 destinations until at least the end of the first year. Those who had the clearest career aims at the start of the first year generally maintained these, although they did not always keep the same choices of A2 courses.

Analysis of the database and questionnaire responses failed to show any clear association between instability in A2 course choice and instability in career aims. However, in-depth interviews suggested that often changes to progression aim occurred before March/April of the first year and that students re-thought previous aims at this time in the light of which

AS courses proved most enjoyable and least difficult. It seems that in the period between March/April and the beginning of the second year new options were clarified and career/HE choices made, largely on the basis of enjoyment (or lack of enjoyment) of different subjects. Questionnaire responses indicated that study of 'new' subjects had often led to a change in progression aim as different post-18 options were opened up or clarified.

Enjoyment of particular courses was not the only factor influencing career/HE choices, however. It was clear from both interviews and questionnaire responses that guidance from the Careers Advisor was important to a number of students. Advice from parents, and knowledge of particular career areas through parental occupations, was significant in the decisions made by many students. Family experience also shaped students' perceptions of the value of higher education.

Interview data suggests that key influences on progression decisions were long-held interest in a career area (often influenced by experience and/or perceptions of family members), potential earnings and self-perception of own suitability for a particular career. However, the over-riding consideration for many students was to find a career or degree course which matched the subjects that they enjoyed and felt they would do best in at A level. Students did not generally make decisions to study particular AS or A level subjects in order to meet the requirements for a specific career pathway.

8.4 Implications for guidance

Curriculum 2000 reforms brought with them a widely-recognised need for improvements to tutoring and guidance in order to help students choose appropriate programmes. Advice from the Learning and Skills Development Agency, published after the reforms had been in operation for one year, stresses the importance of advice and guidance when students choose first year courses, and when they progress from AS to A2.

Institutions recognized that they have a responsibility to ensure that students are given clear and comprehensive information, advice and guidance prior to starting curriculum 2000 programmes.

It is acknowledged in the review that the transition period from year 12 to 13 is a significant change in sixth form life. Students need to understand and be prepared for the flexibility that the AS/A2 structure gives. (LSDA:2001).

However, little attention has been given to the implications of the reforms for advice and guidance on post-18 progression. According to the OECD (1996:17) the concept of guidance is that clients

should be helped to take responsibility for their own futures, learning how to make choices and decisions on the basis of their understanding of themselves, and the information they are given.

Many students actively researched and used their own experience, and that of others, to inform their choices. However, whilst there is evidence that this was true when considering post-18 destinations, it was often not the case when making decisions about first year courses. It is also not clear that students made explicit links between their course choices and the opportunities or barriers these created for future careers. The study indicates rather that students took one step at a time, often making short-term plans for the following year and then considering the implications of their choices after the event. Indeed, it was clear from interviews that students valued this flexibility allowed by the new curriculum. The study therefore points to a number of implications for guidance and these, with suggested recommendations, are set out below.

- 1. Students like being able to study more subjects in the first year. They see this as an opportunity for a fresh start and many choose to study at least one 'new' subject on the grounds that they are prepared to 'take a chance' with these. Choices of 'new' subjects are based on potential enjoyment and interest, but judgments are sometimes based on incomplete and partial information.***

It may be that information available to students in 2000 was less complete and accurate than it might have been, as this was the first year of Curriculum 2000 in operation.

However, it is clear that there is a need for students to have more information about course content, teaching and assessment methods in order to reduce 'post-decision dissonance' (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001). It would also be helpful for students to know about the post-18 pathways which are opened by studying particular subjects in the sixth form, but equally important to understand what barriers are imposed by not choosing other subjects.

2. Parents are active partners in course choice for some students, but their information may be out-dated or inaccurate

Guidance given to students by family members needs to be balanced with information from other sources. Opportunities should be taken to explore parents' perceptions of subjects, for example at enrolment interviews, and it may be helpful to educate parents of year 10 and 11 pupils about the nature and value of different subjects and courses. Clearly written, well-targeted guides to subjects, *which outline progression pathways* and are centrally co-ordinated could help to resolve potential problems of partiality in advice given by tutors both at the College and in schools. The study shows that careers advice is valued by students, and it could therefore be advantageous for the Careers Advisor to contribute to the production of course guides.

It might also be desirable to supply careers information from subject associations, or to invite speakers from higher education or industry to talk about careers relevant to specific subject choices. It would be best to do this before March of the first year.

3. Students' choices of A2 courses are unstable. They make early decisions regarding like or dislike of some AS/6-unit AVCE courses and whether or not they will continue with them in the second year. These decisions may bring about a change to progression aim early in the first year.

To reduce the risk of early 'closure' and possible obstruction of specific progression routes, students could be asked in March/April (or earlier) to rank AS/AVCE courses in order of likely continuation to A2, rather than simply stating which they intend to continue. This

information could then be shared with subject staff, enabling them to ensure that students know what career options are being ruled out at the stage when they might begin to give less priority to the course. Changes to career aim could be discussed at this stage to help students understand the implications of different choices.

4. *Early decisions to discontinue courses after AS level are sometimes acted out by working less hard in those subjects which are to be dropped.*

It might be wise for tutors to accept that students may need help in prioritizing workload, since it is clear that many of them will attempt to do this anyway. If students were able to be more honest with staff about their level of commitment to examination preparation and revision in a particular subject, it might be possible to offer more targeted support, for example in the form of basic revision guides for those not intending to pursue the course to A level. This might then encourage students not to 'give up' on a subject in the face of heavy coursework and revision loads, but instead to aim at least for a pass grade.

5. *Although students may make stable choices about one or two key subjects to continue to A level, choices between other subjects tend to be made on the basis of enjoyment at AS and perceived workload and difficulty at A2. Some students perceive 'new' subjects to be less difficult.*

As a significant proportion of students change at least one of their A2 choices between March/April and June, judgements about potential enjoyment and workload in the second year are coloured by their experience of AS coursework and examinations. There is therefore a need to ensure that students understand the nature and workload of A2 courses *before* March of the first year, when some start to prioritise their efforts in different subjects and effectively bring about results which serve to rationalize early choices.

6. *The Careers Advisor is a significant influence on the post-18 decisions of some students. However, careers advice is not generally sought when decisions about course choice are being made.*

Students could be encouraged to attend careers interviews in the first and second term of the first year, before making subject choices for their second year. This would help them to understand the implications of different A2 course choices for their future HE and career pathways.

8.5 Limitations of the study

Research for this study was conducted in one institution only. It cannot therefore claim to provide a representative picture of young people's responses to Curriculum 2000 in all institutions. School sixth forms and smaller colleges may have been unable to provide the same breadth and flexibility of curriculum choices, while general FE colleges are likely to have offered a much greater range of vocational courses with fewer AS and A level choices. Furthermore, QMC is unusual in the proportion of students studying five AS levels, and entry requirements are low in terms of number of GCSE passes and points score. However, singularity is a virtue in case study research, as it is possible for the reader to judge how relevant the findings are to other situations (Mertens:1998), and for the researcher to draw attention to key factors which contribute to the uniqueness of the case and make it interesting.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there are some problems of reliability inherent in the research methodology. In particular, the questionnaire survey and interviews were ex post-facto in design. In other words, findings were reliant on students' memories of reasons for course and career change due to the time-lag between decisions and surveys. It would be very interesting to carry out a 'live' study, tracking students through their first year and recording changes to choices as they occur.

Bias in questionnaire and interview samples may have affected findings. The questionnaire sample was biased towards those with higher GCSE scores, studying a greater number of AS levels, although it is not clear how this might have skewed the results. Interviewees may have been unusually compliant and co-operative, leading to a distortion in findings relating to the influence of parents and the Careers Advisor.

Finally, the study did not investigate the full range of Curriculum 2000 reforms. The implications of twelve-unit AVCE courses and key skills were not investigated, nor was the opportunity to take AS levels in the second year of study. The latter in particular could be a potentially fruitful area for future research.

8.6 Final conclusion

The study of students' first year course choices at QMC suggests that they responded positively to the range, breadth and flexibility of programmes offered. Appendix VII shows that 15 of the 19 students interviewed chose to study a mix of maths/science/technology subjects with humanities/arts/social sciences. Two of the four remaining students mixed AVCEs with AS levels and the others maintained a fairly broad mix whilst not including maths or sciences. Seven of the interviewees chose to study additional AS levels in the second year. The evidence from this small sample, which was not chosen on the basis of subject choice, therefore suggests that in the absence of prescription, and with considerable freedom of choice, students opted for breadth and variety in the first year.

A major finding is the high degree of instability in choice of second year courses, though most students maintained some choices and switched between their third, fourth or fifth options. There is strong evidence that students gave priority to enjoyment and potential for success. These findings are in line with those of Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), Ball et. al. (2000) and Krieshok (1998) whose studies show that young people subject their decisions to continual review, leading to transitory choices and the displacement of previous priorities with new ones. Post-decision dissonance (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown:2001) revealed itself in the decisions students often made early in the first year to change some second year course choices and progression aims. This sometimes led to workload management so that courses which were to be discontinued after AS level were given less priority. Whilst students appreciated the flexibility that Curriculum 2000 offered in being able to make this choice, the study points to the danger that implications for career opportunities were not always taken into consideration when these early decisions were made. In this respect Krieshok's (1998) view that students may need to be moved back into

indecision is important.

The marketisation of post-16 education has contributed to young people's perception of themselves as consumers, and Hodgson and Spours (2001) show how they have responded to this in Curriculum 2000 by resenting attempts to constrain subject choices. However, free choice in a marketised system raises questions about impartiality of advice and guidance, particularly when subject tutors are involved in departmental competition for students (Sadler and Reisenberger:1997). The desire to retain students into the second year, and achieve good results in the first year, raises potential difficulties for tutors in accepting any recommendation to help students manage their first year workload. In the present climate of performance management tutors may not perceive it to be in their interests to assist students in prioritizing efforts. However the alternative approach, in which students carry out their own cost benefit analysis and focus their time and energy on courses they perceive to be more enjoyable and achievable, may result in more marginal students failing one or more courses.

There was some evidence from the study that students considered utilitarian interests when making course and career decisions, often influenced by family context and parental advice. Some had taken heed of national skills-shortages and relatively high earnings potential of careers in these areas. However, many students considered only the next step in their progression pathway (often higher education) and based their decisions on what they thought would be most enjoyable and would offer the greatest opportunity for success. Rather than searching for objective knowledge of options available, they discovered new self-knowledge (Bloomer and Hodkinson:1997), with AS subject experience being one contribution to what Ball et. al. (2000) have termed as 'reflexive project of identity-formation'. While this experience encouraged or discouraged students to choose particular post-18 destinations, Curriculum 2000 has, however, increased students' ability to rectify mistakes in course choice without lasting damage (Gulotta et. al:1999). It has also enhanced the number of points at which students can reconsider options and change direction, with enjoyment emerging as a key criterion for course choice. Post-18 options remain open for longer than in the pre-2000 curriculum, but this study shows that students often rule out some A2 choices, and therefore certain career/HE possibilities, early in the first year. If particular course choices are key to national economic competitiveness, and

lack of prescription is to remain a feature of Curriculum 2000, it is important to make these courses less difficult and more enjoyable at AS level. However, it could also be argued that this study provides some evidence to support further reform, moving towards a unified curriculum in which the primacy of enjoyment as a determinant of course choice is constrained by a requirement to engage with study across broad domains of knowledge and skills, thus delaying specialisation even further.

APPENDIX I

KEY TO EXCEL 4 DATABASE

Contains data on all students who completed initial A2 course choices in March/April 2001 or June 2001, and who were studying 3 or more AS levels

A	Admission No
B	Surname
C	First name
D	Gender
E	Postcode
F	Previous school
G	General studies or critical thinking
H	AS courses and AVCE
I	Class tutor
J	Average GCSE score
K	Choice of A2 courses in March/April 2001 (Y=chosen, N=not chosen, X=no data)
L	Choice of A2 courses in June 2001
M	AS grade in June (V=AVCE course)
N	AS points score
O	AS average points score
P	Actual A2 courses started in September
Q	Number of AS levels studied at 1 October 2000
R	Whether questionnaire returned (Q=returned)
S	L = left college since April 2001. 1 st yr = started first year again in September
T	Number of AS levels studied at April 2001
U	Y = had clear career/HE aim at start of AS levels
V	Y = had rough career/HE aim at start of AS levels
W	Y = had no idea of career/HE aim at start of AS levels
X	Y = still have same career/HE aim in January 2002
Y	Y = had clear or rough career/HE aim at start, but had changed it by January 2002
Z	Y = had no idea of career/HE aim at start, but had clearer idea in January 2002
AA	Y = had no idea of career/HE aim at start, and still had no idea in January 2002
AB	Reasons for change in, or clarification of career/HE aim
AC	Y = changed choice of A2 courses between April and September 2001 N = didn't change choice of A2 courses between April and September 2001 X = no data or left
AD	Y = changed choice of A2 courses between June and September 2001 N = didn't change choice of A2 courses between June and September 2001 X = no data or left
AE	Y = is studying a subject at A2 in which AS grade was lower than a subject which wasn't chosen
AF	Number of subjects studied at AS level which must have been new to student Includes: Media Studies Sociology Economics Accounting Photography Leisure & Rec Music Tech Philosophy Politics Psychology Film Studies Health & SC Travel & Tourism Spanish (beginners)

APPENDIX I

N = not studying any 'new' subjects

AG Y = students who changed their choice of A2 courses between April and September and who substituted one of their 'new' subjects for a familiar subject

AH Y = students who changed their choice of A2 courses between April and September and who substituted one of their familiar subjects for a 'new' subject

APPENDIX II

IMPACTS OF AS LEVELS – RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

1 How many AS levels did you start in Sept 2000?

2 When you started your AS levels, did you already have an idea what you would like to do after you left college? Tick whichever statements applied to you in September 2000.

- a) I had a fairly clear aim regarding my career or the subject(s) I wanted to study in higher education Answer question 3 only
- b) I had a rough idea regarding my career or the subject I wanted to study in higher education Answer question 4 only
- c) I had no idea what I wanted to do after I left college Answer question 4 only

3 Do you still have the same aim regarding your career or study in higher education?

Yes No

If **no**, what has made you change your mind?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

4 Do you now have a clearer idea what you will do after leaving college?

Yes No

If **yes**, what has helped you to decide?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Name (please print) Tutor Group

Date

Thank you very much for your help.
Terri Sandison

QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

1 When you started your AS levels, did you already have an idea what you would like to do after you left college? Tick whichever statements applied to you in September 2000.

- a) I had a clear aim regarding my career **or** the subject(s) I wanted to study in higher education **Answer question 2 only**
- b) I had a rough idea of what I wanted to do after I left college **Answer question 3 only**
- c) I had no idea what I wanted to do after I left college **Answer question 3 only**

2 Do you still have the same aim regarding your career or study in higher education?

Yes No

If **no**, what has made you change your mind?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3 Do you now have a clearer idea what you will do after leaving college?

Yes No

If **yes**, what has helped you to decide?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Name **Tutor Group**

Thank you very much for your help.

APPENDIX IV

To: Second Year Personal Tutors

From: Terri Sandison

1 December 2001

You may know that I am currently engaged in post-graduate research at the University of Southampton. I am investigating the impacts of AS levels on students' career or university intentions and am particularly interested in:

- How many students start the AS year with clear progression aims and then change these aims during the year?
- What causes students to change their progression aims?
- What part does study at AS level play in the changing choices of students?

My research methods will include:

- Analysis of existing college data to measure the degree of change in A2 choices as the AS year progressed (students made choices in March, June and September)
- Interviews with groups of students and individual students
- A questionnaire survey

I would like to conduct the questionnaire survey through the tutorial programme on 10 January and should be grateful for your help and support. The survey is very short and should take students no longer than 5-10 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire should be distributed to all second year students, **except those studying for 12-unit AVCEs.**

Would you kindly read the attached notice to them before they complete the questionnaire.

When completed, please return the questionnaires to the box in the Staffroom. I will collect them on Monday 14 January. If students are absent from the Tutorial, please ask them to complete a questionnaire as soon as possible afterwards, and return to my pigeon-hole in the Staffroom.

Many thanks.

Terri

APPENDIX V

To: All second year students, except those taking 12-unit AVCEs.

I should be very grateful for your help with a research project I am carrying out at the University of Southampton. The research is focusing on the effects of AS levels on students' career and/or university intentions.

As part of my research I need to ask second year students some key questions. I should therefore be grateful if you would complete a questionnaire and return it to me via the brown envelope supplied to your Personal Tutor.

Your responses will remain confidential and I will not identify you in my research report.

If you would like to find out more about my research, please feel free to contact me via my pigeon-hole in the Staffroom.

Many thanks

Terri Sandison

APPENDIX VI (a)

Research and Graduate School of
Education
University of Southampton
Highfield
SOUTHAMPTON SO17 1BJ

8 February 2002

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate further in research I am carrying out at QMC through the University of Southampton. You may remember completing a brief questionnaire for me which asked questions about your career intentions before you started at College and now. My overall research focuses on the broad impacts of AS levels.

I have now analysed the questionnaire responses, together with information about students' programmes of study at AS/AVCE level, and would like to follow up by talking with you and some other selected students in more depth. I plan to carry out interviews/discussions with groups of four students during Personal Tutorial time, covering the following topics:

- Whether the subjects you chose at A2 level were the ones you originally thought you would continue beyond the first year
- How difficult it was to choose your A2 subjects, and what influenced your choices
- What impact, if any, your experiences of AS/AVCE level have had on your career/university intentions.

I anticipate that the discussions will last about 40 minutes. The discussion will be completely confidential and you will not be named in my research report, or any other document produced. However, I would like your permission to allow me to tape-record the discussion so that I don't have to take detailed notes. No-one else but me will listen to the tape.

If you are willing to participate I would like to invite you to come to Room 540 (next to the vending machines near the Library) at:

10.40 am on Thursday

I will ensure that your Personal Tutor knows you will be missing from the Tutorial. I'd be grateful if you could complete the attached slip and return it to Reception (there is no need to put it in an envelope unless you wish). If you have any concerns or questions, please contact me either by putting a note in my pigeon-hole in the Staffroom, or by E-mailing me at the University at the following address: T.J.SANDISON@soton.ac.uk. Many thanks for your help.

Yours sincerely

Terri Sandison

APPENDIX VI (b)

I am willing/not willing (*please delete as applicable*)

to participate in a group interview/discussion with Terri Sandison on

Thursday (date)

Name Tutor Group

Please return slip to Reception

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES

Student	GCSE score	M/ F	AS at start	AS grades	2nd year courses	Avg AS score	Career aim at start	Career aim now	Course change	Group
Matt	5.9	M	5	Maths U German D Business Studies C IT D General Studies E	A2 Business Studies A2 IT <i>AS Law</i> <i>AS Accounting</i>	1.6	None	Employment in business <i>Clearer</i>	Yes	5
Holly	5.1	F	4	Sports Studies E Biology U AVCE Leisure & Rec	A2 Sports Studies AVCE Leisure & Rec <i>AS Psychology</i>	0.5	Something to do with sport	Unclear <i>Less clear</i>	Yes	3
Noel	6	M	5	Maths E German E Geography E English Lang B Physics D	A2 Maths A2 English Lang A2 Physics	2	None	Gap year, then university (but not sure what to study) <i>Clearer</i>	No	6
Linda	5	F	5	AVCE Travel & Tourism Psychology D Sociology C Biology E	AVCE Travel & Tourism A2 Psychology A2 Sociology	3	Something related to travel	Gap year, then probably tourism degree <i>Same</i>	Yes	8
Jilly	4.9	F	4	Biology E Photography U Sociology U	A2 Photography A2 Sociology <i>AS General Studies</i>	0.3	None	Gap year, then possibly photography course at college of art <i>Clearer</i>	Yes	6
Todd	5.6	M	4	Art E IT D Maths D Photography U	A2 Art A2 Maths <i>AS Media Studies</i> <i>AS Critical Thinking</i>	1.25	Possibly university (not sure what course)	Civil engineering traineeship <i>Changed</i>	Yes	3
Rona	6.4	F	5	History C Maths U English Lit C Geography E General Studies D	A2 History A2 English Lit <i>AS/A2 Sociology (in one year)</i>	1.8	Law degree	Gap year, then degree in history or law <i>Less clear</i>	No	4

Jody	7	F	5	Sports Studies A Geography A Psychology A English Lang A Biology A	A2 Geography A2 Psychology A2 Biology	5	PE teacher	Psychology degree then possibly teaching, marketing or PR <i>Less clear</i>	No	4
Georgia	4.9	F	4	Geography C Biology D Art U Chemistry U	A2 Geography A2 Biology <i>AS Sociology</i> <i>AS Psychology</i>	1.25	Something to do with Geography or a caring career	Degree in Environmental protection at FE college <i>Clearer</i>	Yes	7
Steve	6.3	M	5	IT B Maths B Geography C Business Studies C Accounting D	A2 IT A2 Maths A2 Geography	3.2	Employment in computing	Possible work-based training in computing <i>Same</i>	Yes	7
Lisa	6	F	5	IT C History D Psychology C English Lang D Music C	A2 IT A2 Psychology A2 English Lang	2.6	University (not sure what course)	Gap year, followed by degree in psychology <i>Clearer</i>	Yes	7
Sue	5.7	F	4	AVCE Travel & Tourism Performing Arts C Spanish E Media Studies C	AVCE Travel & Tourism A2 Media Studies <i>AS Psychology</i>	3	Acting	Tourism management degree <i>Changed</i>	Yes	4
Tania	4.7	F	4	AVCE Travel & Tourism Psychology D Geography U General Studies E	AVCE Travel & Tourism A2 Psychology <i>GCSE Spanish</i>	1	Travel industry employment	Travel agency employment <i>Same</i>	Yes	8
Tony	5.4	M	4	History D Sociology C Music Technology C Photography U	A2 History A2 Sociology A2 Photography	2	Photography-related degree	Humanities degree then possibly primary teaching <i>Changed</i>	Yes	4
Liz	6.1	F	5	Geography U Law E Psychology C Sports Studies D English Literature D	A2 Geography A2 Law A2 Psychology	1.6	Criminology degree	Gap year, followed by criminology degree <i>Same</i>	Yes	7

Clive	6.1	M	5	Geography C Physics C Maths U Biology D History C	A2 Geography A2 Physics A2 History	2	Meteorology degree	History and International Relations degree <i>Changed</i>	No	4
Jack	7.4	M	5	History B English Lang B Chemistry B Maths C Politics A	A2 History A2 English Lang A2 Politics	4	Degree in something followed by Journalism	Politics degree followed by Journalism <i>Clearer</i>	Yes	7
Fiona	6.9	F	5	Geography B Maths B Biology A Chemistry A Philosophy A	A2 Maths A2 Biology A2 Chemistry	4.6	Genetics degree	Genetics degree <i>Same</i>	Yes	8
Anthony	5.6	M	5	Geography D Business Studies D IT E Physics D German D	A2 Geography A2 Business Studies A2 Physics	1.8	Pilot	Business Studies degree <i>Changed</i>	No	4

Entries in italics denote courses started in second year

APPENDIX VIII

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Students who changed their choice of courses (Group 1, 3, 5, 7)

- 1 What AS/AVCE levels did you study and why did you choose these?
- 2 When you started your AS courses, did you have a feeling for which subjects you would carry on to A2?
- 3 Thinking about the subjects you then decided not to carry through to A2 – what made you change your mind about them?
- 4 When did you change your subjects choices, and why at this particular point?
- 5 Did you give these subjects less priority in your study after you decided?
- 6 Do you feel it was good for you to study a greater number of subjects in your first year? Why/why not?

Students who did not change their choice of courses (Group 2, 4, 6, 8)

- 1 What AS/AVCE levels did you study and why did you choose these?
- 2 When you started your AS courses, did you have a feeling for which subjects you would carry on to A2?
- 3 Did you give these subjects less priority in your study?
- 4 Did you consider at any stage changing your choice of subjects?
- 5 Do you feel it was good for you to study a greater number of subjects in your first year? Why/why not?

Students who changed/clarified their choice of career/HE (Group 3, 4, 5, 6)

- 1 What ideas did you have about your future career/HE studies when you started your AS levels?
- 2 How different are these ideas now?
- 3 What made you change your mind about your career/HE studies?
- 4 If you had only studied 3 subjects at AS/AVCE level, do you think your career/HE choice would be different now? If so, how?

Students who did not change their choice of career/HE (Group 7, 8)

- 1 What career/HE intention do you have?
- 2 How long have you had this intention?
- 3 Did you pick AS level subjects which were needed for your intended career? Which ones?
- 4 Did you pick some AS level subjects which were contrasts to those needed for your intended career? Which ones?
- 5 How easy was it for you to choose which subjects to carry on to A2?
- 6 What influenced your choice of A2 subjects?

Students who still have no idea regarding their future career (Group 1, 2)

- 1 Why did you choose to stay on in education after 16?
- 2 Why did you choose to stay on for a second year at QMC?
- 3 How difficult was it for you to choose your AS courses? Why?
- 4 How difficult was it for you to choose your A2 courses? Why?
- 5 If you had studied less subjects at AS level would this have made it easier to choose a career, or more difficult?
- 6 Is higher education a possibility for you in the future? Why/why not?
- 7 Have you sought careers advice?
 - If yes, how? How helpful has it been?
 - If no, why not?

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