University of Southampton

"Policy Espousal, Policy Enactment and Policy Experienced: A Study of the origins, tensions and contradictions embedded in the development of GNVQs between 1992 - 2000 in relation to student progression"

Elizabeth Jane Hodgson-Wilson

B.Sc. (Hons.), P.G.C.E., RSA (T.E.F.L.), M.Ed., M.Sc., C.Q.S.W.

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Faculty of Social Sciences

April 2004

"Policy Espousal, Policy Enactment and Policy Experienced: A Study of the origins, tensions and contradictions embedded in the development of GNVQs between 1992 - 2000 in relation to student progression"

Dedication

For Patrick, Ted, Mum and Dad

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Doctor of Philosophy

Policy Espousal, Policy Enactment and Policy Experienced: A Study of the origin, tensions and contradictions embedded in the development of GNVQs between 1992 - 2000 in relation to student progression.

by Elizabeth Jane Hodgson-Wilson

This study seeks to examine the issues surrounding the introduction of a new education policy in England and Wales in the 1990s, namely GNVQs, and the extent to which these new vocational qualifications became established as an acceptable progression route to higher education and training between 1992 and 2000. The thesis is presented at two levels: the origin and rationale for the Government policy and some fieldwork which explores the impact of the policy on students, and their experience of GNVQs and progression to higher education.

The research draws on a range of theoretical perspectives both macro and micro to evaluate Government policy and political processes and to interpret the research data. The fieldwork is mainly qualitative in approach and considers GNVQs' fitness for purpose in providing students with appropriate knowledge and skills to facilitate their progression to H.E. The study focuses on the crucial issue of parity of esteem and why this major national initiative failed to achieve the Government's policy objectives. Contradictions and tensions within GNVQ philosophy and practice are explored along with the complex interplay between stakeholders in the policy-making and implementation process. The final chapter considers the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ policy enactment in relation to the policy experienced and the lessons to be learnt for the future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the continued help, guidance and encouragement from my tutor, Nick Foskett who, despite my numerous personal problems and two changes of direction helped to keep me focused and motivated. Without his support I would not have completed this thesis.

I must also acknowledge the encouragement from my late Mother and my late husbands, Patrick and Ted who so dearly wanted me to complete this work and despite their respective illnesses, never objected to the time set aside for study and research.

Grateful thanks are due to Alan Firth, who enhanced my I.T. knowledge and skills and helped with the final layout of this thesis.

Outline Contents

Abstract		
Acknowledgements		
Outline Contents		i
Contents		ii
List of Figures		vi
Abbreviations		viii
Chapter 1	Introduction - the origin and development of GNVQs	1
Chapter 2	Policy Implementation	58
Chapter 3	In search of the holy grail: the quest for 'parity of esteem'	97
Chapter 4	Research Methodology	148
Chapter 5	Analysis of results: Phase I Research	186
Chapter 6	Analysis of results: Phase II Research	211
Chapter 7	Analysis of results: Phase III Research	265
Chapter 8	Progression, Parity of Esteem and Policy Objectives	297
References		338
Appendices		358

Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

Outline Contents i

Contents ii

List of Figures vi

Abbreviations viii

Chapter 1 1

Introduction - the origin and development of GNVQs

1.1 Government policy on vocational education and training 5
1.2 The structure of the GNVQ award 14
1.3 Assessment and grading of the award 16
1.4 Underpinning political and economic philosophy 17
1.5 Mainstream implementation of GNVQs 35
1.6 So were GNVQs fundamentally flawed? 42
1.7 A changing political context and a change of approach 48
1.8 Summary 53

Chapter 2 58

Policy Implementation

2.1 Theoretical perspectives on policy implementation 58

2.2 Contradictions and tensions underpinning GNVQ philosophy and practice 62

2.2.1 'Progressivism', 'technical rationalism' and 'free marketism' 62
2.2.2 Student autonomy, empowerment and vocational progressivism 65

2.3 Political processes and the definition of research agendas 84

2.4 Summary 93

Chapter 3 **97**

In search of the 'holy grail': the quest for 'parity of esteem'

3.1 The education policy context 97
3.2 The quest for 'parity of esteem' 103
3.3 The meanings and implications of 'parity of esteem' 105
3.4 GNVQs and A-Levels compared 109
3.5 Student take-up of GNVQs and their perceptions of them 115
3.6 GNVQ and A-Level completion rates 117
3.7 GNVQs and progression to Higher Education 118
3.8 Government strategies to promote GNVQ progression to Higher Education 132
3.9 An historical perspective on vocational education 138
3.10 Summary 142

Chapter 4 **148**

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction: What is knowledge? What is truth? What is social reality? 148
4.1.1 Philosophical issues underpinning research 149
4.1.2 The value base underpinning my research 153
4.1.3 Why do social research? 158
4.2 An overview of the Research Methodology 161
4.3 Reliability and Validity 163
4.4 The Key Research Questions 168
4.4.1 Key Question 1 168
4.4.2 Key Question 2 169
4.4.3 Key Question 3 169
4.4.4 Key Question 4 170
4.5 Phase 1 of the Research 171
4.5.1 Selection of the sampling frame 171
4.5.2 Ethical issues 172
4.5.3 The Survey Approach 176
4.5.4 The pilot study or 'pre-test' 178
4.6 Phase II of the Research 182

4.7 Phase III of the Research 183
4.8 Summary 184

Chapter 5 **186**

Analysis of results: Phase I Research

5.1 Introduction 186
5.2 Descriptive statistics from Phase I Research 189
5.2.1 Career choices 191
5.2.2 Links with previous courses 195
5.2.3 Additionality 197
5.2.4 Work experience 204
5.3 Summary 205

Chapter 6 **211**

Students' progression to Higher Education
Analysis of results: Phase II Research

6.1 Introduction 211
6.2 The national picture: UCAS progression statistics 211
6.3 Overview of my cohort's completion/destination statistics 219
6.4 Analysis of Phase II Fieldwork 224
6.4.1 Progression to H.E. and admission requirements 226
6.4.2 Proportion of GNVQ students on the H.E. courses 228
6.4.3 GNVQ students' general progress on H.E. courses 230
6.4.4 Perceived differences between GNVQ and H.E. teaching and learning styles 235
6.4.5 Students' perceptions about the value of doing work experience placements 236
6.4.6 Aspects of the H.E. course with which GNVQ students felt most confident with 240
6.4.7 Aspects of the H.E. course with which GNVQ students were having difficulties 243
6.4.8 Perceived usefulness of GNVQ for H.E. 251
6.5 Summary 259

Chapter 7 265

Perspectives from Higher Education
Analysis of results: Phase III Research

7.1 Introduction 265
7.2 Views from other H.E. tutors 266
7.3 Follow-up interviews with H.E. tutors 271
7.3.1 Familiarity with GNVQ course structure 272
7.3.2 Suitability of GNVQs as H.E. entry qualifications 275
7.3.3 Ability range of GNVQ Advanced students 279
7.3.4 The main difficulties of GNVQ students 283
7.3.5 The main strengths of GNVQ students 286
7.4 Summary 288

Chapter 8 297

Progression, Parity of Esteem and Policy Objectives

8.1 Introduction 297
8.2 Policy Background and Key Findings 299
8.2.1 Policy issues re-visited 299
8.2.2 Key Questions and Findings - Phase I Fieldwork 302
8.2.3 Key Questions and Findings - Phase II Fieldwork 304
8.2.4 Key Questions and Findings - Phase III Fieldwork 315
8.3 Review of strengths & weaknesses of the research methods 318
8.4 Policy implementation - conflict or consensus? 322
8.5 The quest for 'parity of esteem' 325
8.6 Lessons for the future 334

References 336

Appendices 358

Appendix 1 Questionnaire Phase I Fieldwork 358
Appendix 2 Questionnaire Phase II Fieldwork 362
Appendix 3 Questionnaire Phase III Fieldwork 365

List of Figures

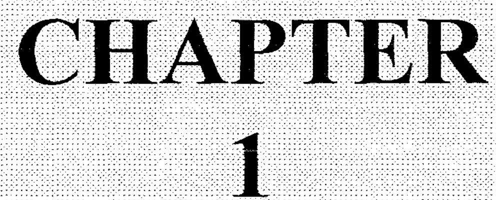
1.1	National qualification framework	8
1.2	The phasing-in of GNVQs	11
1.3	The structure of GNVQs, entry requirements and equivalence	15
1.4	Student registrations by programme area	35
2.1	What managers should do to implement policy successfully: the 'top-down' approach	59
3.1	Percentage of 18-21 year olds in Higher Education 1960 -1992	102
3.2	A-Level entries 1996	112
4.1	Sample size - GNVQ students - Phase I Research	176
5.2.1	Student numbers by course and college	189
5.2.2	Students' ethnicity	190
5.2.3	Students' social class	190
5.2.4	GNVQ Health & Social Care students' career choices	191
5.2.5	GNVQ Business students' career choices	192
5.2.6	Reasons for enrolling on a GNVQ course	194
5.2.7	Students' perceptions of how GNVQ Advanced Level differs from previous courses which they have taken	196
5.2.8	Additionality	198
5.2.9	Applications for a University or professional training course	199
5.2.10	Applications by type of establishment	200
5.2.11	Students' reasons for applying for their particular H.E.I.s	201
5.2.12	The perceived value of GNVQ teaching and learning activities	202
5.2.13	How GNVQs help students with their HE/professional training courses	203
5.2.14	How GNVQs help students with their future careers	204
5.2.15	Perceived value of work experience in assisting students' progression	205
6.2.1	GNVQ applications to H.E.	213
6.2.2	Applicants accepted for H.E. courses with GNVQ as their main entry qualification for England 2001	218
6.3.1	Overall GNVQ results for the four F.E. Colleges	220
6.3.2	GNVQ results by individual Colleges	220
6.3.3	GNVQ results by course	221
6.3.4	GNVQ completion rates by age	222
6.3.5	GNVQ completion rates by gender	222
6.3.6	GNVQ student destinations	223

7.1 Entry requirements by course type and subjects 267
7.2 Percentage of GNVQ students in relation to other entrants John Moore's University, 1996-2000 289

Abbreviations

A-LEVEL	Advanced Level (General Certificate of Education)
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
AS LEVEL	Advanced Supplementary Level
AVCE	Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CAT	College of Advanced Technology
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
CHE	College of Higher Education
C&G	City and Guilds of London Institute
CPVE	Certificate of Pre-vocational Education
CTC	City Technology College
DE	Department of Employment
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
ED	Employment Department
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FEU	Further Education Unit
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualification
HEFC	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistical Agency
HND	Higher National Diploma
HRM	Human Resources Management
I.B.	International Baccalaureat
I.P.P.R.	Institute for Public Policy Research
I.T.B.	Industrial Training Board
I.T.T.	Initial Teacher Training
LEA	Local Education Authority
MSC	Manpower Services Commission
NEAB	Northern Examination and Assessment Board
NCVQ	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
NTETS	National Training and Education Targets
NUS	National Union of Students

NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OfSTED	Her Majesty's Inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education
O.T.	Occupational Therapy
O.U.	Open University
PAMS	Professions Allied to Medicine
QCA	Qualifications Curriculum Council
RSA	Royal Society of Arts.Examinations Board
SCAA	Schools Curriculum Assessment Authority
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SVQ	Scottish Vocational Qualification
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council
TES	Times Educational Supplement
TVEI	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UVP	Unified Vocational Preparation
UWT	University of Women Teachers
YOP	Youth Opportunity Programme
YT(S)	Youth Training (Scheme)



Introduction - the origin and development of GNVQs

Chapter 1

Introduction - the origin and development of GNVQs

This study is an investigation into the impact and implementation of a specific piece of education policy between 1992 - 2000, namely, the introduction of GNVQs into post-16 education and training.

The study is presented in four main sections. The first section (Chapter 1) explores the macro-political context of the policy and the origin and development of GNVQs. The second section (Chapter 2) analyses the contradictions and tensions underpinning the GNVQ curriculum, its philosophy and practice, while the third section (Chapter 3), considers the quest for "parity of esteem" and the extent to which policy objectives were achieved. This is followed by the last section (Chapters 4-7) involving some empirical research, which investigates the impact of the GNVQ policy on a sample of GNVQ students and H.E. tutors, while the concluding chapter (Chapter 8) examines the extent to which the GNVQ policy actually bridged the "academic-vocational" divide and facilitated student progression to higher education (H.E.) and training.

But what is education policy?

A policy is a normative statement with an implied administrative framework. Within the context of education, a policy is usually written down and/or

enshrined in legislation in the form of an Education Act or White Paper. It sets down a set of principles which are designed to bring about desired goals (Trowler, 2003). However, this definition has its limitations. It is simplistic and implies a static model that does not adequately capture the complexity of the 'policy-making process'. Indeed, policy-making usually involves a complex interplay between the power-holders, different political parties and various 'stakeholders' and interest groups. As Trowler observes:

> *"There is usually conflict among those who make policy, as well as those who put it into practice, about what the important issues or problems for policy are, and about desired goals.*
>
> *Interpreting policy is an active process: policy statements are almost always subject to multiple interpretations depending upon the standpoints of the people doing the interpretative 'work'.*
>
> *The practice of policy on the ground is extremely complex, both that being 'described' by policy and that intended to put policy into effect."* *(Trowler, 2003 p. 96)*

Policy-making is frequently conceptualised as a continuum of two 'ideal types'. At one end is the "rational" goal-orientated approach (Etzioni, 1967 p. 385) which assumes that policy-makers perceive a problem, formulate a range of solutions and then choose the most appropriate one. It is a very rational, goal-orientated approach to decision-making. By contrast, the "incrementalist" model put forward by Lindblom argues that policy-making is

in reality a process of 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959). Thus policies are often contradictory and unco-ordinated: they evolve through various stages as a result of pressure from competing factions and circumstances. Although these two 'ideal types' may not exist in their 'pure forms', the models can be applied to a range of different decision-making contexts.

Thus, when reviewing educational policy-making between 1944-1979, Trowler argues that it was essentially the 'incremental' model that was evident. Policy evolved through negotiation and compromise as a result of the post-war broad consensus that existed between the two main political parties i.e. Labour and Conservative (Trowler, 2003 p. 35). Indeed, between 1944 - 1974 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and teachers were active partners in the policy-making process. However, this model changed after 1979 when policy-making became more ideologically driven and more focused on means to ends. At this point, LEAs and teachers became marginalised in the decision-making process.

Indeed, it would be naive to think that policy-making is not a political process. Policy-making is always the result of an interface between competing and conflicting interest groups who are trying to shape education policy to their perspectives and goals. However, Governments do have the power to enable or restrict the role of the various stakeholders and interest groups. Thus after 1979, a number of actors in the process became increasingly marginalised and 'left out in the cold'. After 1979 tensions were evident between two rival factions - the "centralists" who wanted increased

Government control over education, schools, colleges and the curriculum, and those who favoured "de-regulation". The results of the 'rational' decision-making model are evident in three Education Acts, 1980, 1986 and 1988.

So how is education policy made?

According to Rein there are three main stages in policy-making.

- problem (or issue) setting
- the 'mobilisation of the fine structure of Government action'
- the 'achievement of settlements (compromises which establish a framework for policy and practice) in the face of dilemmas and trade-offs among values (Rein, 1983 p.211 quoted in Trowler, op. cit., p. 96)

The first stage involves defining the problem that needs to be addressed. In the education context, debate may be stimulated by politicians e.g. Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1976 which stimulated the 'Great Debate'. Issues may be raised in the media or by civil servants such as the Education Inspectorates or the DfE. In some cases employer organisations e.g. the CBI or Institute of Directors, or even a right-wing pressure group like the Institute of Economic Affairs may raise concerns which spark off the debate. The second stage revolves around the agencies in which the discussion will take place. Again, in an education context this could be schools and colleges and/or Higher Education Institutions (H.E.I.s), LEAs, teacher associations or awarding bodies, depending on the nature of the 'problem'. The third stage revolves around a complex interplay between the

defined 'problem' and the agendas of the various 'stakeholders' who have been drawn in to the consultations and policy-making processes. As Trowler argues:-

> *"Policies are always the product of compromises between multiple agendas and influences. The actual outcome, the policy as articulated, will be the result of a micro-political process and 'muddling through' ".* *(Trowler, op. cit. p.98)*

In order to try to exemplify the complexities of the education policy-making process, I have chosen a key national policy initiative as a case study, namely, the introduction and implementation of a new national vocational qualification (i.e. GNVQs), which were intended to address a number of national 'problems'.

But how, and from where did GNVQs start?

1.1 Government policy on vocational education and training

In the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES/DE, 1991),* the government proposed that a high-quality vocational alternative to GCE Advanced Levels should be developed for the increasing number of young people staying on in full-time education. This policy was identified as 'an important priority' and was considered 'a matter of urgency' with the expectation that the new general NVQs should be in place by the end of 1992. The qualification should embody the following characteristics:

i) It should be more relevant than GCE A-Levels to future employment.

ii) It should involve students in more practical activities.

iii) It should develop core skills and a body of knowledge in order to provide a foundation from which students could progress to employment, further training or further education, including higher education.

iv) It should be available in colleges and perhaps schools.

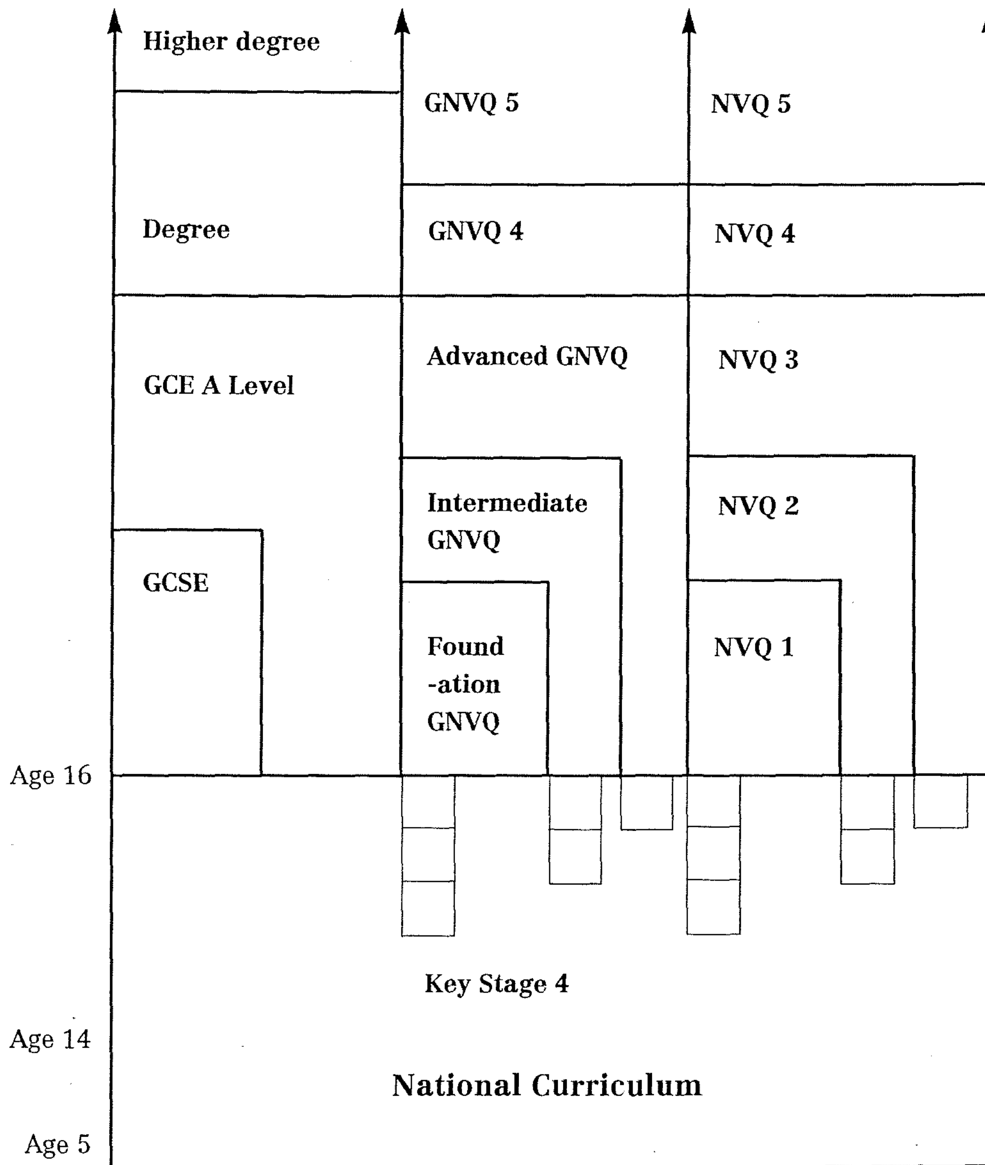
v) It should be of 'equal standing' with academic qualifications and distinct from occupationally-specific NVQs, but related to them.

The new qualifications became known as the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) led by Gilbert Jessup, was made responsible for developing them between June 1991 and September 1992, in partnership with three of the main vocational awarding bodies, BTEC, RSA and City & Guilds. GNVQs would form part of the Government's new national qualifications framework with three tracks which would enable progression to higher education and/or employment as well as transfer across the tracks. (See Figure 1.1)

This was the first time that a Government document had set out a qualifications framework in diagrammatic form and according to Gilbert Jessup at NCVQ it marked "a major conceptual breakthrough" (quoted in Sharp, 1998 p. 302). Thus GNVQs were a fundamental part of Government policy which aimed to address some of the weaknesses of the existing education system, by enhancing participation of those staying on in full-time education. The new curriculum was also introduced to reduce the wastage from GCE A/L non-completion and failure rates identified by the Audit Commission/OfSTED (1993) by providing a different type of post-16 curriculum with greater relevance for students and employers. The policy also aimed to rationalise the current plethora of vocational qualifications and progression routes with the intention that GNVQs, together with the already established National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), would become the main provision for vocational education and training in England and Wales. However, a variety of external influences at both macro and micro levels affected the introduction of GNVQs, resulting in a very troubled implementation and some unintended consequences.

In order to make sense of the complex strands and issues, this thesis will offer a time framework for a critique of Government policy on vocational education and training and its implementation between 1992-2000, whilst simultaneously reviewing the research literature on GNVQ developments, although it is recognised that this is a somewhat artificial device used for heuristic purposes.

Figure 1.1 The National qualification framework



Source: (FEFC, 1994 p. 31)

Over the eight year period, there are three discernible phases of the implementation of GNVQs which are characterised by particular watersheds.

Phase 1 1992 - 1993:

This phase saw the introduction of the GNVQ Pilot involving GNVQ 'Mark 1' with internal assessment based at the *'performance criteria'* level, external tests comprising *both* multiple-choice *and* open-ended questions with a pass mark *set at 80%* and 'core skills' integrated within assignments.This was followed by initial reactions from teachers, students, Higher Education Institutions (H.E.I.s), inspectorates, Government bodies and researchers.

Phase II 1994 - 1996:

Phase II was characterised by mainstream implementation, with some minor modifications to the assessment regime (notably, a move to *element-based assessment* and the *multiple choice only external tests*) embodied in GNVQ 'Mark 2'. But these were only partly successful and vociferous complaints from various stakeholders, namely, GNVQ teachers and lecturers in schools and colleges, students, employers, H.E., Awarding Bodies, FEDA (the Further Education Development Agency) and academic researchers who demanded further revisions to the assessment and grading systems of GNVQs. These complaints were funnelled into the Capey Review and culminated in a report (Capey, 1995). This resulted in substantial revisions to the original GNVQ model and gave rise to GNVQ 'Mark 3' which was

radically different from the 'Mark 1' model. The issues were also recognised by the Dearing Report in March 1996 (SCAA, 1996).

Phase III 1997 - 2000:

Finally, a changing political context with a new Government in office marked the beginning to this phase, and resulted in a substantial shift in the qualifications debate and a strategic review of policy options influenced by the Labour 'think tank', notably Ken Spours (1995; 1997;) and the London Institute of Education. The new policy drive towards 'inclusive learning' and a unified qualifications system resulted in the implementation of 'Curriculum 2000' from September 2000. This involved a re-alignment of GCE Advanced Levels, GNVQs, GCSEs and NVQs through changes in assessment and modularisation strategies and the emergence of GNVQ 'Mark 4'.

Phase 1 September 1992- August 1993

The first GNVQ courses were piloted in 1992 in 115 schools and colleges. Initially they were available at two levels - Intermediate and Advanced, to correspond to GCSEs and GCE A-Levels respectively, and in five vocational areas, namely, Art & Design; Business; Health & Social Care; Leisure & Tourism and Manufacturing. The GNVQ Intermediate and Advanced courses were designed to run as one and two year programmes respectively. It was planned that a total of 15 GNVQ programme areas would be phased in at three levels (Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced) over a 5 year period. (See Figure 1.2)

Figure 1.2: The phasing-in of GNVQs

Intermediate and Advanced

	1992-3	*1993-4*	*1994-5*	*1995-6*	*1996-7*
Health & social care	pilot				
Leisure & tourism	pilot				
Business	pilot				
Art & design	pilot				
Manufacturing	pilot				
Science		pilot			
Constr & the built environt		pilot			
Hospitality & catering		pilot			
Engineering			pilot	(pilot)	
Information technology			pilot	(pilot)	
Distribution			pilot	(pilot)	
Media: communications & prod			pilot	(pilot)	
Management studies (advanced)			pilot	(pilot)	
Landbased & environt industries					(pilot)
Performing arts					(pilot)

In addition, advanced GNVQ in management studies will be piloted in 1994-96

Foundation

	1992-3	*1993-4*	*1994-5*	*1995-6*	*1996-7*
Health & social care		pilot			
Leisure & tourism		pilot			
Business		pilot			
Art & design		pilot			
Manufacturing		pilot			
Science			pilot		
Constr & the built environt			pilot		
Hospitality & catering			pilot		
Engineering			pilot		
Information technology			pilot		
Distribution				pilot	
Media: communications & prod				pilot	
Landbased & environt industries					(pilot)
Performing arts					(pilot)

**Restricted take-up (mainly limited to those centres offering intermediate GNVQs in the same vocational areas)*

Source: NVQ Monitor autumn 1994

By 1993/94 the Phase 1 Pilot areas were fully operational and the results of the first completing student cohorts were surveyed in two national surveys, one from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) which focused on the school sector (OfSTED, 1994), and another from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which evaluated implementation in colleges (FEFC, 1994). In addition, a national survey report was also produced by the University of London Institute of Education in conjunction with the Further Education Unit (FEU) and the Nuffield Foundation. This was an interim report of a joint project on the evolution of GNVQs which focused on enrolment and delivery patterns and their policy implications (Wolf, 1994).

The FEFC report identified 'a number of teething problems' which were evident with GNVQ implementation in colleges, involving its management as well as the curriculum design. There were also concerns from colleges and students on the GNVQ Advanced courses (as well as their parents) about the acceptability of GNVQs for entry to higher education (H.E.) and training. Thus "student progression" was emerging as a potentially serious problem which could undermine the credibility of the new vocational awards. Nevertheless, according to the Interim Report from the Institute of Education (Wolf, 1994), student aspirations for progression to H.E.were high as the following extract illustrates:

> "*Very large numbers of GNVQ students aspire to higher education. Almost two-thirds of current Advanced students expect that, three years from now, they will be following higher*

education courses or in specialist training (mostly nursing). Forty per cent of Intermediate students have the same aspirations and expectations. They intend to progress via Advanced GNVQ or other full-time courses, to higher education and advanced specialist training. Centre staff express concerns over the ability of many students to cope with Advanced GNVQs so these latter aspirations may not be entirely realistic. Overall, however, students' plans signal large increases in the demand for H.E.".

(Wolf, 1994 p.6)

In 1993-4 some 83,000 students were enrolled on GNVQ intermediate and advanced courses in schools and colleges, of whom approximately 53,000 attended F.E. colleges. The TES and other publications concluded that current enrolment patterns for 16-19 year olds indicated that GNVQs were the fastest growing sector of the educational 'market'. However, they were not even at this early stage, bridging the academic-vocational divide.

The report of the Institute on Education concluded:

"GNVQs are developing as an educational qualification, not a vocational one. There is little evidence so far that they are succeeding in providing a genuine pathway to, or bridge with, NVQs and other specific awards...

Students do not combine GNVQs with NVQs; the awards are not replacing NVQs and the preferred progression routes identified by GNVQ students are educational, not vocational"...

Current patterns are likely to create major further increases in the demand for higher education." *(Wolf, ibid pp. 54-55)*

1.2 The structure of the GNVQ award

GNVQs were initially offered at three levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced. They were made up of combinations of mandatory and optional units, plus three mandatory 'core skills' units, which were re-named 'key skills' following the Dearing Report (1996). GNVQ Intermediate was deemed to be equivalent to four GCSEs at grade C or above, or an NVQ at Level 2, while the Advanced GNVQ was supposed to be equivalent to two GCE A-Level passes, or NVQ Level 3. The following table clarifies the structure of GNVQs in terms of the three levels, their normal entry requirements, duration, and their equivalence with NVQs, GCSEs and GCE A-Levels. (See Figure 1.3) GNVQs incorporated four main design features:

- unit-based specifications involving complete coverage by students and their demonstration of 'mastery knowledge'
- active and participative learning through the compilation of a portfolio
- the development of core skills, and
- outcomes-based assessment involving a range of complex procedures

Figure 1.3 The structure of GNVQs, entry requirements and equivalence

Level	*Normal entry requirements*	*Vocational units*	*Core skills units*	*Normal duration*	*Broad equivalence*
Foundation	No entry qualifications	3 mandatory units 3 optional units from different vocational areas	Level 1 in communication application of number, and information technology	1 year	4 GCSEs at grades D to G; 1 NVQ at level 1
Intermediate	1 or 2 GCSEs at grades A to D or a foundation GNVQ	4 mandatory units 2 optional units	Level 2 in communication application of number, and information technology	1 year	4-5 GCEs at grades A to C; or 1 NVQ at level 2
Advanced	4 or 5 GCSEs at grades A to C or an interm-ediate GNVQ	8 mandatory units 4 optional units additional units, if desired	Level 3 in communication, application of number and information technology	2 years	2 GCE A levels* or 1 NVQ at level 3

** The 12 vocational units of the advanced GNVQ were designed to be equivalent to two GCE A levels. In addition, there is the requirement that core skills be included in the GNVQ curriculum.*

Source: (FEFC, 1994 p. 8)

The GNVQ Advanced award comprised eight mandatory vocational units, and four optional vocational units. The three mandatory key skills covered application of number, information technology and communication. There were also three non-mandatory key skills: working with others; managing your own performance and problem solving.

Each GNVQ subject and level had a 'specification' - a form of syllabus in which knowledge was split into 'elements' with 'performance criteria' which described the outcomes of studying the particular vocational unit. These performance criteria were preceded by a prescriptive statement "A student must ..." followed by words like 'describe', 'explain', 'analyse', 'compare', 'evaluate', 'investigate' and 'recommend' etc.

1.3 Assessment and grading of the award

In order to achieve a pass, GNVQ students were required to produce substantial evidence in the form of a portfolio that they had met *all the requirements of the units*. Four grading themes were used to determine whether students were eligible for a Merit or a Distinction:
i) Planning,
ii) Information Seeking and Handling,
iii) Evaluation and
iv) Quality of outcomes.
Students were set assignments to research and also had to demonstrate competence in the three key skills. Unlike GCE A-Levels, there were no three-hour terminal examinations but externally-set multiple choice, one-hour tests on usually six mandatory units (depending on the subject area).

Thus GNVQs were fundamentally different from GCE A-Levels: they were competence-based qualifications with an emphasis on students'

demonstration of 'outcomes'. The curriculum was less teacher-centred and teacher-controlled. The role of the teacher was to guide and support students rather than to deliver knowledge in a didactic manner. There was considerable emphasis on the students managing their own learning, planning, problem-solving, evaluation, developing their research skills and their practical application of knowledge. Teamwork, work experience and knowledge and understanding of the world of work were also important features of GNVQs as was student-centred, active-learning. Compared with A-Levels, GNVQs were

> *"less directive, less theoretical, less classroom-based. These features are in keeping with GNVQ's vocational and practical nature and are central to its philosophy". (Edwards, 1997 p.9)*

But from where did this philosophy derive and what was the rationale for it?

1.4 Underpinning political and economic philosophy

This research study is located within the economic, political and philosophical debate on the role of education and training, a debate which can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century with the introduction of state-controlled education and the perceived links between education and the economy and political stability.

GNVQs developed out of the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) and SVQ (Scottish Vocational Qualification) competence-based system of

vocational qualifications which involved assessing an individual's performance in the workplace (Bates, 1995). Although some researchers have traced the philosophical roots of this movement to the outcomes-based, behaviouristic educational psychology evident in American teacher education programmes in the 1960s and 1970s (Ashworth and Saxon, 1990; Hyland, 1994; Wolf, 1995) and to the adoption of these ideas by the Manpower Services Commission in Britain in its 'New Training Initiative' of 1981 (Jessup, 1991), other researchers argued that the policy derived from a more complex interplay of economic, institutional and political factors which were operating in the particular British context at that time (Marsh, 1995; Williams and Raggatt, 1998).

Research conducted by Williams and Raggatt (1998) based on 29 in-depth interviews and confidential semi-structured interviews with policy makers and other relevant informants, identified four catalysts to the adoption of the competence-based qualifications which was evident in the *Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales.* (MSC/DES, 1986). According to Williams and Raggatt there were four major inter-related factors which provided the thrust to the adoption of competence-based qualifications policy in Britain in the 1980s.

> *"i) The new 'vocationalism' in education*
> *ii) Economic changes and their effects on work and employment*
> *iii) The need to reform work-based restrictive practices in skills formation and*

iv) The political pressures caused by high levels of youth unemployment". *(Williams and Raggatt, 1998 p. 277)*

Firstly, the economic recession in the mid 1970s which resulted in high levels of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, and Government concerns about their potential disaffection and political unrest, led to a greater focus on the education system as the key to economic regeneration and taking young people out of the labour market. However there was a growing feeling that the education system was promoting anti-industrial attitudes ...

" which were inimical to wealth creation and that standards of attainment in basic skills were too low, hence making school-leavers 'unemployable'. (MSC, 1975; CCCS, 1981; quoted in Williams and Raggatt, 1998 p. 277)

The question was how could education policy-makers address these issues?

The election of a Conservative government in 1979 added impetus to the policy-making powers of the MSC (Manpower Services Commission). As Ainley and Corney (1990) point out the DES had limited power and was disliked by Margaret Thatcher. Its traditional collaborative style of working with LEAs, teacher unions and related groups was not compatible with driving educational policy reform based on economic imperatives: the DES had no control over the curriculum, examinations or funding and had

... " profound difficulty in providing policy leadership when dealing with vocational education".

(Williams and Raggatt, 1998 p. 279)

Williams and Raggatt conclude:

"The DES, thus became a minor 'bit player' in the development of vocational education and training during the 1980s and it was the MSC which increasingly dominated policy innovation in this area". (Williams and Raggatt, op.cit. p. 279)

Not surprisingly, with its focus on developing training schemes to address youth unemployment, the MSC became increasingly interested in the concepts of experiential and outcomes-based learning, APEL (the accreditation of prior learning) and competence-based vocational qualifications. It challenged the DES philosophy in the mid 1970s of "education for life" and attempted to replace it with "education and training for work" (Ainley and Corney, 1990 p.3).

In 1986 in the *Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales* (MSC/DES, 1986) the MSC proposed that a National Council for Vocational Qualifications should be established to 'design and implement' a coherent framework of National Vocational Qualifications based upon the assessment of an individual's competence. A Government White Paper - *Working Together* DE/DES, 1986) largely accepted the Review Group's proposals and the new system was formally instituted in October 1986.

However, it would be wrong to assume that competence-based vocational education and training was *only* linked with 'right-wing' political thinking that sought to align the education system more closely with economic needs. During the 1970s there was also a very strong 'left-wing' critique of the role of formal education systems in western industrial societies propounded by Ivan Illich in his book "*De-schooling Society*"(Illich, 1971). Illich was critical of both right-wing functionalist and liberal perspectives on education. He argued that education should be a liberating experience in which the individual develops his/her talents to the full by exploring and creating things through using initiative and judgement. However, he felt that schools were not very good at developing skills or promoting this model of education.

On the contrary, he saw them as repressive institutions which induced conformity through an authoritarian, didactic teaching regime, which smothered creativity and indoctrinated pupils to defer to the authority of professionals and become dependent on Government directives, bureaucratic organisations and the pursuit of consumerism. This he saw as 'self-defeating' and the cause of social ills, misery and dissatisfaction. Illich's solution was to liberate people by de-schooling society and to create 'skills exchanges' and 'learning webs' where instructors would teach pupils skills they use in everyday life based on creative and exploratory learning and 'drills' involving systematic instruction. Real learning, he argued, occurs through the direct involvement of the individual in every part of the learning process. Thus elements of the competence-based approach to vocational education and

training involving individuals' direct experience of the world of work are reflected in Illich's perspective.

A similar critique was put forward by Paul Freire in *"Pedagogy of the Oppressed"* (Freire, 1972) which saw the education system as promoting Western capitalist societies by inculcating passive conformity in pupils to the existing social system and perpetuating the class inequalities through economic labour markets.

Thus as Williams and Raggatt argue:

> *"... the 'new vocationalism' of the 1970s and early 1980s was the expression of a distrust of the established educational system, especially further education, not only on the 'right', but also among 'progressive' educationalists employed by Government agencies, the MSC in particular, to work on the development of programmes for the young unemployed".*
>
> *(Williams and Raggatt, 1998 p. 278)*

Williams and Raggatt conclude:

> *"the MSC not only dominated policy formulation in vocational education and training during the late 1970s and early 1980s, but also promoted very heavily the view that it should be more closely aligned to the world of work. As an MSC official recalled: "There was a two-fold concern. One of them, a crude*

one I thought, was to get them (the young unemployed) off the streets and the unemployment count, but also, and a slightly more high-minded one, to repair the gaps that frankly the education system seemed to have left. So the MSC did give them something to relate to ... by making it more close to the world of work in some way and by making sure that it did have a strong work experience element in it". (Williams and Raggatt, 1998 p. 280)

Another major thrust to the competence-based qualifications policy were changes within the economic system. Manufacturing was in decline and the service sector was growing fast and the use of information technology was permeating all areas of the economic system, with concomitant effects on different skill needs. The situation was highlighted by the economic recession of 1980-81 and increasing unemployment which prompted a radical review of the provision of skills and qualifications by policy-makers which was reflected in the MSCs New Training Initiative of 1981.

"The new markets and technologies require a more highly skilled, better educated and more mobile workforce in which a much larger number of professional and technical staff are supported by a range of more or less highly trained workers who perform a range of tasks and who are involved in a process rather than the repetitive assembly or manufacture of a part of a specific product". (MSC, 1981 p.3 quoted in Williams and Raggatt, op. cit. pp. 280 -281)

Concern about an out-moded apprenticeship system which appeared to be serving a declining section of the economy and that was knowledge-based, teacher-centred and seen to be perpetuating restrictive practices in the workplace, combined with the need to provide skills and qualifications for the rapidly growing 'service sector' e.g. hotel and catering, retail and health and social care, eventually led the MSC towards an emphasis on broad based transferable skills, greater flexibility and an interest in "outcomes-based" achievement.

As early as 1968, the Donovan Report, which had been set up to review restrictive practices within British industrial relations *which were perceived* as undermining productivity, recognised the need ... "to secure the rapid and general adoption of systems of training which accord with the social and economic needs of a modern industrial society", and called for "objective standards to be laid down by which qualifications may be judged" (Royal Commission, 1968 pp. 92-93). However, it was some time before this recommendation became translated into policy.

Williams and Raggatt argue that a number of influential reports and research studies increased the pressure for the reform of vocational education and training. In 1980 the Centre for Policy Studies (a right-wing think tank) not only recommended that ITBs (Industrial Training Boards) be abolished, but also suggested that because of the rigidity of apprenticeships - especially their length and restrictions on entry - there should be a move away from a "time-serving" concept of apprenticeship training towards an

> *"achievement basis, so that apprentices who have reached the required standard, regardless of the length of their apprenticeship, are deemed to be qualified". (Senker, 1992 p.61)*

In 1981 the MSC's New Training Initiative recognised the need to link training with standards of competence *as well as developing a new vocationally-orientated curriculum,* but policy outcomes at this time were more influenced by the impact of youth unemployment which had to be managed in the short-term.

> *"By 1976 over 800,000 young people were registered as unemployed and youth unemployment was rising three times as fast as unemployment among the working population as a whole". (Williams and Raggatt, op.cit. p. 285)*

A number of unsuccessful training schemes were developed by the MSC including the Unified Vocational Preparation (UVP) 1976, the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) 1979 -1983, and in 1983 the one-year Youth Training Scheme (YTS). However, these lacked quality, were perceived as stop-gap measures aimed at keeping young people off the streets and a predominantly college-based, formal classroom approach, combined with low status training and certification, made them unpopular with trainees (Finn, 1984). The Government White Paper *Education and Training for Young People* of 1985 which introduced a two-year YTS scheme in April

1986, also established a review of *all* vocational qualifications in England and Wales (DE/DES, 1985).

The failure of the further education sector to effectively deliver the training programmes and the scale of the YTS programmes nationally, added more impetus to developing the NVQ competence-based assessment system that was to be delivered and assessed in the workplace. This new policy had a number of merits:

i) it was work-related and addressed the needs of employers;
ii) it involved criteria-referenced practical assessment (rather than norm-based examinations) which focused on outcomes and the progress of the individual learner
iii) it was attractive to the critics of the existing vocational education programmes
iv) it provided an effective and efficient way of measuring the success of YTS trainees and individual training providers, and
v) it had flexibility to cope with wider economic changes and led to up-skilling of the workforce

However, although a national system of competence-based vocational qualifications was seen to be a central aspect of Government policy, and appeared to be addressing a range of needs, the question arises why the competence-based vocational qualifications policy had problems in attracting the enthusiasm of employers, in promoting and recognising up-skilling and in

rationalising the structure of vocational qualifications, at least in England and Wales (Williams and Raggatt, op. cit.). Spours (1997) provides some interesting answers. He argues that lack of recognition of vocational qualifications in the labour market derived from the problems of voluntarism and low skill demand by employers, issues which will be discussed later in this chapter. *(GNVQ implementation Phase III 1997-2000).*

These political, economic and institutional factors also influenced the development and implementation of NVQs 'sister' qualification - GNVQs. Empirical research conducted by Paul Sharp (1998) into the origin and development of GNVQs, based on in-depth interviews with key participants in the policy-making process, argues that ministerial pressure from Tim Eggar was the driving-force behind GNVQs which were adopted as a political initiative prior to the 1992 Election and to replace the ailing CPVE (Certificate of Pre-vocational Education). It is important to comment briefly on the CPVE since there were some lessons to be learnt in respect of the design and implementation of GNVQs and its abolition was part of the micro-political context. Launched in 1985, CPVE had been originally intended for a wide range of students in colleges and sixth forms, but it was actually attracting mainly low-ability students and there were concerns about its rigour, consistency and progression. Although run by a Joint Board for Pre-Vocational Education by BTEC and City & Guilds, competition from the introduction of BTEC First Diploma courses from 1986, which were more vocationally-specific and provided progression to BTEC National Diplomas, proved the more popular vocational qualifications. As some centres began

using CPVE for students with learning difficulties, it was soon perceived as a course for low ability students which did not sufficiently differentiate achievements beyond the basic completion level nor was it understood or valued by employers (Sharp, 1998).

Thus political processes, competing ideologies and market interests were inextricably entwined but the vision for the new order was coming into sharper focus as the following extract illustrates.

> *"In 1990 Eggar was responsible for the dismantling of the Joint Board and for the request to CGLI to replace CPVE with the DVE (Diploma of Vocational Education). With hindsight, City and Guilds officials were completely mystified why Eggar should make such a request when the Government was committed to new awards (GNVQs) which in practice undermined DVE's position from its inception". (Interview with Aylott, 5 June 1997, quoted in Sharp, 1998 p. 295)*

Sharp suggests that at this point in time in 1990 the DES was considering permitting the extension of existing vocational qualifications offered by BTEC and City & Guilds, rather than introducing a new award. This is borne out by my experience as an LEA Adviser when, in September 1991, BTEC was allowed to extend its qualifications into the school market, and in response to this change in Government policy, another post-16 colleague and I held meetings with local schools to explain the curriculum delivery and resourcing implications of these courses.

However, another possible explanation for this strategy was that the DES was hedging its bets in not risking public confrontation near Election time, by attempting to replace existing, well-tried vocational qualifications before new ones had been developed and successfully trialled. Moreover, the DES had no statutory authority to directly abolish existing qualifications although the awarding bodies were aware that funding mechanisms were potentially a very powerful tool alongside the ' market forces' of consumer demand.
Indeed, BTEC National Diplomas had been growing in popularity as Smithers points out, from 17,700 students in 1983 to 34,500 in 1989 and there was evidence of progression both to H.E. degree courses and BTEC Higher National Diplomas (Smithers, 1991).

Thus in the late 1980s there were three qualification pathways - the traditional academic A-level route, a workplace training route involving craft apprenticeships and technician qualifications, (notably those promoted by City & Guilds and industrial training boards), and finally full and part-time vocational programmes offered by all three awarding bodies in FE colleges. BTEC led the market in the latter route and was very concerned when in 1991 NCVQ, led by Jessup announced that

> *"all vocational qualifications would have to conform to the workplace competence model which it was developing. Essentially the third route would cease to exist as such and would be incorporated into the second".* *(Sharp, 1998 p. 298)*

But NVCQ was not without its critics. There was increasing concern over its budgetary problems and the slow pace of development of NVQs, which had concentrated on Levels 1 and 2, and their limited take-up by employers as the following comment by Tim Eggar, Minister for State for Employment (1989-90) illustrates. Indeed, this comment also helps to partly explain the rapid speed at which the GNVQs were designed and implemented.

> *" ... there was an immense frustration with the lack of progress, funnily enough not so much from within the Department, but from employers, senior employers, who had taken an interest but hadn't actually been involved in the day-to-day business. They just thought there had been no real progress and what progress there had been had been misguided ... There was a huge gulf between the objective and the actual reality on the ground and a lot of pretty sloppy thinking and a lot of in-fighting and a terrible and embarrassing lack of progress ... an awful lot of time had been spent in rather nugatory sort of meetings and probably some rather theoretical conclusions were come to, but lack of delivery on the ground. (Interview quoted in Sharp, 1998 p. 299)*

However, notwithstanding these problems, a combination of political factors and pressure from particular stakeholders led to NCVQ being given the job of developing a new vocational award along the lines of the competence-based NVQ model, but under the leadership of Sir Bryan Nicholson who was well versed in the vocational education and training issues. In 1988
the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) had set up a task force

> *"to review the nation's vocational education and training effort and to make recommendations on how to improve its effectiveness".* *(CBI, 1989 p.7)*

The task force was led by Sir Bryan Nicholson, former chairman of the Manpower Services Commission who, *(according to Sharp's research 1998 p. 297)* had worked closely with Geoffrey Holland, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Employment. Although the report focused on the development of training credits and was produced in line with Government policy, it was somewhat critical of job-related training for not developing adaptable, flexible and responsive employees. (CBI, op.cit. p. 13)

> *"NVQs were alleged to be too narrow for the development of flexible skills with NVQ units sometimes being concerned with isolated tasks in which the overall context was lost. Too much emphasis was placed on narrow, rather than broad-based, competence with knowledge and generic skills neglected".*
> *(Sharp, ibid p. 297)*

Ironically, in spite of this 'foresight' in the CBI Report, these same criticisms echo the vociferous complaints by GNVQ teachers levelled at the GNVQ 'Mark I' between 1993-96, where the absence of a 'holistic' approach to the development of knowledge and skills led to an instrumental approach to learning by many students, or student drop-out, caused by the fragmentation of knowledge in the GNVQ unit specifications and its assessment methods.

Similar criticisms had been made of NCVQ and NVQs in the Times Educational Supplement in October 1989 by John Sellars, Chief Executive of BTEC who was concerned about their emphasis on

> *"narrow, mechanistic, easily measurable competencies to the detriment of knowledge and intellectual content in many areas of education and training. He wanted to see more emphasis on personal effectiveness learning to broaden the curriculum and less on the narrow 'trade training' approach". In a fairly overt reference to Gilbert Jessup at NCVQ, he blamed present problems on the 'evangelical zeal' of 'latecomers' to the cause of employment relevance who wanted simply to make their mark".*
>
> *(quoted in Sharp, op. cit. pp. 297-298)*

It is difficult to pinpoint *exactly* when GNVQs became part of Government thinking. Sharp argues that according to Nicholson, GNVQs were not on the agenda when he took over at NCVQ in September 1990, nor were they evident in Government policy by December 1990 when Tim Eggar sanctioned the extension of BTEC First Diplomas into schools and asked City & Guilds to revise CPVE. However, Eggar's actions signalled a warning to Jessup that NCVQ was at risk of being marginalised and he lobbied Nicholson and Peter Reay, the Chief Executive of NCVQ about his concerns. According to Sharp, Nicholson wrote to ministers arguing that:

> *" a more strategic approach would be to extend the NVQ framework over any new vocational qualifications made*

available in educational institutions. Although this documentation is not yet in the public domain, it is clear that NCVQ had its way. The importance of this pre-emptive strike by NCVQ personnel should not be underestimated, because, if BTEC and City and Guilds had been given the remit to develop their vocational awards for schools and colleges outside of the NCVQ framework and away from Jessup's influence, it is possible, even probable, that they would have been quite different qualifications from the GNVQs which we have to-day".

(Sharp, 1998 p. 301)

In addition, Nicholson warned the Government that it was in danger of being eclipsed on vocational education and training issues by Labour Party thinking which was reflected in a report by the Institute of Public Policy *"A British Baccalaureate"* published in 1990, which may have ... "led to a more or less overnight decision on GNVQs" (Interview, Nicholson 9 June 1997, quoted in Sharp, 1998). In March 1991 details of the proposed GNVQs were leaked to the press and in May 1991 they were officially announced in the Government White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES/DOE/Welsh Office, 1991).* In order to ensure compliance with Government policy, the Secretary of State made it clear that under section 24 of the 1988 Education Reform Act, schools and colleges would only be permitted to offer vocational qualifications which fell within the NCVQ framework: other vocational qualifications were to be phased out. As Sharp points out, the message was clear both for Awarding Bodies and centres: the implementation of GNVQs

would go ahead and NCVQ was given the remit for their development in a short timescale.

NCVQ set up a Policy Group in the summer of 1991 chaired by Peter Reay, with representatives from a wide range of bodies. By October 1991 a consultation document had been produced *"GNVQs: proposals for the new qualification, a consultation paper"(Harrop, 1992)* which set out the criteria for the GNVQ 'Mark 1': this was essentially the competence-based model and brainchild of Gilbert Jessup who used his undoubted influence at that time to introduce a top-down innovation which was not radically changed until after the Capey Report, in 1996. Sharp concludes:

> *"the consultation was a second-order exercise, and that it was Jessup, via the policy group, who was the real author of the primary-order concepts in the consultation document which were to form the basis of GNVQ. Practitioners were only asked to comment once the basic model had been drawn up".* *(Sharp, 1998 pp. 304 - 306)*

Footnote:

The MSC, which had been set up in 1973 under the auspices of the Department of Employment (DE) to develop and manage job centres nationally, was abolished in 1988 and its work was taken over by the DE until July 1995, when the DE merged with the DfE and became the Department for Education and Employment.

1.5 Mainstream implementation of GNVQs

Phase II September 1993 - 1996

GNVQs were launched into mainstream education in September 1993. Over the following academic year, 83,000 GNVQ students were recruited by 1,400 approved centres across five main programme areas. (See Figure 1.4)

Figure 1.4: Student registrations by programme area 1993-94

Programme Area	Registrations
GNVQ Business	34,000
GNVQ Health & Social Care	18,000
GNVQ Leisure & Tourism	14,000
GNVQ Art & Design	9,000
GNVQ Manufacturing	1,800
Other - Pilot and Foundation	6,200
Total =	83,000

(Source: FEFC, 1994)

Although a number of official reports and surveys cited the growing popularity of GNVQs among staff and students as an alternative curriculum to GCE A-Levels, their 'popularity' was mainly due to Government policy which was set on phasing out existing vocational programmes and implicit

funding mechanisms which were 'encouraging' centres to offer the new awards, plus market forces which was generating competition between schools and colleges.

A joint research project undertaken by the Further Education Unit (FEU), the Nuffield Foundation and the London Institute of Education in 1993-94 led by Wolf concluded:

> *"We found little evidence of centres introducing GNVQs because of intrinsic features of the awards or a well-researched preference for GNVQs over other qualifications ... In many centres GNVQs were introduced solely as direct replacements for either BTEC or City & Guilds analogues... because of the perception that this was Government policy; that all centres would have to make the change at some point; and that there were advantages in starting now. Other centres had made the decision to introduce new vocational qualifications into the curriculum or to expand their vocational programmes into new vocational areas in order to attract more post-compulsory students or provide more alternatives within a rapidly expanding sixth form. GNVQs were selected in preference to older awards because the latter were clearly being phased out".*
>
> *(Wolf, 1994 p. 20)*

However, mainstream implementation of GNVQs proved highly problematic and completion rates were disappointing (FEFC, 1994;1995; OfSTED, 1994; SCAA, 1996). There was increasing evidence that non-completion in GNVQs was a greater problem than for the 16-19 qualifications which they replaced (Robinson, 1996; Carvel, 1997). In 1996-97 less than half of students on GNVQ advanced courses had achieved the full award within the designated time period. Non-completion and high drop-out rates, particularly among the one-year intermediate level GNVQ students were a particular cause for concern.

The FEFC report of 1994 identified 'a number of teething problems' which were evident with GNVQ implementation in colleges, namely:-

> *" i) the lack of a cross-college strategy for the development, management and co-ordination of GNVQ courses;*
>
> *ii) poor pre-enrolment guidance resulting in the mis-match of students to courses and some high drop-out rates, particularly at GNVQ Intermediate Level*
>
> *iii) lack of clarity on the 'range' and 'levels of knowledge' required by GNVQ specifications and an excessive use of 'jargon' which mystified students and staff;*
>
> *iv) variable assessment practices in centres and limited staff development nationally, regionally and locally within colleges;*

v) unwieldy documentation associated with excessive recording and assessment;

vi) limited development and integration of core skills;

vii) poor standards of students' work on some GNVQ Intermediate courses;

viii) poor success rates in some external tests".

(FEFC, 1994 p. 28)

The major criticisms of the new vocational award from GNVQ teachers were levelled at the excessive jargon and ambiguity in the specifications, difficulties with interpreting the grading criteria and the very cumbersome and burdensome tracking, recording and assessment regime, which, although central to the competence-based assessment approach, was proving both difficult and very time-consuming to manage. While acknowledging these problems, inspectorate reports recognised that the speed with which GNVQs had been introduced *(which had been part of Government policy),* was a contributory factor and that centres had had insufficient time for staff development to enable them to understand and embed the new curriculum.

" Political time scales are always at odds with proper planning time scales, and the new qualifications system is an extremely good example of that. They are long term developments, but

inevitably, and this isn't a criticism, ministers have to be able to demonstrate short-term gains, and there's no doubt that in an ideal world, you'd have spent more time developing and implementing GNVQs".

(DES official, quoted in Williams, 1999 p. 161)

"The pity of it was that ministers, having been enthused, which was a good thing, got so enthused they aimed to have it done very quickly indeed, probably quicker than it should have been done. I think the first GNVQs, not all of them, but some of them, were a bit off-course. We should have had another year - there's no question of that". (DE official, quoted in Williams, 1999 ibid)

However, criticisms of GNVQs did not abate, and in March 1994 Mr. Tim Boswell, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for further and higher education announced a six-point plan to address the issues. He called for:

- a tightening up of the external testing regime,
- a review of the role of external verifiers to ensure that moderation of standards was the main focus of their work and they had appropriate subject expertise and better training
- a clarification of the grading criteria
- a clarification of the knowledge and understanding required in each unit, especially the mandatory core skills units at each level
- greater clarity of expression and the avoidance of jargon in guidance to teachers on issues such as marking course work, grading and setting up and

designing courses, with written materials backed up by regional and local support networks

• common criteria and consistency of interpretation over the approval of centres offering GNVQs. (FEFC, 1994 p. 28)

It is an interesting part of the 'political process' that these points had been shared with the DfE during an informal feedback of interim findings by FEFC inspectors in February 1994, although the FEFC Report was not published until November 1994.

NCVQ and the three GNVQ awarding bodies were given the task of implementing these significant improvements. An independent review group was commissioned by NCVQ and led by Dr. John Capey. Reporting in November 1995 it made 19 recommendations. The key points were that:

• GNVQs should adopt a more holistic approach to assessment and move from 'element based' to 'unit-based' assessment;
• the language and terminology in GNVQs should be simplified and made more user-friendly for teachers and students;
• the GNVQ grading criteria should be simplified from four to two themes, namely, 'process' and 'quality of outcomes';
• there should be more guidance on planning and teaching core skills within the vocational programmes and NCVQ should assess the feasibility of using standard assignments by which to assess core skills;

- awarding bodies should review the appointment and training of external verifiers to ensure greater consistency in applying GNVQ requirements.

In the face of all the criticisms from stakeholders, the Government had two policy options: either abandon GNVQs or review their design. The already considerable investment by the Government in designing and implementing the new vocational awards made the first option unlikely.

In April 1996 following the Capey Report (November 1995), the Government allocated £29 million over a three year period to improving GNVQs. The Government charged NCVQ and the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) with the task of 'improving the rigour of assessment and grading, building on and improving national standards, finding new and effective ways of assessing key skills, supporting teachers and lecturers through staff development and training, and removing barriers to progression into higher education and employment'. (DfEE, 1996)

While GNVQs continued to be offered by centres in their current format, NCVQ set up another one year GNVQ pilot ('a phased implementation') involving four GNVQ programme areas (Art & Design, Business, I.T. and Health & Social Care) based on revised specifications and different assessment strategies in order to trial some of the recommendations made in the Capey Report. A separate pilot scheme for stand-alone key skills (which were assuming a higher profile politically following concern expressed by employers and in inspection reports) was also established. However, a change

of government in May 1997 led to a review of the whole 14-19 education and training provision, and the mainstream implementation of the outcomes of the pilot, planned for September 1998, was postponed until 1999.
(See section later in this Chapter, Phase III 1997-2000)

1.6 So were GNVQs fundamentally flawed?

So what was fundamentally wrong with the GNVQ curriculum? A number of researchers argued that the GNVQ model was essentially flawed because of some inherent tensions within its philosophy and structure.
(Avis, 1991; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Young, 1994: Spours, 1995; Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Bloomer, 1997; Edwards et. al., 1997; Bates et. al., 1998).

Indeed, GNVQs had essentially imported a narrow, behaviouristic, competence-based assessment and 'training' model used to assess adults within a work-based setting, into a full-time, 16-19 'education' context into which it did not easily fit. The major tensions revolved around assessment. Although NCVQ's original consultation document in 1990 which contained the draft proposals for the new vocational awards, had been widely supported, there had been considerable debate over whether GNVQs should be graded and externally assessed (NCVQ, 1992). NCVQ preferred to model GNVQs as closely as possibly on the NVQ competence-based system with its simple pass/fail criterion and without any other external assessment. However, this had been unacceptable to the DES and ministers, who had

insisted on grading and external assessment to ensure credibility and 'parity of esteem' (another major issue which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). Reluctantly, NCVQ and the three awarding bodies had introduced external testing with multiple choice and open-ended items for each mandatory unit. But the external tests had proved problematic with initially low numbers of candidates achieving the 80% pass mark, with some of the brighter students failing and weaker students passing them. There was ambiguity in both test items and multiple choice answers, as well as problems of the language used in some of the tests being pitched at inappropriate levels. After the results of the initial 1992/93 Pilot, NCVQ and the awarding bodies in discussion with the DES, decided to make the external tests *all* multiple choice and the pass mark was reduced to 70% in 1994. This seemed the lesser of all evils.

Between May 1996 and January 1998, research undertaken by Williams involving 24 in-depth and semi-structured interviews with former senior officials from the DES, DE and NCVQ helps to clarify some of the political processes underlying the policy making.

> *"The whole policy development was being driven by the DE and the NCVQ, by people who had a clear idea themselves of what they wanted and (were) simply not prepared to see what was on the ground... Which was where I think the policy went fundamentally wrong. I mean it wasn't looking at the practice first at establishing what was wrong with it. It was starting with*

an NVQ model and trying to adapt it to a completely different environment. (DES official quoted in Williams, 1999 p. 161)

However, even in the early stages, tensions between different factions within the DES, DE and NCVQ were pulling the vocational qualification in different directions and the 'compromise' was causing the potential for an assessment overload and giving rise to 'an academic drift' as the following comments from two DES officials indicates:

> *"The assessment side of it was obviously a major concern. We fought a very tough battle to have any element of external assessment included in GNVQs, because ministers regarded that as vital for credibility's sake... A lot of them, I think, in NCVQ had produced this theology - it had to be competence-based. And I think some people in education, and I wouldn't say it ... (grading and assessment) was actually an attempt to re-create A-Levels ... but I think it was more an attempt to put on drag anchors and stop it from becoming too wacky, or indeed too ideologically driven". (Quoted in Williams, 1999 p. 162)*

Thus by 1996, although the phased implementation of GNVQs was progressing more or less as planned, the on-going problems at macro level surrounding the assessment and implementation of GNVQs caused some centres to re-think their curriculum and reinstate former vocational programmes such as BTEC First and National courses in some areas.

Indeed, the three main vocational awarding bodies were another major group of 'players' in the political process. In the 1980s BTEC, the largest of the three awarding bodies, had been reluctant to change their well-established vocational programmes to competence-based NVQs. NCVQ had to woo them by giving some of the BTEC products 'conditional accreditation' without any alterations to the specifications, in order to ensure that a major segment of the market was brought into the NVQ framework. However, there was a fundamental clash of philosophy in that NVQs were unit-based and that occupational competence was to be delivered and assessed in the workplace. By contrast, BTEC qualifications, which emphasised the importance of knowledge and understanding, were delivered in F.E. colleges and also enabled access to higher education.

Likewise, with the introduction of GNVQs, the support of the three awarding bodies was a crucial variable if the new vocational qualification was to be a success. However, BTEC, RSA and City & Guilds each felt that their own existing vocational programmes which were being delivered in the FE market, could be adapted to nationally-recognised, broad-based vocational qualifications framework for delivery in schools and colleges. Initially the DES thought that existing vocational programmes could be enhanced and in 1991 sanctioned the extension of these programmes into schools. But it soon became clear that a totally new qualification was needed for the national framework rather than elevating the products of one awarding body to the detriment of the other two. In addition, NCVQ successfully lobbied the

government for a *totally new qualification* which would encompass many of the elements of the BTEC awards, but would be quite distinct. NCVQ was then made the lead body responsible for designing the new award in conjunction with the three awarding bodies, who were given 'monopoly rights' over the new qualifications in recognition of the substantial amount of resources they would need to commit to the development of GNVQs. However the awarding bodies were very much aware of the political process and monitored the NCVQ policy group very carefully as the following comment illustrates:-

> *"Crucially, you had three top people from City and Guild, BTEC and RSA, and it was fascinating because in a sense they were competitors, but they were ... being asked to modify their qualifications... they sat there like three wise men ... always at the end of the table together, and I used to watch them like hawks to see which way the wind was blowing".*
>
> *(NCVQ official, quoted in Williams, 1999 p. 160)*

But what about other stakeholders? How did students respond to GNVQs?

At a more micro level however, some GNVQ areas were out of kilter with student demand and/or perceived progression routes. In the first phase of GNVQ implementation, although Business, Health & Social Care and Leisure & Tourism proved popular, there was little take up nationally for Manufacturing, and there was an uncomfortable 'marriage' between Leisure & Tourism which attempted to bring together two quite disparate groups of

students: those wanting to study and participate in particular sports and outdoor activities (mainly boys) and students who wanted to study the cultural side of tourism (mainly girls). Recreation, sports and outdoor pursuits courses were frequently offered in agricultural colleges, while the travel and tourism was offered in mainstream F.E. colleges. However, combining the two areas caused staffing and resource problems in many centres and frequent complaints from students (original inspection data - FEFC 1993/4).

During Phase 2 implementation of GNVQs a similar problem emerged with Engineering. Students wanted either a course specialising in mechanical engineering or electrical/electronic engineering, not a generic course which combined the two disciplines. There were similar issues with GNVQ Construction and the Built Environment, and Hospitality & Catering. However, the criticisms of GNVQ Leisure & Tourism were so vociferous that the programme was later split into two separate subjects at advanced level, and in engineering students were allowed to opt for a particular 'track' after the first year. Following a very low take-up, GNVQ Management Studies at advanced level was abandoned: it was eventually realised that it was not an appropriate curriculum for the 16-19 age group.

However, after an initial rapid growth in GNVQs since 1993, 1996/97 saw the first decline in student registrations at foundation and intermediate levels. Dr. Townsend, the chief executive of B.TEC, who had been listening very carefully to her 'customers' re-instated first the National Diploma programmes (which were due to be phased out), and then the BTEC First

Diplomas (which had already been phased out). Although called to account for this to the DfE in 1995, she provided substantial evidence that GNVQs were not meeting all the market needs of students or employers. In the wake of all the criticisms of GNVQs, the DfE did not take any further action against BTEC, but left it to market forces and perhaps future funding policies to determine the relative popularity and status of the different awards.

1.7 A changing political context and a change of approach

Phase III 1997 - 2000

By 1997, after nearly a decade of experimentation with vocational qualifications and in spite of the growth of the new awards, GNVQs were still not embedded comfortably within the education system. The "teething troubles" identified by the first FEFC inspectorate report (FEFC, 1994) had not gone away and serious flaws had emerged with the original GNVQ model resulting in a number of reviews and modifications, although it could be argued that these were essentially only ' tinkering' with the basic model. A number of researchers argued that there was a crisis in vocational qualifications and little consensus about their future (Spours and Young, 1996; Spours, 1997; Hodgson and Spours, 1997; Edwards et.al., 1997).

Spours summed up the situation at an evening lecture at the London Institute of Education three months before the General Election in May 1997:

" GNVQs - still rated as second-best to the academic track, have been a bureaucratic experience and now are drifting towards A-Levels and away from the workplace following the Capey Review on GNVQ assessment.

Lack of take-up of NVQs - often seen as inadequate for vocational education and training especially by the 'best employers'.

Traditional vocational qualifications - more highly regarded by practitioners, but not favoured by the present government"
(Spours, 1997)

He concluded that the problems were:

"... exacerbated by using the competence-based approach to respond to 'low-skill' demands by employers (NVQs) and to respond to rising participation needs of low achievers - the 'gap in the market' argument. The problem is a mixture of 'voluntarism' and 'ideology' in the development of vocational qualifications.
Therefore competence-based vocational qualifications are failing in two missions - in having an effective general educational role (limitations of core skills and process skills) or promoting high skill approaches in workplaces (limitations of competence-based approaches)". (Spours, 1997 ibid.)

Spours maintained that a more pro-active approach to policy-making should be adopted to create qualifications which shape good educational and training behaviour but at the same time are not seen as 'ideologically driven'. He argued that a strategic review of the qualifications framework was needed in order to address a number of inter-related weaknesses, namely, the 'parity of esteem' problem between A-Levels and GNVQs; the failure of GNVQs to develop vocational skill and knowledge and their lack of recognition in the labour market; the 'lack of presence, volume and identity in NVQs' combined with the problem of voluntarism and the low skill demand by employers.

But how could this be done? There were three choices of policy direction.

Option 1: (Conservative policy)
Continue the current course - with the 'gold' standard (A-Levels) unchanged and more externally tested GNVQs and NVQ approaches to work-based and professional education and training.

Option 2: ("Smithers' approach")
Reform the academic track and vocational tracks separately and keeping them distinct. Keep A-Levels, but make vocational education more 'technical'.

Option 3: (Unification approach)
Reform all tracks simultaneously through a common strategy

Spours favoured the unification approach in which academic and vocational qualifications *would be part of the same track* and share the same design features - namely, balanced assessment and a modular/unitised structure with 'vocational formation' and 'progression' being the key principles, rather than 'competence' which he saw as subordinate to these. Clearly, Spours was becoming an influential 'actor' now that Gilbert Jessup had fallen from grace.

Spours argued for a new policy direction in that all vocational qualifications would be aligned within five levels which would

> *" promote progression and attempt to raise the standard at the upper end and extend downwards at the lower end:*
> *~ Advanced (equivalent to three A-Levels/NVQ3)*
> *~ Intermediate (equivalent to end of first year A-Level study and very much transitional between General and more demanding Advanced Level)*
> *~ General (current upper GCSE grades)*
> *~ Foundation (current lower GCSE grades)*
> *~ Entry (sub-GCSE)"*
>
> *(Spours, 1997 op.cit.)*

The election of a new Government in May 1997 provided the opportunity for a strategic review of the education system and Spours was brought in as a key member of the Labour Government's 'think tank'. The 'unification approach' was eventually adopted as Government policy and A-Levels, GNVQs,

GCSEs and NVQs were re-aligned through changes in their assessment and modularisation strategies, with a phased implementation of 'Curriculum 2000' starting from September followed by a consolidation and broadening phase of a fully unified system beyond 2001. There was also a strong emphasis on the development and assessment of Key Skills as free-standing qualifications with external tests, which would be accessible to *all* curriculum routes, not just GNVQs. Substantial Government funding was then *aimed at institutional collaboration and partnership* via regional staff development to support implementation through FEDA's 'Key Skills Task Force.'

However, it would be naive to regard Ken Spours' unitisation approach *as not being 'ideologically' driven.* It was fundamentally part of a non-selective, egalitarian approach to education which sought to achieve greater 'parity of esteem' by diluting the 'gold standard' of A-Levels through modularisation and securing greater convergence of GNVQs, while enhancing participation by the drive towards 'inclusive learning'.

But to what extent (if at all) these strategies would achieve Government objectives and, in particular, 'parity of esteem' was debatable. However, while the state education system had to come into line with the Government's policy directives, the response of the independent sector did not bode well as the following extract indicates:

> *"One in eight leading independent schools may offer tougher, European-style exams as an alternative to A-Levels, it emerged today. A survey revealed that 49 out of 400 heads are*

considering introducing the International Baccalaureate (IB) amid concerns over Government reforms to the sixth-form curriculum. The findings among members of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference, reflect fierce criticism of the new A and AS levels by the independent sector (and) ... widespread concerns that the new sixth-form courses - in which pupils take five or six AS Levels in their first year before narrowing down to three or four A-Levels - would not stretch the brightest pupils, required too much testing and did not give 'coherent breadth' to study... The results will cast renewed doubts over the future of A-Levels."

(Daily Mail, 4 October 2000)

1.8 Summary

In reality, the policy-making process does not conform to the rational-purposive model in which a problem is defined or emerges, a range of 'solutions' are considered and policy-makers make a rational choice about the 'best' policy option, carefully relating 'means' to 'ends'. The process is far more complex and chaotic, as policy texts are developed through the interface of multiple agendas, attitudes and values from a range of 'stakeholders', resulting in negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power (Trowler, 2003).

Thus policy espousal involves a complex process of defining, interpreting, negotiating and refining proposals. However, the Government has the power

to involve or marginalise stakeholders within this process, as different perspectives are incorporated into the policy formulation, or deflected and ignored. Indeed, the new vocational curriculum policies have shifted power away from LEAs, teachers, lecturers and academics into the hands of employers, politicians and national bodies such as NCVQ, which have been set up to ensure policy implementation. However even national bodies responsible for the education and training initiatives e.g. the MSC, NCVQ and SCAA are held accountable and made scapegoats when policy objectives are not met, and are soon replaced by new organisations or merged ones as policies evolve and change direction.

It has been argued that throughout the 1980s after years of gradual and ad hoc reform, the 1991 Government White Paper marked a watershed in the direction of Government policy. It signalled a more centralist approach to qualifications reform and the development of a national framework, within a 'market context' that aimed to give more power and autonomy to individual institutions and students. The White Paper introduced a triple-track national qualifications framework, with some alignment of levels and unit design, and established a new competence-based middle track *GNVQs,* as an alternative to the academic A-Level route, which aimed to facilitate progression to work or Further and Higher Education (FHE). However, these policies have not always achieved even their basic aims and their intended consequences are always mediated by other 'stakeholders' at the micro-political level. Thus students used GNVQs as an alternative route to H.E. rather than to employment.

Similarly, although NCVQ was given the brief of developing the national framework and converting all vocational qualifications to a competence-based model, initially with NVQs and existing vocational qualifications, and subsequently with the new GNVQs in 1991/92 this strategy was not successfully achieved. The developments were implemented in great haste and with a 'missionary zeal' (Hyland, 1994; Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995;) which reflected the ideological vision of the designer and ignored the preferences of 'stakeholders' at grass roots level, namely, students and teachers. But although NVQ methodology succeeded in dominating intellectual debates about vocational education between 1992 - 1996, it did not succeed in eradicating the existing vocational qualifications as had been originally intended by NCVQ. By 1996 over 60% of all vocational qualifications were still outside the NVQ and GNVQ tracks, (FEFC, 1996) and traditional BTEC and City & Guilds awards continued to thrive, with some colleges abandoning GNVQs in favour of a return to them.

Thus, contrary to Government policy intentions, the NCVQ framework did not rationalise the overall structure of qualifications. By 1995, the traditional vocational awards such as B.TEC National Diplomas and others were still in existence and had significantly higher esteem (and exchange value) than the new GNVQs (and NVQs). Indeed, rather than simplifying the qualifications structure, Government policy had merely added to the range of awards and had created an even greater plethora (Trowler, 2003).

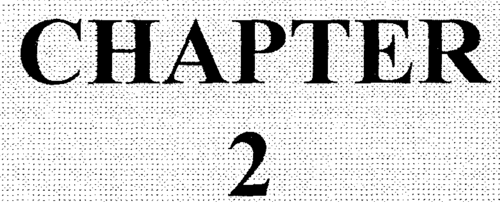
Moreover, despite heavy Government backing both legislative and financial involving both 'carrots' and 'sticks', GNVQs failed to secure a broad consensus among teachers, employers and educationalists and at a micro-political/institutional level they were rejected by many students, as reflected in the high drop-out and non-completion rates. Fundamental flaws in the design of GNVQs to do with assessment and grading resulted in a troubled implementation and vociferous criticisms from 'stakeholders' which necessitated a series of modifications by NCVQ between 1992 and 1996, albeit with great reluctance, but these only partly addressed the problems. Indeed, such widespread criticisms of the GNVQ/competency-based model raised issues about whether the Government policy was rooted in a fundamentally sound base. This will be explored further in Chapter 3.

Following the election of a Labour Government in 1997, this culminated in a strategic review of the whole education and training system, and the adoption of a new policy direction which was moving towards a unification approach and an abandoning of the triple-track system which was seen by some educationalists as divisive and undermining the quest for 'parity of esteem'. (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Young, 1995; Hodgson and Spours, 1997)

While this chapter has focused on the political dimensions underpinning Government policy, the next chapter will look at the curriculum level and the underlying tensions and contradictions within GNVQ pedagogy. Chapter 3 will examine GNVQs and progression within the context of the debate on 'parity of esteem'. A consideration of phenomenological perspectives of

students' experience of GNVQs will lead into Chapter 4, and an outline of my research methodology. Chapter 5 will present the findings of Phase I of my fieldwork research in relation to the relevant key questions posed in Chapter 4.

In Chapters 6 and 7 the focus will be on students' progression to H.E. and the findings of Phase II and III of the research, namely, the follow-up interviews with 18 students who progressed to H.E. and the views of H.E. tutors about the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ students during their degree/diploma courses. Finally, Chapter 8 will focus on the last Key Question, with a discussion on the adequacy and sufficiency of GNVQs in facilitating students' progression to H.E., in bridging the 'academic-vocational divide' and the extent to which Government policy objectives were achieved and provide an overall summary and conclusion to the thesis.



CHAPTER 2

Policy Implementation

Chapter 2

Policy implementation

2.1 Theoretical perspectives on policy implementation

Management perspectives on 'Organisation Development' help to shed light on the process of policy implementation. There are two main groups of theories that apply to this context. First, the 'functionalist' or 'managerial' approaches and secondly, phenomenological perspectives, each of which starts from a different ontological and epistemological position.

The 'managerial' or 'top down' approach argues that effective change is brought about when managers define a policy, set the goals and then ensure staff commitment to them. This model assumes that organisations have a unified culture which is shared by all members and which shapes their behaviour towards the achievement of common goals. As Trowler points out:-

> *"Organisations which have weak, or multiple and conflicting cultures are likely to fail. Thus the manager who wishes to see education policy successfully transferred into practice should work to build a strong coherent culture in their school, college or university. Given clear policy goals, a strong culture, sufficient resources and an understanding of how to bring about change, the strong manager relatively easily ensures that policy is*

carried out as intended by the policy-makers".

(Trowler, 2003 p. 126)

Thus, education policies, whether formulated by Government, LEAs or in education institutions themselves, need to create the right conditions for successful implementation. Numerous writers on 'Organisation Development' have identified a range of conditions for managers to consider. Trowler provides a useful summary of these in the following figure, against which the GNVQ curriculum policy can be evaluated.

Figure 2.1 What managers should do to implement policy successfully - the 'top-down' approach

---

1) creating and sustaining the commitment of those involved
2) having clear and stable policy objectives
3) ensuring that the policy innovation has priority over competing demands
4) ensuring that there is a real expectation of solid outcomes inherent in the policy, not just symbolic ones
5) ensuring that the causal theory which underlies the policy reform is correct and adequate
6) allocating sufficient financial resources
7) creating, as far as possible, a stable environment within which the policy is being implemented

Source: adapted from Cerych and Sabatier 1986,
(quoted in Trowler 2003, p.125)

So to what extent did the new post-16 policy on vocational qualifications meet these "necessary" conditions? Before considering this later on in the Chapter, other management perspectives on implementing policy change in organisations need to be reviewed.

There are a number of criticisms of the 'top-down' approach to policy implementation. Firstly, research by Cerych and Sabatier (1986) has indicated that even if all the factors listed above are met, these are not 'sufficient' to ensure that policies are adopted as the policy-makers intended. In particular, phenomenological sociologists argue that the functionalist or 'top-down' perspectives have given too much emphasis to the goals of managers and policy-makers at Government level, and have ignored the key actors within the organisation who actually interpret and implement the policies. Moreover, organisations are not simple, linear structures with a single set of norms and values. They are very complex and contain many 'actors' within them with different sets of norms and values. Thus as Trowler observes:-

> *"Organisational cultures are multiple rather than unitary, at least in large organisations, and there are competing sets of values and understandings at work in the interpretation of policy innovations. Each organisation has a specific, and multiple cultural configuration which is highly unstable".*
>
> *(Alvesson, 2002 quoted in Trowler, 2003 p. 127)*

Given these circumstances, policies are mediated by personnel lower down in the organisational hierarchy, and policies are frequently modified in the process.

> *"Consequently, policy becomes refracted as it is implemented, that is, it becomes distorted and less coherent as it is interpreted and put into practice by ground-level actors, such as teachers."*
>
> *(Trowler, ibid. p. 128)*

Thus from the phenomenologists' perspective, policy implementation is also a 'bottom-up' process. This model recognises the role of different 'actors' within the organisation in changing policy during the actual implementation stage. Thus implementation is not a passive second stage to policy formulation and espousal: it is an active and dynamic part of the policy-making process and has implications for managers. When implementing policy change, the existing values and attitudes of staff within an organisation need to be taken into account. Thus managers need to foster a shared vision of the new policy and encourage 'ownership' of it among members of the organisation otherwise policy-imposition will lead to subversion and non-compliance.

However, it would be wrong to assume that these perspectives are without their criticisms. It is argued that 'bottom-up' approaches overestimate the power of lower-level members within an organisation and fail to recognise that the policy-makers set the agenda and the ground rules for negotiation.

So, returning to the main issues of my case study:

- To what extent did Government policy on the new vocational qualifications achieve its objectives?
- Did the new GNVQs offer a high status pathway to H.E. and achieve 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels?

There has been considerable debate surrounding these issues as the following sections will demonstrate.

Researchers and academics have identified a number of contradictions and tensions underpinning GNVQ philosophy and practice which call into question criteria 2 and 5 of Cerych and Sabatier's implementation model.

2.2 Contradictions and tensions underpinning GNVQ philosophy and practice

2.2.1 'Progressivism', 'technical rationalism' and 'free marketism'

A number of researchers have argued that the GNVQ model was essentially flawed because of some inherent tensions within its philosophy and structure which was pulling it in different directions. In particular, 'technical rationalism' in the form of competence-based education and training was incompatible with another strand namely, 'progressivism' which was evident in the GNVQ curriculum.

(Thus, in terms of Cerych and Sabatier's model, GNVQ policy was not based on sound foundations. See Figure 2.1 point 2).

Furthermore, Government policy was shaped by a number of political constraints already discussed in Chapter 1, combined with 'turf wars' between two government departments (i.e. the DE and the DES) which pulled GNVQs too far on the 'technical rationalism' side and reduced its appeal to some of its constituents, namely, the *progressive educationalists.*
(Thus GNVQs not only lacked 'clear and stable policy objectives' but the Government failed to create a 'stable environment within which the policy was being implemented'. See Figure 2.1 points 2 and 7 of Cerych and Sabatier's model).

Progressivism was a powerful ideology which had its roots in primary education in the 1960s. Progressivism aimed to foster the development of individuality and creativity in children and was very anti-industrial and anti-modernist since industrialisation and modernism were perceived as alienating and hostile forces which undermined these values. It emphasised the importance of experiential learning through topic work in contrast to learning particular subject disciplines. Although less well-developed in secondary education because of the influence of academic or classical humanist approaches to subject learning in grammar schools and the emphasis on preparation for work in secondary modern/technical schools, progressivism was evident in the integrationist approaches to science and the humanities in the 1970s, such as the Nuffield Science and Schools Council projects and, more recently, in developments in personal and social education.

Bates et. al. see 'progressivism' in GNVQs reflected in three dimensions:

> *"the promotion of equality of opportunity through the creation of a high status pathway; the expansion of individual choice through the opening up of an alternative curriculum and, within any GNVQ the opportunity for further choice between modules; and the development of learner autonomy or empowerment through sharing with students responsibility for control over their own learning"* *(Bates et. al., 1998 p. 116)*

However, Bloomer argues that although the GNVQ curriculum was *modelled* around 'progressivism' in its activity-based, student-centred style of learning, the fragmentation of knowledge reflected in GNVQ specifications and in its mode of assessment, in reality, led to a 'technical rationalism' which controlled the learner and limited his/her understanding of the knowledge through a mechanistic, competence-based assessment model.

The overlaps and contradictions between these ideologies are complex. On the one hand it is argued that the GNVQ curriculum contained elements traditionally associated with "progressive education" namely, student empowerment and 'active' and 'participative' learning, involving student 'choice' and autonomy and provided opportunities for self-actualisation, however, the fragmentation of knowledge reflected in the GNVQ specifications and in the mechanistic competence-based mode of assessment, in reality controlled the learner and limited his/her autonomy and understanding (Bates et. al., 1998; Bloomer, 1998).

It is argued that competence-based assessment, so central to the GNVQ model and reflected in the 'performance criteria' and 'evidence indicators' in the GNVQ specifications, as well as the end of unit tests, was a crude form of behaviourism applied to education which controlled learning and the 'learner' in a very prescribed way. Thus while 'progressivism' stressed the essential unity of knowledge, the value of learning by discovery and learner 'autonomy' by contrast, 'control' and 'technical rationalism' promoted the fragmentation of subject knowledge for the efficiency of instruction and assessment *(and a mechanistic approach to learning and assessment)* and led to a 'reductionist' approach to knowledge and an instrumental approach to learning.

If these criticisms are valid, then they have serious implications for GNVQ students who progressed to H.E. where independent learning and critical awareness and thinking are crucial for success at degree level.

2.2.2 Student autonomy, empowerment and 'vocational progressivism'

But how much freedom, 'empowerment' and choice did GNVQs actually offer students? The language of 'empowerment' was evident in a number of publications which accompanied the launch of the GNVQ framework as the following extracts illustrate:

> *"The new education and training model places the learner at the centre of the system. The learner is regarded as the client and the* ***model is designed to provide him or her with more control***

over the process of learning and assessment". (Jessup, 1991 p. 115)

"The emphasis on performance and attainment encourages more ***active*** *and* ***participative*** *learning" (Jessup, 1991 p. 138)*

In these two respects, ***through greater choice of outcomes and models of learning, there will be more freedom for the learner in the proposed system than exists"*** *(Jessup, 1991 p. 140)*

Other researchers acknowledge these themes and intentions:

Jessup's "outcomes" model is directed to ***liberating and empowering*** *the individual rather than controlling or merely modifying behaviour" (Burke, 1995 p. 67)*

"The key objective of the current British reforms is to ***empower*** *all members of an increasingly diverse population to lead fuller lives" (Daniel, 1995) (Quoted in Bates, 1998 a p. 190)*

However, Bates argues that the 'autonomy' within the GNVQ model in practice was 'highly circumscribed' and 'ambiguous' and suggests that the concept of 'empowerment' needs closer analysis. According to Bates 'empowerment' in GNVQs could be seen to derive from a "fusion of liberal progressive values and vocationalism" (Bates, 1998a p. 189). Reviewing the

concept in the industrial context she argues that there are a number of lessons to be learnt. The concept of 'empowerment' in industrial settings, is promoted within the human resource management (HRM) school of thought. Exponents of this perspective argue that pushing autonomy 'down the line' can lead to greater employee satisfaction and commitment to managerial goals. Moreover, the 'empowered worker' is potentially more flexible and capable of greater initiative and enterprise and since empowerment is expected to reduce the need for supervision, this can lead to greater productivity and lower costs.

But although this model may *ostensibly* lead to greater autonomy in, and control over work research indicates that this control is exercised within strict frameworks of accountability and performance appraisal. (Quoted in Bates, 1998b; Guest, 1987; Mabey and Salaman, 1995; Legge, 1995; Marchington, 1992). Even team-work, although it allows individuals some degree of freedom in allocating tasks and responsibilities, in practice, 'empowerment' *is highly circumscribed within resource limits and by the outcomes required by managers.* (Bates, 1998a pp. 12-13). Moreover, it is argued that increasing work demands coupled with the need for self-regulation and self-policing, can cause workers greater insecurity and stress as well as leading to an instrumental approach to the achievement of performance targets. (Blyton and Turnbull, 1992; Legge, 1995)

Bates argues that there are some similar parallels evident in the GNVQ curriculum and in students' responses to the new style of learning. Based on her participant observation research with two GNVQ Advanced Level groups (Business and Health & Social Care) in a large inner-city comprehensive

school in the Midlands, Bates found that 'empowerment' at institutional level was being mediated by the perspectives of both GNVQ teachers and their students and the practicalities of operationalising the GNVQ learning model.

> *"At one level students' new found responsibilities were consistent with the GNVQ grading criteria in that they became responsible for planning their work to meet deadlines, gathering information, writing up assignments and contributing to the evaluation of what they had done."* However, *"by far the most time-consuming and demanding of the new responsibilities transferred to students was the task of locating and obtaining information ... 50% of their GNVQ time could be spent in this way. The amount of time involved was increased by difficulties in finding resources or unsuccessful attempts to contact organisations"* *(Bates, 1998b pp. 193-194)*

Encountering such difficulties increased the likelihood that students would abandon their GNVQ work in favour of more hedonistic activities with their peers.

> *"In pursuit of their own meanings, students converted GNVQ course design and school environment problems into social possibilities. The frustrations of finding information from the town library could be assuaged by a subsequent tour of the shopping precinct"* *(Bates, 1998b p. 200)*

Bates concluded:

> *"Thus the general tendency we observed was one of student resistance to their new roles as self-steering learners...*
>
> *Early in the second year ... it became clear that for many students, completion of the Advanced GNVQ in two years was fast becoming a lost cause. More than a third of the group eventually dropped out of the course, some at the request of staff. Staff and students were in broad agreement that for the remainder to complete (the course), a radical change of teaching style was necessary".* *(Bates, 1998b p. 200)*

Initially, although GNVQ students said that they liked the freedom to undertake their own research, being treated as adults and being trusted to get on with work themselves, as the year progressed their attitudes changed as backlogs of work accumulated and they found their new 'responsibility' burdensome and their attitudes became more ambivalent. Students experienced a complex mixture of frustrations which led them to request a more structured approach by their teachers, firmer deadlines and more externally-imposed discipline.

> *"Some wished they had been given firmer deadlines, or kept better records of the work they had done. They thought that help was not sufficiently available and that they were 'given too much slack' "* *(Bates, ibid.)*

The GNVQ teachers, although committed to GNVQ philosophy for its progressive and egalitarian values and the emphasis on learner independence, found that they had to intervene because of the non-completion of assignments by students or merely allow the students to 'fail'.

> *"The dominant pattern of response was to reclaim responsibility over student learning or as one teacher graphically explained 'We've had to clamp down on them in a big way to make sure they pass'.* *(Bates, 1998b pp. 20 -21)*

> *"Clamping down entailed tightly specifying the approach to assignments, tasks to be done and days on which the work was to be submitted, with constant monitoring by teachers that work was being produced".* *(Bates, 1998a op.cit. p.200)*

As Bates points out:

> *"Teachers' willingness to step in such circumstances serves to underline the circumscribed and tenuous nature of the 'empowerment' ceded to students... Notions of empowerment, for all their innovatory and liberating features, compared with traditional pedagogic forms, have to be treated with some caution. The changes involved, particularly in terms of who is taking responsibility for what, are perhaps not as extensive or significant as proponents of the GNVQ have at times hoped"*
> *(Bates, 1998b ibid. p. 21)*

Bates concludes that although students gain some degree of empowerment -

> ... *"at a deeper sub-structure level, these gains are accompanied by new constraints ... (as) students are formally required to exercise a high degree of responsibility for their work and the extent to which they do so is scrutinised through the assessment criteria. They are thus placed in a situation of* ***imposed autonomy,*** *which is inherently ambiguous and contradictory"* *(Bates, 1998a p. 191)*

Bates' research is supported by an unpublished research project by FEDA into 'GNVQs Learning and Assessment' in 1995/96 in which GNVQ Advanced Level students across eight programme areas, expressed frustration with the amount of freedom and responsibility they had to assume in finding and processing information, as well as with action-planning which was frequently written *after* the work had been completed. Bates also found a disparity between students' actual and manifest performance, in that 'action plans' were frequently written after the work was finished, 'evaluation' followed a formulaic style and there were many examples of creative fabrication of portfolio evidence.

> *"Throughout our GNVQ study there was evidence of the development of a variety of strategies in fabricating evidence not only of work output but of effectiveness in managing their own work".* *(Bates, 1998a p. 201)*

Thus in order to achieve their GNVQ award, some students were adopting an instrumental approach to learning and demonstrating 'compliance' with

GNVQ requirements, rather than becoming autonomous learners and developing an expressive approach to learning while others were voting with their feet and contracting out.

In reviewing the concepts of 'empowerment' and 'independent learning' embedded in the GNVQ curriculum, Bates concludes that:

> *"While the GNVQ pedagogy does entail new 'powers' and freedoms - which should not be dismissed - these are largely confined to matters of how tightly prescribed learning objectives are to be achieved. Influence over curriculum content is negligible".* *(Bates, 1998a p. 188)*

Thus GNVQ students had a 'procedural autonomy' over *how* they learn, rather than *what* they learn, which raised issues about 'knowledge and control' a theme which was hotly debated by sociologists of education in the 1970s (Young, 1971). Indeed, in the GNVQ *Mark 1* students were rewarded for their performance in this 'procedural autonomy' by demonstrating their achievement across three grading themes; 'Planning'; 'Information seeking and handling' and 'Evaluation'. At this point in time, the GNVQ assessment regime did not acknowledge students' 'quality of outcomes': this was eventually incorporated as the fourth 'grading theme' by NCVQ following repeated complaints about this omission from both teachers and students.

From a phenomenological perspective, Bates' research helps to explain the reasons for high drop-out and non-completion rates nationally among GNVQ students. Overloaded by the assessment criteria and the need to demonstrate competence across the grading themes in *every piece of work*, many students

rejected the limited form of 'empowerment' offered by GNVQs and substituted it with their own objectives which were primarily personal and social. In a similar vein, Bloomer proposes a five-fold typology of students' responses to the GNVQ curriculum based on Merton's typology of individual adaptation (Merton, 1968) which, at the micro-political level, helps to clarify students' behaviour in more detail. Bloomer argues that students are not merely passive recipients of the curriculum, but they exercise 'studentship' in a number of ways: *conformity; retreatism* (absenteeism or non-completion), *innovation* (devising some novel ways of achieving their goals), *rebellion* (being disruptive in class etc.) or *strategic compliance.* Again, this model is useful in explaining the high drop-out and non-completion rates among GNVQ students. But at a deeper level, GNVQ failure bites more fundamentally into Government policy objectives which aimed to link education more closely with the needs of the economic system.

> *"As with NVQs, the policy objective is one of radical intervention in existing social processes, shaping both skills and, perhaps more importantly, orientations towards work, in preparation for what are assumed to be the changing conditions of employment".* *(Bates, 1998a p. 189)*

Indeed, the post-Fordist visions of the workplace, combined with the 'enterprise culture' being promoted by the New Right, are congruent with some key concepts embedded in GNVQs which emphasised the values of 'flexibility', 'enterprise', 'responsibility', 'self-reliance' and 'empowerment' (Avis, 1996).

Bates concludes:

> *"In the context of GNVQs however, 'vocational progressivism' takes on a particular cast. The ideals of developing individual autonomy and empowerment are deployed not so much in order to counterbalance the subordination of learning to economic ends, but - at least in part- to complement and reinforce the intended economic function".* *(Bates, 1998a p. 189)*

Another contradiction and tension evident within GNVQ ideology is "free marketism" which is linked to the "technical rationalism" strand. Free marketism, originally promoted by the New Right and currently in vogue with New Labour, elevates consumer choice within the 'marketplace' of education. In marketing their 'products' in a competitive situation where only the strongest survive, schools and colleges become harnessed to serving the needs and interests of the consumers and the tendency is for the technical qualities of the products to be stressed rather than the practical or theoretical qualities.

As Gleeson and Hodkinson argue:

> *"Marketing and the hard sell become more important than either good teaching or good student relations ... and the intrinsic value of the course followed becomes marginalised"*
> *(Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995 pp. 9 - 10)*

But to what extent was consumer choice in GNVQs a reality? Although ostensibly students could choose to study at different post-16 institutions and

could select GNVQs in preference to other programmes, the choice of the GNVQ curriculum offering was severely limited by the 'mandatory' units *prescribed* by NCVQ, and the range of 'optional' units actually *available within individual centres*. In addition, there were other 'controls' at Government level as Bloomer points out:

> *"... despite a free-market rhetoric of consumer choice and control, governments maintain strong checks upon what is made available to consumers and how, and it is no accident that assessment and accountability mechanisms across every sector of public education now stress the technical and the measurable over other educational qualities". (Bloomer, 1998 p. 168)*

But what of the third strand - 'progressivism'? To what extent was this evident in GNVQ practice?

Bloomer argues that GNVQs, although purporting to be a 'progressive' curriculum and encouraging students to think critically, in fact controlled them and inhibited the development of their cognitive skills and led them to treat 'knowledge' unproblematically. Based on his study of 102 vocational education students in Devon aged between 14-19, of whom 43 were on GNVQ courses, Bloomer argues that both students and their teachers regarded course knowledge as primarily external, objective and universal. When asked where the knowledge that they had gained from their courses had come from, most students cited their text books or their teachers.

> *"They emphasised not only the externality and objectivity but knowledge as non-complex, non-problematic and finite*

commodity. But it was not only text books which were referred to as sources of an unambiguous and uncontested course knowledge. Teachers were frequently described not only as authoritative sources but as carrying out their work in a manner which invited students' uncritical acceptance of knowledge"

(Bloomer, 1998 p. 170)

Some students reported learning from practical experience or by visiting companies and making contact with primary sources, both of which they found most beneficial to their learning. However, Bloomer found a predominance of classroom-bound 'receptive learning' activities where students 'internalise or receive course content without any visible critical action on their part' in contrast to 'active learning' promoted in GNVQ pedagogy. However, Bloomer's sample of GNVQ students was small and the majority of whom were Intermediate Level students, (or first year Advanced) whom I would not have expected to have developed a sophisticated level of awareness of the 'problematic nature of knowledge'. In my experience as a teacher for 18 years, I would only expect this level of understanding to be evident among second year GCE A Level students.

Bloomer half acknowledges this in the following comment:

"... we should be cautious before drawing too firm conclusions about the relationships between the practical and the theoretical on the basis of these insights since it is apparent that, for many students, the concept of 'theoretical' extended only to what could

be read or written, rather than to that which might be thought about". *(Bloomer, 1998 p. 173)*

Indeed, Bloomer's research was limited in another respect - it discounted students' experiences of work placements.

> *"... the observations I have made are grounded primarily in students' and tutors' accounts of GNVQ taught courses and assignments. I have not offered any insights into students' experiences of work placements where, it is apparent, learning opportunities were both varied and sometimes very different to those reported here. Indeed, since large numbers of GNVQ students had no work experience placements at all, it would be misleading to draw placements into any discussion of progressivism in GNVQ".* *(Bloomer, 1998 p. 173)*

However my research, based on a sample of 146 GNVQ Advanced Level students indicated that work placements were a crucial element in empowering students to reflect on theory and practice and in helping them to crystallise their 'career identities'. Work experience, where it was positive, and enabled students to participate in staff teams and demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the vocational setting in a meaningful way, contributed to the development of their self-esteem, and enhanced their commitment to their GNVQ course. Even where GNVQ students had negative experiences or did not fit in with work teams or they disliked the work context, this enabled them to reflect on their learning and move on to

another placement in a different environment. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Notwithstanding the above comments, Bloomer's research found numerous examples of the fragmentation of knowledge in GNVQ courses caused by the Unit specifications and performance criteria, which constrained teaching and learning styles and resulted in a mechanistic approach to teaching as the following student's comment illustrates:

> *"She'll look down the list and see what we've got to do, tell us what we've got to do, give us the book. We're learning what we've got to learn and that's it. There's no little things on the side. She doesn't often come round and say, 'Well, you could do this as well and I know it's not in the course, but we'll improve that'. As long as we've got what it says we've got to cover, then she's happy"*
>
> *(Penny Ham, Intermediate GNVQ in Art & Design - quoted in Bloomer, 1998 p. 174)*

Bloomer concludes:

> *"In so far as these insights are typical of students on GNVQ courses - and it is my view that they are not untypical - the GNVQ curriculum is characterised by strong classification (Bernstein 1971) despite the abundance of a rhetoric which stresses integration".* *(Bloomer, op. cit.)*

Based on my inspections in the South-West region in 1993/94, these comments were indeed typical and were reflected in some teachers' awareness of how the GNVQ curriculum was restricting their delivery and controlling teaching and learning styles. Staff felt under constant pressure to cover the specifications and ensure that students completed their portfolios, leaving no time for discussion of wider issues or looking at topics in a more holistic way as previous B.TEC National courses had permitted.

Indeed, in Bloomer's study many students felt that their 'freedom' was frequently circumscribed by teacher-led directions about completing particular tasks within set deadlines, and to a set format, which is also well-documented by Bates (1998a).

> *"You get performance criteria sheets and you have to do an evidence indicator at the end and ...In that portfolio you have to put everything that's on the performance criteria, and what they've asked you to do and in more depth and then you put your attitudes about it. (Danielle Henry, First Year Advanced GNVQ Business student)* *(Bloomer, op.cit. p. 178)*

As Bloomer points out when students in his sample were asked to describe their approach to assignments, most indicated that they were little more than data retrieval exercises.

> *"For Danielle, a course assignment appeared to be little more than an exercise in procedural compliance. She gave no indication at all that assignments afforded opportunities for her to exercise her own critical judgement, only that there were rules*

governing the conduct of assignments and that her learning would be fostered principally through her conformity to those rules". (Bloomer, ibid.)

Thus, Bloomer's research challenges NCVQs claim that GNVQs promoted student-centred learning and the development of a wide range of cognitive skills. Students were 'trained' to tick boxes and their learning was 'heavily constrained by the assessment requirements' as the following student's comment illustrates:

> *"Miss said she wants us ... shading and contrast - all the different elements that go into it - just the usual art stuff. But at the end of it, it doesn't matter how good the people's work was ; it didn't matter if it was brilliant. If it didn't use those aspects that we were told to cover, then we wouldn't get the good grade. (Penny Ham, Intermediate GNVQ Art & Design) (Bloomer, op. cit. p. 182)*

As Bloomer points out, 'the tight prescription in Penny's view, stifled the flexibility that was necessary if GNVQ assessments were to give recognition to students' creative abilities and achievements and not merely their technical competence'.

This view is supported by other researchers such as Wolf (1995) and Stobart (1996).

> *"The GNVQ tick box, evidence indicator and PC-driven assessment methods adopted for GNVQs focused tightly upon a*

> *predetermined and finite knowledge base and offered little space for the unpredictable, for the novel or the creative. Moreover, 'the unit tests, much condemned by tutors, assisted in the decontextualisation of course knowledge and its fragmentation into information while a seemingly 'never-ending spiral of specification' (Wolf, 1996) led to emphasis on 'coverage rather than understanding' (Stobart, 1996) (quoted in Bloomer, op. cit. p.182)*

He concludes that 'coverage' of the GNVQ specifications combined with the mechanistic assessment regime frequently led to a 'treasure-hunt' approach to knowledge and

> ... *"have militated against a student-centred approach and it is questionable whether the vast majority of GNVQ students acquire a 'wide range' of cognitive skills. Tutors frequently indicated how assessment requirements emphasised constituent parts of performance or product over and above their unifying or holistic properties and assessments were often described only in terms of evidence indicators, PCs and boxes". (Bloomer, op. cit. p. 180)*

However, in some respects, Bloomer's interpretation of his data may need to be tempered in the light of his personal experience and value base. Working in Higher Education with post-18 and mature students, where sophisticated skills of analysis and synthesis are both expected and rewarded, and knowledge is treated more problematically, may have led him to expect too much from Foundation and Intermediate GNVQ students. In my research

based on GNVQ Advanced Level students in 4 colleges, the students were more congruent with the GNVQ curriculum and their ability to access a wide range of resources for their H.E. courses, was cited by them as a major factor in their successful transition to H.E. Although Bloomer does not hold this view:

> *"Students on GNVQ courses may well have used a range of knowledge sources and resources. So often, however, they had used them in ways which stripped them of the rich potential they undoubtedly held for the generation of new ideas and new insights. Such sources of knowledge were treated solely as information mines, and whatever they might have had to offer in terms of problematised knowledge had been sanitised into simple 'facts'".* (Bloomer, ibid. p. 183)

However, if this interpretation is correct why did GNVQs remain relatively popular?

Bloomer argues that GNVQs were sustained by a 'progressive rhetoric' which served to maintain 'a surface level of agreement' (Goffman, 1971) between the various actors and constituencies, while attention was deflected from the considerable variations in interest and practice. The politics of the curriculum was such that different constituencies perceived their preferred ideologies within GNVQs, which were 'all things to all people' and the paradoxes were ignored.

> *"There is a major paradox lying at the core of GNVQ. On the one hand many of GNVQ's distinctive practices, including*

personal projects, activity-based learning and participative enquiry, are the very types of activity widely used to underpin progressive practice. Moreover, much of the rhetoric associated with GNVQs signals a progressive intent. On the other hand, accounts offered by students and tutors reveals that in practice, experiences of learning have little or no connection with progressivism at all". *(Bloomer, op. cit. p. 183)*

But what of the arguments of the links between education and the economy?

Bloomer concludes:

"In as much as the labour market of future generations will demand versatility and the capacity for collaborative working, learning and knowledge generation as well as autonomy and self-management in their labour forces, GNVQ is not an adequate preparation". *(Bloomer, ibid.)*

So if the GNVQ model was 'fundamentally flawed' to what extent did any changes to the model make any difference?

Bloomer sees the Capey Report (1995) as a positive step forward in attempting to reduce the assessment overload (the technical rationalism strand) and achieve a greater balance of interests. The move from assessment at 'element level' to 'unit level' would lead to a more holistic approach to knowledge and increase opportunities for the development of students' critical abilities. However, in his view, Capey did not go far enough in his

review of GNVQ problems, perhaps due to political considerations and constraints. But much depends on the purposes behind the GNVQ curriculum.

Bloomer argues that if GNVQs were predominantly aimed at promoting independent learning and student autonomy, then the unit specifications and the emphasis on content and procedure should to be abandoned and greater emphasis laid on 'quality' of assignments rather than 'quantity' and teaching and learning strategies required to foster students' critical abilities. However, Bloomer ends on a slightly sceptical note in terms of the manifest and latent purposes of Government policy:

> *"If on the other hand, the dominant interests are those of political control, these strategies will not do at all" (Bloomer, op. cit. p. 184).*

2.3 Political processes and the definition of research agendas

But why had all this 'critical' research apparently been ignored by the Government and its agencies ?

Kathryn Ecclestone, Professor in post-compulsory education at the University of Sunderland, offers some valuable insights into the reasons for this using Lakatos's criteria to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of research programmes. She argues that following the Government's remit to NCVQ in 1992 to develop GNVQs, NCVQ set up an extensive research and support programme involving a wide range of government bodies, quangoes and consultants, plus a few H.E. researchers, which dominated (and controlled) the political and research agendas for GNVQs. Thus not only did NVQs and

GNVQs profoundly transform vocational education and training by implementing a centralised competence-based assessment model, but they also changed the research agendas and the ways in which research was carried out (Ecclestone, 1998). This was part of the political process.

Following the Capey Report (1995), £8 million was allocated for research and development into GNVQs, with the direction and focus of the 'official research programme' being determined by the DfEE. The research agenda revolved around the technical recommendations arising from inspectorate reports (FEFC, 1994; 1995, OfSTED, 1994; 1996), consultations with stakeholders and evaluations commissioned by NCVQ and the DfEE on strategies for improving the design and delivery of GNVQs, as well as the policy concerns of the DfEE. However, as Wolf points out, little is known about which individuals and organisations undertake these projects or what criteria are used to allocate the funding, yet the findings of this research feed into GNVQ policy processes as well as curriculum practice (Wolf 1997).

Ecclestone argues that this 'official research programme' inhibited radical and critical thinking about developments in vocational education. Indeed, in March 1996 when I started my PhD research, the literature search yielded few critical reviews and research papers on GNVQs with some notable exceptions (Collins, 1993; Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994; Taubman, 1994; James and Knott, 1994) an observation also made by Ranson regarding post-compulsory education in general.

> *"Research into post-compulsory education remains conspicuously under-researched".* *(Ranson, 1996)*

Nevertheless, there was a lot of rhetoric from NCVQ officers and government agencies about the benefits of GNVQs as reflected in the following headlines.

> *"GNVQs: a new pathway to H.E." Rob Coward,* ***'Newscheck'*** *4 (8) June 1994*

> *"Higher Education extends a cautious welcome to Advanced GNVQ" Rob Coward,* ***'Newscheck'*** *5 (2) November 1994*

> *"Big business wakes up to GNVQs" Rob Coward,* ***'Newscheck'*** *5 (7) May 1995*

> *"All change for the GNVQ" Rob Coward, 'Business Education To-day' March/April 1995*

> *"Future Perfect: Boswell's verdict on the GNVQ", Tim Boswell, 'Business Education To-day' March/April 1995*

> *"GNVQs are good for you: it's official" Higgins and Megson, 'Education' 186 (21) November 1995*

> *"GNVQ students make the grade for H.E entry", Rob Coward,* ***'Newscheck'*** *6 (7) May 1996*

Indeed, 'Newscheck' is a DfEE sponsored journal with a particular focus on careers education. The above-mentioned articles read more like government propaganda marketing a product than informed academic research.

Nevertheless, a small, but significant body of dissenting research has been growing outside the 'official research programme' supported by independent

funding, although this has largely been ignored by NCVQ, Government agencies and the inspectorates. Even the Capey Report (1995) only made limited mention of this independent research in its bibliography (Wolf, 1993; 1994; 1995; James and Knott, 1994), which in effect became in Phillips' terms, a 'rival research programme' (Phillips, 1987)

Ecclestone concludes:

> *"In the absence of a high-profile for university-based research in the vocational curriculum, the QCA's well-funded research programme and its processes for allocating funding to particular bidders are likely to become increasingly influential. And, despite the lack of impact on intellectual debates outside 'the official programme', its outcomes profoundly affect the design and implementation of the vocational curriculum" as government bodies increasingly intervene directly in the curriculum with guidance on systems or strategies to facilitate GNVQs and assure their quality".* *(Ecclestone, 1998 p. 683)*

Ecclestone identifies three main strands in this 'dissenting research'. First, research into policy-making and the post-16 curriculum which notably came from the London Institute of Education; the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds (Hodgson and Spours, 1997; Evans et. al., 1997). Second, studies on curriculum development and practice which investigated how vocational policy was implemented by teachers and students (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Bloomer, 1996b; Higham et. al., 1997; Bates, 1997; Wolf, 1997a). Third, and perhaps the most fragmented group, are critiques of the

behaviourist paradigm which underpinned GNVQ pedagogy (Hyland, 1994; Halliday, 1996), and the degree to which competence-based assessment could be used to control learners (Edwards and Usher, 1996; Halliday, 1996) as well as penetrating critiques of government policy and the vocational curriculum (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Avis et. al., 1996; Avis, 1998).

Ecclestone concludes:

> *"Taken as a whole, this body of work illustrates* ***serious ideological problems with GNVQs****, such as their potentially narrowing effects on the content and control of the vocational curriculum. It also highlights epistemological dangers such as an extreme positivist approach to defining learning outcomes and assessment specifications. Yet this critical or oppositional research lacks the coherence of other programmes since it tends to draw in individual researchers and lacks funding. Nor is it based on identifiable projects in a specific institution or around a particular research journal" and also reflects a diverse range of liberal, Marxist and post-modern perspectives. (Ecclestone, 1998 p. 686) My emboldening*

However, as two NCVQ employees admitted, deliberate public engagement with opposing views was not part of the research culture in NCVQ (Oates and Hillier, 1998) nor was it congruent with the 'organisational culture' within the FEFC or FEDA. But when critical research fell under the public spotlight e.g. the Smithers Report (1993) and the press report on Wolf's research on GNVQs (1997a), as Wolf and Oates point out, such publicity

might irritate the policy-makers without necessitating public engagement with the divergent views. Indeed, this view is supported by my personal experience while working for FEDA . The press release on Wolf's research into GNVQs, which had been commissioned by FEDA, caused considerable 'waves' within the organisation, as it had not been officially sanctioned prior to its release and was seen as undermining GNVQ delivery in centres. Wolf's contract was put under the microscope and the press release was swiftly refuted by FEDA's Chief Executive (Crowne, 1997).

Ecclestone concludes:

> *"As a result, much debate about the vocational curriculum is firmly set within the parameters of policy imperatives and the technical requirements* ***to make GNVQs (and NVQs) work in practice****. This leads to a climate where, in spite of enormous expenditure on GNVQ developments and research, some researchers argue that there is not enough attention to work which addresses fundamental concerns about parity of esteem, coherence or breadth in the post-14 curriculum. (Bates et. al., 1997; Hodgson and Spours, 1997; Wolf, 1997b). Other critics would argue that political and social dimensions in curriculum content and pedagogy are similarly excluded (Hyland, 1994; Avis et. al., 1996)* *(Ecclestone, 1998 p. 687)*

Nevertheless, as Ecclestone observes, this lack of public and private engagement was one of the main factors which reinforced the power and closed nature of 'the official research programme'. In addition she argues that

GNVQs have suffered from certain 'hard core' elements in terms of their design which have been resistant to change.

> *"A hard-core element (in Lakatos's terms) in 'the official research programme for GNVQs .. is that assessment is a prime factor in curriculum and pedagogic change.*
>
> *"GNVQ designers hoped that the positive heuristic of externally defined, rigorous assessment specifications would lead, or at least enable, teachers to adopt student-centred pedagogy". (Oates and Harkin, 1995; Oates, 1997) Furthermore, adherence to tightly defined assessment specifications was claimed to be a guarantee of validity and reliable national standards of achievement. (Ecclestone, 1998 p. 687)*

However, it was the adherence to these 'hard-core elements' in NCVQ's R&D work between 1992 - 1996 that caused fundamental problems in implementing the GNVQ assessment regime. Nevertheless, between 1996 - 1999 political factors such as the concern to portray GNVQs as having 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels and research evidence about the effects of such prescriptive and detailed assessment, combined to bring about changes. But substantial evidence from Wolf (1994) of epistemological and practical problems with GNVQ assessment did not have an immediate impact on Government policy. Oates argues that action was only taken by the DfEE when her research was confirmed by official reports by the FEFC, OfSTED

and Capey. (Oates personal communication May 1997). Indeed, after the Capey Report (1995) ...

> *" quite fundamental epistemological concessions were made. The approach to mastery, so prominent in the NVQ assessment model and transferred to GNVQs, was acknowledged, tacitly, to be epistemologically flawed as well as impractical. So too, was the idea that ever more refined assessment specifications would guarantee both the validity and reliability of standards. Of particular interest to researchers is that these concessions are made without any public engagement with the detracting research evidence".* *(Eccleston, ibid. p. 687)*

So Government policy has been less influenced by the findings of independent research than by political factors e.g. the need to present GNVQs as having parity of esteem with A-Levels and there has been increasing pressure to align A-Level and GNVQ grading scales to make GNVQs more like A-Levels. (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995). Furthermore, NCVQs merger with SCAA, where the ethos and practice of syllabus development and teachers' moderation of standards are part of a different assessment culture, has fundamentally affected the direction of research in QCA so much so that some of the 'hard core elements' according to Ecclestone, have become expendable or defunct, as political considerations have resulted in the closer alignment of GNVQs with A-Levels.

> ... *"away from public critical scrutiny and without explicit engagement with evidence from rival research*

programmes, 'battle royals' were fought over elements which then became expendable". (Oates, personal communication May 1997)

A crucial turning point in the research programme, according to Oates, was the refutation of the notion that ever more detailed assessment specifications, defined linguistically and applied consistently, can guarantee reliable standards. This also appears to have marked the end of Gilbert Jessup's strong influence over the GNVQ model. (Ecclestone, 1998)

" A once irrefutable principle in NVQs for example, was that if assessment standards were rigorously specified, there was no need for teachers to engage in peer moderation and on-going scrutiny of assessment processes. Yet an important shift in the current official programme is extensive technical work to build these processes into GNVQs". (Ecclestone, 1998 p. 689)

Moreover:

"These transitions have been masked by the almost continual stream of policy guidance and prescription which has accompanied GNVQ developments. This enables changes to be presented merely as evolving and useful technical amendments and helps maintain a public face of political and educational consistency". (Ecclestone, ibid.)

2.4 Summary

Management perspectives on 'Organisation Development' have highlighted a number of 'necessary' conditions for the successful implementation of policy. When these are applied to the introduction the Government's new policy on vocational qualifications, it is clear that some key elements have not been met, or they were initially met, but not sustained. In particular, the Government did not have ... "clear and stable policy objectives." (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986. *See Figure 2.1 item 2*) When problems emerged with GNVQs during mainstream implementation (Wolf, 1993; James and Knott, 1994), and, following vociferous complaints by a range of 'stakeholders' which were endorsed by Inspectorate reports (FEFC, 1994; 1995; OfSTED, 1994; 1996) and Government sponsored reviews (Capey, 1995; Dearing, 1996), policy goal posts were frequently changed.

Moreover, the theoretical paradigm (Behaviourism) and the competence-based assessment model on which GNVQs were based, was found by independent academic researchers to be inadequate and fundamentally flawed. Thus measured against Cerych and Sabatier's criteria, the policy-makers did not ensure that ... "the causal theory which underlies the policy reform" was "correct and adequate". (Cerych and Sabatier 1986. *See Figure 2.1 item 5*). Although the Government attempted to control and stifle criticism of the GNVQ curriculum by sponsoring what Ecclestone (1998) calls an 'official research programme' managed by NCVQ, a growing body of research from independent academics challenged this Government propaganda by identifying some fundamental contradictions and tensions underpinning GNVQ philosophy and practice. (Hodgson and Spours 1997;

Evans et. al. 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson 1997; Bloomer 1996b; Higham et. al. 1997; Bates 1997; Wolf 1997a).

The Government certainly backed the new vocational initiative with financial 'carrots' and 'sticks'. Indeed, Robinson (1996) estimates that £107 million was spent on setting up the NCVQ framework, apart from publicity and staff costs. In April 1996, following the Capey Report, the Government allocated a further £29 million to improve the assessment and grading of GNVQs and for staff development. Thus it could be argued in terms of Ceryrch and Sabatier's criteria (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986. *See Figure 2.1 item 6*), that the policy-makers allocated "sufficient financial resources" to support policy-implementation. They also endeavoured to ensure that "the policy innovation had priority over competing demands" (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986. *See Figure 2.1 item 3*) by phasing out existing vocational qualifications, although this strategy was less successful in practice.

However, although at the policy-espousal stage the Government *initially* created interest in the new vocational qualifications, some serious deficits emerged at the policy-implementation stage and the commitment of some stakeholders was not sustained. (Cerych and Sabatier, 1986. *See Figure 2.1 item 1*). As Bloomer argues the three strands of 'progressivism', 'technical rationalism' and 'free marketism' combined into a rhetoric which had the capacity to appeal to a range of audiences, including teachers and educationalists. But this did not last.

> *"It is a compelling illustration of the power of rhetoric in shaping reality."* *(Bloomer, 1998 p. 169)*

Thus although GNVQs appeared to be student-centred and based on liberal-progressive education principles which aimed to encourage independent learning and enable progression to H.E. and employment (NCVQ, 1995), in reality, at policy-implementation level this did not occur. On the contrary, detailed requirements for evidence of action-planning and assignment evaluation, coupled with tightly-specified outcomes and externally-set end of unit tests that focused on specific knowledge requirements, resulted in very detailed prescription. (Bates et. al. 1998, p.121) Indeed, GNVQs lost the support of many students. Non-completion and high drop-out rates were indicative of this malaise. As Bates et. al. point out:

> *"However, despite the rhetoric of flexibility and student-centredness, the learning opportunities on GNVQ courses are not always geared to these ends in practice ... GNVQ designers have underestimated the influence of teachers and students .. and the restrictive nature of 'controlled vocationalism'. (Bates et. al., 1998 p. 122)*

Thus to conclude: the 'top-down' functionalist perspectives of 'Organisation Development' have been useful in identifying some 'necessary conditions' for successful policy implementation. However, even if the policy-makers had met all these it is evident that they were not 'sufficient' in themselves, since policy-implementation is also a 'bottom-up' process as Bates et. al. clearly recognise in the extract above. Phenomenological perspectives, which emphasise the importance of 'actors' and key stakeholders at the micro-political level, also play a crucial role in the policy-implementation process.

As Bates et. al. conclude:

> *"Though there is indeed a progressive tradition in GNVQs, it is masked and often undermined by partly contradictory ideologies, practices and procedures, within a controlled vocational context".* *(Bates et. al., 1998 p. 120)*

However, if knowledge was being fragmented in GNVQ programmes and tight prescription was stifling students' creativity and encouraging 'instrumental learning', this did not bode well for the teaching and learning styles in H.E. - where a holistic approach to knowledge and the need to engage in critical discourse are paramount.

But to what extent did GNVQs achieve the Government's policy objective of securing 'parity of esteem' with GCE A-Levels? This will be considered in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

In search of the holy grail: the quest for 'parity of esteem'

Chapter 3

In search of the holy grail: the quest for 'parity of esteem'

3.1 The education policy context

Before considering the issue of 'parity of esteem' between GNVQs and A-Levels, it is useful to look at the historical policy context of Further and Higher Education (F.H.E.) into which the new vocational qualifications were embedded. Little had been done for many years to improve the provision of technical education and training in England and Wales. Indeed, Correlli Barnett argues that there was a malaise in education policy developments in the decade after the Second World War. Although Government ministers knew what needed to be done regarding education and training, since the War had highlighted the limited output of highly-trained scientists, engineers and technicians from Britain's education and training system compared with those in Germany, no action was taken to address these deficits. (Barnett, 2002)
As Barnett points out:

> ... *"the cumulative British output of graduate engineers for the fourteen years 1925-39 amounted to less than double Germany's output for the single year of 1937. Other wartime industries in Britain, from coal to aircraft manufacture, similarly suffered from scarcities of trained high-grade talent at all levels of management and engineering..."* (Barnett, 2002 p. 445)

The few university students were drawn essentially from the middle and upper classes, and studied predominantly arts and classics subjects rather than science and engineering. Thus in 1938-39 Britain had 22,374 'Arts' university students and only 6,331 studying 'Applied Science'. At the ordinary degree/technician level, the picture was equally bleak. In 1938-39 Britain had 1,111 students studying part-time for HNC in technological subjects and 173 for the Higher National Diploma, compared with Germany, where there were over 138,000 students studying in 1,233 'Berufsfachschulen' (full-time training colleges). At the secondary school level, the situation was even worse with 99% of Britain's working class pupils leaving school without any qualifications at all. (Barnett, 2002) The rhetoric of the 1943 White Paper recognised the need to 'remould and unify the educational system' and not merely to 'patch and improve it', yet still nothing was done. (Ministry of Education, 1943)

Barnett ascribes this inertia to the lack of vision of the humanist public-school, Oxbridge civil servants who dominated the Board of Education and various Royal Commissions on Education. The piecemeal approach to policy-making by 'mandarins' who disagreed over educational values and priorities in various Government committees and the 'malign dominance of the academic tradition', resulted in no coherent masterplan being developed. (Barnett, 2002)

However, the 1944 Education Act was a major policy landmark. It created the tripartite system of secondary grammar, technical and modern schools,

with the goal of 'parity of esteem' between the three types of school. This new system opened up secondary education to all children in England and Wales until the age of 15. Nevertheless, the policy objectives underpinning the 1944 Education Act were not achieved. Instead of achieving 'parity of esteem' the tripartite system merely perpetuated the British class divide and subsequent focus fell on the curriculum and examinations of the grammar schools to the neglect of the other two types of school. As Barnett concludes:

> *"Although by 1956 the percentage of children staying on in school after the age of 14 was double that of 1937, 'secondary education' only signified for the vast majority of them a tedious extra year in the classroom that still led to no academic or vocational qualification."* *(Barnett, 2002 p. 461)*

These class biases and deficiencies were also recognised by the Crowther Report (1957) as well as being reflected in the school-leaving statistics. In November 1955, a draft plan for the Cabinet again acknowledged policy deficits in vocational education and training as the following extract illustrates:

> *"If we are to produce all the trained craftsmen and technicians and technologists that are needed, the pyramid of technical education must have a broader base of school-leavers than it has now. Our aim must be to attract 50% of them into day-time attendance at technical colleges". (Ministry of Education, 1955)*

This was what the Schools Enquiry Commission had recommended 87 years earlier, but there was still no Government action. (Barnett, 2002)

The 1956 White Paper on Technical Education recognised the need to review Britain's system of technical education since it was evident that compared with the USA, Russia and Western Europe who were making an immense effort to train more scientific and technical manpower, Britain was in danger of being left behind (Ministry of Education, 1956). In 1955-56, Germany's 'Technische Hochschulen' produced 3,760 graduates, compared with 2,300 graduates with degrees and diplomas of technology from universities in England and Wales.

However, the 1960's saw a major policy change with the Robbins Report (1963) which recommended massive expansion of H.E. in order to attract more talent, especially from the working classes. In 1963 Britain only had twenty-four universities, but the Robbins Report set targets for major expansion, with the aim of doubling full-time student numbers from 280,000 to 560,000 by 1980. At last, policy espousal was translated into policy implementation. During this period, a number of new universities were built (e.g. York, Kent, Warwick, Lancaster and Essex), and some Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) were awarded university status (e.g. Bath, Salford and Aston) while the O.U. was set up in 1969 offering part-time study opportunities for mature students at home. The 1966 White Paper "A Plan for the Polytechnics" continued this expansion, with 29 CATs becoming degree-

awarding polytechnics. This policy was continued in the 1972 White Paper: "Education: A Framework for Expansion" (Trowler, 2003). By 1996 there were 176 H.E.I.s in the UK of which 115 were designated 'universities'. (Dearing, 1997)

However, this expansionist policy was not without its 'costs' which had spiralled to £38 billion by 1995, with students having to rely on loans and paying an increasing proportion of the costs of their higher education. By 1995/5 there was a total of 1,720,000 H.E. students in the U.K. (HESA 1997) compared to 618,000 in 1970/71 (Trowler, 2003).

The move towards a 'mass' system of higher education and away from an 'elite' system was a major policy objective of the Government, and GNVQs were part of this development. It is useful to view the effects of Government policy in terms of a model put forward by Trow. Trow makes a distinction between 'elite', 'mass' and 'universal' systems of higher education, which are defined by the proportion of 18-21 year old students within each category. Thus 15% separates an 'elite' from a 'mass' system of H.E., while 40% defines the transition from 'mass' to universal' (Trow, 1970). See Figure 3.1 below.

However as Trowler points out, this growth in higher education was also accompanied by major change in four other respects:

- a change in size

- changing patterns of access
- a decline in resources
- a change in the functions of H.E.

(Trowler, 2003)

Figure 3.1 : Percentage of 18-21 year olds in Higher Education 1960 - 1992

	%	Trow's model
1960	6.9	'Elite' = 0-14%
1980	13.3	'Mass' = 15- 39%
1992	27.8	
2000	33	'Universal' = 40+%

(Source: DES 1991b; DfE 1994)

In 1963 the Robbins Report identified four main functions of higher education, namely:-

- instruction in occupational skills (to develop the nation's economy)
- the advancement of learning (to develop knowledge)
- promotion of the powers of the mind (to develop the intellect of the person)

- the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship (to develop society)

(Trowler, 2003 p.83)

Between the 1980s and 1990s, shifts in education policy emphasised and de-emphasised different aspects of these functions. Thus the 1985 Green Paper "The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s", stressed the importance of the contribution of higher education to the economy, to the detriment of the other three functions. By 1991 both Government policy and funding mechanisms put the emphasis on ... "the vocational relevance of post-compulsory education and its contribution to 'UK plc'" rather than on individual personal development or the cultural and intellectual development of society. (Trowler, 2003 p.84) Indeed, the direction of Government policy was greatly influenced by the 'new vocationalism' - of which the new national vocational qualifications framework was an integral part.

Expansion was also on the agenda for 465 F.E. colleges, as the new national vocational qualifications came on stream in the 1990s, in line with Government policy to increase participation rates of post-16 students.

3.2 The quest for 'parity of esteem'

The notion of 'parity of esteem' between Advanced GNVQs and GCE A-Levels was a major focus of debate throughout the 1990s. It was emphasised in the 1991 Government White Paper and by the Minister of State for Education, Tim Eggar, who believed that 'parity of esteem' was 'absolutely

critical to the success of GNVQs and that without it there would be pressure to dilute and weaken A-Levels (Sharp, 1998 p.307). However, acknowledgement by Ministers that the academic-vocational divide was *"false, artificial and unnecessary"... made "the damage attributed to it seem readily repairable by sensible curriculum reform"* (Edwards, in Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 1). But this was easier said than done since, as Edwards points out:

> *"The persistent devaluing of vocational education although increasingly challenged in policy rhetoric, reflects entrenched assumptions about the kinds of learning appropriate for future leaders and for even their most skilled followers". (Edwards, 1997 op.cit. p. 1)*

Indeed, different qualifications, or the lack of any qualifications at all, have served to allocate young people to different levels in the labour market and even the Dearing Report (1996) made only cursory reference to the cultural attitudes and obstacles that impede reform.

Rather naively, Gilbert Jessup believed that the aligning of GNVQs and NVQs in a new 3-tier qualifications track was a 'major conceptual breakthrough' and that promoting 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels was achievable and indeed, a central goal for NCVQ. However, NCVQ rhetoric in promoting the value of a new qualification did not in itself either convey or guarantee 'parity of esteem' as previous experience of Government policy on comprehensivisation in the 1970s demonstrated: changing the name of a school at its gates does not automatically change its status and perception

within the local community. The same applies to the introduction of a new national qualification structure which will take a considerable amount of time to embed.

3.3 The meanings and implications of 'parity of esteem'

In the early 1990s there was little discussion of the meaning and implications of the term 'parity of esteem' and many of the complexities inherent in the concept were either totally unforeseen and/or remained completely inarticulated. (Sharp, 1998 op. cit.)

So what exactly does 'parity of esteem' between GNVQ and A-Level mean? At its simplest level, it means that the two qualifications are held in equal regard by particular stakeholders such as employers, higher education admissions tutors, students, teachers and members of the public. The importance of qualifications in advanced industrial societies is that they communicate publicly that a certain body of knowledge has been covered and that the holder has achieved a certain standard of performance. Both aspects are crucial in establishing public confidence in the validity and reliability of an award as Edwards et. al. point out.

> *"Employers and admissions officers need a level of confidence that a new qualification provides clear and accurate signals about content covered and standards achieved... Since the level of performance will depend to some extent on the developed abilities of the student, the award of a grade indirectly signals levels of developed abilities".* *(Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 51)*

An Advanced GNVQ was officially deemed to be equivalent to two GCE A-Level passes, while the GNVQ grades of Merit and Distinction were stated as being equivalent to the higher grades of the A-Level. However, Advanced GNVQ has recruited students mainly from the middle ability range of GCSEs (FEU et. al., 1994 p.33) and as Edwards concludes:

> *"In so far as the two qualifications compete for the same students, they do so on very unequal terms which include persistent doubts about whether GNVQs compare with A-Levels in difficulty". (Edwards et. al., pp. 13 - 14)*

Moreover, there has been considerable confusion among teachers over how to interpret the GNVQ specifications (the knowledge required) and how to apply the grading themes (assessment to particular standards). Indeed, the complex grading structure which was designed to facilitate selection of candidates for H.E., is seen by some researcher-practitioners as an obstacle to progression. (Shirtliff, 1996). Official reports from OfSTED (1994; 1995) the FEFC (1994; 1995) Capey (1995) and Dearing (1996), have highlighted the need for NCVQ to ensure both transparency and consistency of standards in GNVQs. This has led to the GNVQ specifications being re-written twice with further Pilot studies, and demands for GNVQ terminology to be simplified, as well as the production of a vast array of guidance booklets by NCVQ, FEDA and awarding bodies and regional standards moderation meetings for teachers in order to facilitate implementation. Such implementation problems were not evident with A-Levels following their introduction in 1951.

Notwithstanding the problems inherent in the GNVQ curriculum design, particularly the 'Mark 1' version, there were certain cultural and structural difficulties which were impeding 'parity of esteem' between the two qualifications as Gleeson et. al. point out.

> *"Constant talk of A-Levels as the 'gold standard' has set GNVQ a difficult cultural and educational task." (Gleeson et. al., 1995 p. 9)*

Indeed, a major obstacle to achieving parity of esteem with A-Levels was that GNVQs were put in a double-bind situation. On the one hand they were recruiting students from a wider ability pool and attracted few 'high fliers' (FEU et. al., 1994; Edwards et. al., 1997), yet they were expected to achieve parity of esteem with a cohort which was academically much stronger.

> *"It is a paradox that GNVQ has been introduced to meet the needs of students for whom A-Level is considered inappropriate and yet the two qualifications are intended to be of the same standard". (NEAB, 1995 p.4 quoted in Sharp, 1998 p. 307)*

GNVQs had to compete with A-Levels' market value, long life and innate quality (Dearing 1996: 3.5), with an academic tradition established over 40 years and a perception among employers that they are an indicator of 'promising' applicants' ambition, self-reliance and capacity for hard work.

> *"Advanced GNVQs have to win parity of esteem with a long-established market leader that attracts almost all the students judged academically capable of following that traditional*

academic route. They have to provide the same 'level' of qualification for students who are generally weaker academically... They have to resemble the established academic model in the opportunities to which they give access, but they also have to be sufficiently unlike A-Levels in how knowledge is organised, transmitted and assessed to appeal to a much wider constituency of students on which the attainment of ambitious national education targets depend" (Edwards et. al. 1997 p. 175)

Thus GNVQs had to establish their distinctiveness, as well as their credibility. However, between 1992 and 1996 repeated attempts to improve aspects of GNVQ 'Mark 1' focused on 'technical solutions' aimed at making the qualification more robust in terms of assessment and grading and consistency of standards, rather than acknowledging that Jessup's competency based model was fundamentally flawed. Indeed, the cry for more 'rigor' in GNVQ standards resulted in an 'academic drift' towards A-Levels where the vocational award began to emulate aspects of the higher status academic curriculum in order to secure some of that status for itself. But, as Gleeson and Hodkinson warn:

"If this happens to GNVQ, driven by the ever elusive parity of esteem with A-Level, the practical and technical will remain marginalised in English and Welsh education. (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995 p.10)

Edwards et. al. argue that it is easier to see the two qualifications as 'complementary' rather than them holding 'parity of esteem'. They conclude: the problem of establishing parity of esteem with A-Levels

> ... *"is not solved, and is barely alleviated, by the technical solution of more rigorous assessment (predictably interpreted as making it more conventionally academic)".* *(Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 176)*

Nevertheless, when trying to evaluate relative parity of esteem, it could be helpful to compare GNVQs and A-Levels on a number of dimensions:

- the nature and type of curriculum
- the curriculum range and coverage
- the style of teaching, learning and assessment
- student take-up and perceptions of the two types of course
- relative 'value-added' and completion rates
- and progression to H.E. and/or employment

3.4 GNVQs and A-Levels compared

The GNVQ curriculum differed considerably from A-Levels in the ways of selecting and organising knowledge. GCE A-Levels typically involved students choosing a combination of 3-4 academic subjects, depending on the range offered by the school or college and the required combination for progression to H.E.. The subjects involved specialist study in depth of

knowledge 'for its own sake' (Edwards, op.cit.) and there were no requirements for students to achieve breadth, balance or cross curricular links with other subjects.

By contrast, GNVQs involved the study of applied knowledge and skills with a broad, multi-disciplinary curriculum which was directly linked to the world of work. Learning styles with GNVQs were more student-centred, investigative and practical and involved a more collaborative approach to learning compared with A-Levels, which involved a more didactic, teacher-centred approach to disseminating knowledge and were more theoretical, essay-based and desk-bound (Chorlton, 1994, p. 89). But the extent to which these two 'ideal types' are found in their pure form is debatable; some blurring and overlap was evident in practice as a number of researchers have indicated. (Bloomer, 1998; Bates, 1998; Hodgson and Spours, 1999). However, the whole point of introducing GNVQs was to offer an alternative curriculum which would attract and be suitable for, increasing numbers of students who were staying on at school at post-16 and for whom traditional A-Levels were deemed unsuitable. As Edwards (op. cit. p. 19) points out:

> *"Although Dearing was required by the Secretary of State to retain the 'purely academic' pathway represented by A-Level, his own justification for rejecting a single post-16 qualification was that it would be heavily skewed towards 'the proven A-level approach' ... to the detriment of students who have not yet responded well to academic learning and who are stimulated by a different approach' involving 'the application of knowledge and skills in a broadly vocational context' and a systematic training in how to learn. In his Final Report, he therefore*

proposed that the distinctiveness of the two qualifications should be clear and 'consistent'. (Dearing 1996 p. 12)
(Quoted in Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 19)

Although there have been some changes to the A-Level curriculum, with more subjects becoming available, some changes and reduction to syllabuses and subject cores established, coursework has had a limited place in formal assessment. Thus despite what Higham et. al. (1996 p.53) refer to as 'creeping modernisation', GCE A-Levels are essentially the same as when they were first introduced to replace the Higher School Certificate in 1951. (Edwards et. al., 1997)

Indeed, setting aside A-Level General Studies, nearly two-thirds of A-Level entries in 1996 were in the same ten subjects that predominated 40 years ago in Grammar School sixth forms. *(See Figure 3.2 below)*

Some experiments with modular A-Levels and revised syllabuses were undertaken in the form of the Wessex Project in the late 1980s (Rainbow, 1993), but despite their relative success, widespread implementation was not permitted. Indeed, the preservation of A-Levels has been seen as an obstacle to 'progressive approaches'. (Spours and Young, 1995)

Figure 3.2 A-Level entries 1996

PURE		APPLIED		GENERAL	
English	12.0	Art & Design	4.6	General Studies	8.6
Mathematics	9.1	Sociology	4.0		
Biology	7.0	Business Studies	3.9		
History	5.9	Psychology	3.2		
Geography	5.8	Law	1.6		
Chemistry	5.5	Technical Subjects	1.5		
Physics	4.4	Computing	1.4		
French	3.7	Expresive Arts	1.3		
Economics	3.3	Sport/PE	1.3		
Sub-total	56.7	Media/Film	1.3		
German	1.5	Comms. Studies	0.7		
Other Foreigh langs.	1.4	Home Economics	0.4		
Religious Studies	1.2				
Classical Subjects	1.0				
Music	0.9				
Science	0.7				
TOTALS:	63.4		25.1		8.6

(NB. Figures are percentages of all entries)

Source: (Edwards. et. al., 1997 p. 17)

As Edwards points out:

> *"... A-Levels are now taken by one third of the age group rather than a select company of scholars of the kind recalled by Peterson, and that the proportion achieving at least two 'good passes' at A-Level is now several times larger than the entire sixth form cohort of forty years ago". (Edwards op. cit., p. 9)*

By contrast, GNVQs were promoted for their occupational relevance as reflected in their names - Health & Social Care, Art & Design, Retail & Distributive Services, Engineering and GNVQ Business. There were 14 programme areas, available at three levels - Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced, although these were not offered by all centres.

> *"Although designed as vocational qualifications, GNVQs were to be aligned with other qualifications - significantly GCE A-Levels and GCSEs. In particular, Advanced GNVQs were designed to be of comparable standard to GCE A-Levels and each of the Advanced GNVQs 12 vocational units was to be comparable in its demand and coverage to one-sixth of a GCE A-Level qualification (so making the vocational units, in total, the equivalent of two A-Levels). (FEU/UCAS, 1995 p. 1)*

In addition, GNVQs were designed to be taken in combination with other qualifications e.g. GCE A-Levels, or with additional GNVQ units. As a broad based vocational qualification, GNVQs also involved students' need to

demonstrate achievement across a number of core skills and to facilitate progression to Further and Higher Education as well as to employment and further training. (FEU/UCAS, op. cit.)

However, although GNVQs provided the middle track between A-Levels and NVQs, GNVQs were initially designed to be closer to the vocational side of the post-16 curriculum.

> *"When GNVQs first emerged, they reflected their NVQ origins by specifying learning outcomes relevant to a field of employment but not specifying how those outcomes were to be achieved. Knowledge relevant to achieving them might or might not have a disciplinary base; that was a matter for the teacher to determine, although it was very unlikely to be found in a single discipline. The basic approach was fervently defended as a radical new model of learning appropriate to the modern world, 'a conceptual framework within which to rethink both content and delivery'* *(Wolf, 1995 p. 12)*
>
> *Enthusiasts proclaimed it a model 'appropriate for education and training of all kinds' because it discarded old notions of prescribed content, prescribed periods of study and forms of assessment which over-valued a facility in writing essays and formulating examination answers that had little relevance to the demands of non-academic context (Ball, 1995; Jessup, 1991; 1995)* *(Quoted in Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 20)*

However, criticisms of the GNVQ curriculum and assessment model, (Smithers, 1993; Hyland, 1994; Bates, 1995; Wolf, 1995) particularly its narrowly utilitarian approach, combined with the quest for parity of esteem' tipped their re-design and emphasis towards A-Levels - with the introduction of testing of threshold knowledge, the grading of the final GNVQ award, the replacing of 'competencies' by 'attainment' in the formulation of learning objectives and the proposals for more substantial external assessment (Capey, 1995; Smithers, 1997). Nevertheless, in 1995 the fact that GNVQs were still being described in NUS/UWT policy statements as having 'no syllabuses as such' illustrates their departure from traditional prescribed structure and content of A-Levels.

3.5 Student take-up of GNVQs and their perceptions of them?

According to inspection reports and the educational press, GNVQs were popular. GNVQs were launched into mainstream education in September 1993 and over the following academic year 83,000 students were recruited. By 1994/95 there were 150,000 enrolments (FEFC, 1994; OfSTED, 1994), although this was stimulated by funding mechanisms and Government policy directives that other vocational awards were to be phased out. (Wolf, 1994). According to press reports, the 1994/95 figures represented 25% of post-16 student cohort. However, Spours argues that this claim was misleading:-

> *"GNVQ participation should be measured against at least two year-cohorts, because the FEU study found only 56% of GNVQ students to be 16 (FEU, 1994 p. 24). This means that they represent about 13 or 14% of the age cohort in any one year".*

He concludes:

> *"This is still well below the government target for GNVQs to cater for half of those in full-time post-compulsory education. It is not yet clear whether recruitment patterns for 1995/96 will show the growth in GNVQ uptake slowing down, reflecting the peaking of post-16 full-time participation, or whether GNVQs will continue to grow strongly by replacing existing vocational qualifications and drawing students from A-Levels and GCSE re-sits". (Spours, 1995 p.12)*

In 1995 GNVQs were not fully implemented and some programme areas were still being phased in. Consequently, it was difficult to assess the extent of their impact on the overall growth of vocational courses. Nevertheless, Spours identified some basic trends.

> *"GNVQs have had the greatest numerical effect at Intermediate Level, and this is the area of greatest expansion in schools. Intermediate GNVQ has accelerated the decline in GCSE re-sits. However, the overall growth in participation in Level 2 courses is now static (Spours, 1995). The area of most rapid expansion is in Advanced vocational courses which grew by 3% in 1993/94. Growth rates in full-time vocational education in the two years prior to the general availability of GNVQs had averaged 1.5 to 2%, so it can be concluded that GNVQs have added about 1%+ annually to full-time participation". (Spours, 1995 p. 12)*

Although Government policy originally intended GNVQs as a vocational award facilitating progression to NVQs and employment, a joint research study by the FEU/Nuffield/Institute of Education (1994) indicated that even at an early stage, students *regarded GNVQs as a form of general education and were using them for progression to H.E.*. This trend showed no sign of abating. Thus, notwithstanding the aims and objectives of Government policy, *at the micro-political level,* students were using GNVQs in a very different way and they were evolving very much as an educational award.

> *"The more it develops in that direction, the more its success will be judged 'largely by the numbers getting into higher education', despite the objections of those who see it primarily as bridging the gap between full-time academic education and work-based training".* *(FEU et. al., 1994 p. 6)*

3.6 GNVQ and A-Level completion rates

One of the rationales for introducing GNVQs was to offer post-16 students an alternative menu to A-Levels, since a report by the Audit Commission (1993) found that despite the increase in students taking A-Levels, one third of the entrants 'waste' two years through non-completion or failing the terminal examinations. But GNVQs have not improved the situation.

> *"However, GNVQ completion rates have also been low, with just over 50% successes, even when allowing for students taking an extra term to complete their portfolios (Spours, 1995 p.12). While these rates could improve, this performance is much lower than the pass rates of previous vocational awards, which have*

averaged between 60 to 70 per cent." (Audit Commission, 1993) (Quoted in Spours, ibid.)

But not all stakeholders perceived these statistics in the same light. One of the major Awarding Bodies (BTEC), in a riposte to criticisms of GNVQs argued that the high drop-out and non-completion rates on GNVQ courses helped to demonstrate that they were indeed rigorous and not a 'soft option'. (O'Leary, 1994) Nevertheless, it would be ironic if the success of GNVQs were to be judged against the price of other students' failure. (Shirtliff, 1996)

However the 'reliability' of GNVQ completion rates is another issue which has been raised. There have been some allegations about the integrity of GNVQ assessment processes (Smithers, 1993; 1994; 1995) and indeed, whether college managers put pressure on tutors to fudge pass grades for students in order to secure FEFC funding and the achievement of the Government's national education targets (NTETS). (Hugill, 1995)

While there may be a kernel of truth in some of these cases, the adverse publicity has not enhanced the reputation of GNVQs nor has it helped to facilitate student progression.

3.7 GNVQs and progression to Higher Education

There was considerable expansion in Higher Education places in the 1980s. In 1979 only 15% of 18-19 year olds gained a place in higher education, but by 1994 this figure had risen to over 30%. (DfEE, HMSO *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* 1995 p. 87). However, this expansion has now come to an

end. But it is ironic that GNVQs were introduced at a time when the Government was stimulating post-16 participation while at the same time restricting growth in H.E., with universities being threatened with funding penalties for over-recruitment. Fears have been expressed by some researchers that GNVQ students would lose out as demand for university places exceeds supply (Hodkinson and Mattinson, 1994). However, this has not happened, and, rather strangely, the reverse has occurred.

In September 1992 approximately 3,000 students were registered on the first GNVQ Pilot Scheme. In 1993/94, 905 students taking GNVQ Advanced courses applied to H.E. via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The UCAS GATE (GNVQs and Access to Higher Education) Project, attempted to trace the progress of these students to university. (UCAS/GATE, 1994). Of these students, 85% of them received offers of places, compared with 76% of other applicants, but only half of the GNVQ applicants actually took up the offers (FEU/UCAS, 1995).

A small-scale research project looking at progression to H.E. from GNVQ Business yielded some interesting facts and comments about the GNVQ applicants. Of the 905 students, 610 of them were taking GNVQ Business.

> *"Looking specifically at Advanced Business students, 534 out of 610 applied through UCAS. Of these 534, a total of 490 (92%) secured university places, an even higher rate than for GNVQ applicants as a whole. It does indeed seem both surprising and intriguing that GNVQ applicants have been so much luckier than*

the average UCAS candidate in obtaining offers". (Shirtliff, 1996 p. 9)

Although Shirtliff recognises that most applicants would be A-Level students, there would also be some students from ACCESS courses, BTEC National Diplomas as well as the I.B. (International Baccauleareate). However, detailed breakdown of offers received according to applicants' qualifications, is not recorded in UCAS statistics - only 'other than GNVQ and non-GNVQ'. She concludes:

> *"Thus a straight comparison with purely A-Level applicants is difficult. So it might not be the case that GNVQ applicants have fared better than A-Level applicants; perhaps those from other backgrounds have had less luck than both GNVQ and A-Level students ... or only the 'best' GNVQ students apply".*
>
> *(Shirtliff, op. cit. p. 9)*

However, my informal discussions with an H.E.I. Inspector in 1995 indicated that vice-chancellors were being "pressurised" to take GNVQ students, although he declined to be quoted.

Although the UCAS/GATE report (1994) "Lessons from the First Phase of Advanced GNVQ Applicants to Higher Education - 1994 UCAS Applicants" concluded that GNVQ applicants had been very successful in receiving "at least one offer", they actually received *fewer offers* compared with other H.E. applicants, which consequently limited their choice on which to accept. This could have been due to GNVQ students applying for both Higher National Diploma courses as well as degrees, while A-Level candidates opted only for

degree courses. (Shirtliff, 1996). But, it could also reflect the H.E.I. admissions policies or the micro-politicking at vice-chancellor level mentioned above in order to ensure that the first GNVQ Pilot cohort were ostensibly not disadvantaged.

The UCAS/GATE report (1994) found that 97% of the GNVQ students who were predicted to get a Distinction, received offers from H.E.. However, it would be interesting to know what prevented the remaining 3% from receiving an offer. It might have been the lack of GCSE English or Mathematics, but unfortunately, this point was not clarified in the report although it does confirm that applications *with these GCSEs* were perceived more positively. One advantage that GNVQ students had over A-Level students regarding progression to H.E., was that their final grade could be reliably forecast on the previous year's assessments, whereas A-Level students were reliant on their examination performance over one or two days, and there could be a considerable difference between their predicted grades and their actual grades achieved. However, this advantage for GNVQ programmes was not widely acknowledged.

Progression to H.E. is a complex process with an infinite range of specialist and general degree courses, as well as Higher National Diplomas (HND), which are offered at a wide range of H.E.I.s with variable status, including the Oxbridge Universities, the traditional and 'redbrick' universities, the post 1972 universities (the former polytechnics) and Colleges of Higher Education. It could be that GNVQ students were more likely to secure progression to particular types of degree and at particular types of H.E.I.s as recent research

suggests, but we also need to know the basis on which offers were being made as well as the timing of the offers as Shirtliff (1996) points out.

> *"Although it may not be surprising that as many as 84% of those predicted to get a pass had at least one offer since they may have been for HND courses at less popular institutions, it is interesting to note that 78% of applicants, for whom no specific grade (even pass) was given in the reference, also received offers. Could it be that a few institutions with new and/or unpopular but highly-funded courses to fill were mopping up through the clearing system? The GATE report does not state whether the offers were made during the December to May UCAS phase or during clearing. It would be useful to know at which stage the offers were made - and, more importantly, what they were."* (Shirtliff, 1996 p. 11)

So how were GNVQs perceived by H.E. admissions tutors? What requirements were set by H.E. for GNVQ students' entry to degree courses?

In any competitive situation such as university entrance, where demand exceeds supply, there has to be some method of selecting the most 'worthy' candidates. However, how these are defined is debatable. Even with A-Level candidates, applicants need to achieve more than the bare minimum entry qualifications. Moreover, since an A-Level 'Pass' has five grades (A to E) plus two 'Fail' categories (N and U), it is not surprising that the 3-point GNVQ assessment system (Distinction, Merit and Pass) was regarded by some people as too blunt an instrument for selection purposes by H.E.I.s.

(Shirtliff, 1996). Indeed, research into university admissions tutors' perceptions of the admissions process, undertaken by the University of North London found that 75% of admissions tutors in the sample felt that the GNVQ grading system was "less helpful than A-Level points or BTEC National unit grades". (Tysome, 1995)

Likewise, the six grading themes used in GNVQ assessment, which focused on generic process skills, rather than on outcomes, had to be extended from September 1994 to include two more relating to the quality of work - 'Synthesis' and 'Language' (NCVQ, 1994) to ensure that GNVQs would be more acceptable to admissions tutors. Without this modification, as Shirtliff points out:

> *"In theory, it would be quite possible to go through all the processes covered by the six grading criteria and still submit shoddy work, yet write a detailed evaluation of what went wrong to gain a Distinction! Although in practice this is unlikely, there was a feeling among tutors that there was no official way of rewarding high quality work - so the reaction was to find a way of doing just this, by manipulating the grading criteria to incorporate quality. (Institute of Education GARP Report 1994). This was being done in many different ways on different vocational programmes, in different centres and within the same centres."* *(Shirtliff, 1994 p. 33)*

Overall grading of GNVQs was highly problematic which raised serious issues of validity and reliability of the award. This was partly due to the lack

of clarity in the guidelines issued by the Awarding Bodies as Shirtliff (op, cit.) has highlighted.

> *"At a recent BTEC staff development event 'GNVQ: The Next Stage', held in Wakefield on 29th June 1995, it transpired that there were almost as many different methods of determining the final grade as there were delegates present!...*These variations ... *"could explain why such a high number of overall Distinctions were awarded in 1994. Until clear and appropriate guidelines are worked out for the award of a final grade, there is likely to be at least some doubt in the minds of admissions tutors as to what a Distinction, Merit or Pass really represents...*
>
> *Not only would precise rules enhance the credibility of GNVQs; they would also make the grading process much easier for the assessors and reduce the time spent agonising over whether the final grade complies with the letter and the spirit of GNVQs - and whether it also matches with "gut feeling" and general notions of merit and justice!"* *(Shirtliff, ibid p. 36)*

Consequently, it is not surprising that H.E. admissions tutors had some doubts about GNVQs and were using other yardsticks on which to base offers. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that H.E. tutors were demanding Advanced GNVQ with Distinction grades plus GCSEs A-Cs in Mathematics and English (Panasar, 1995), that the newness of the qualification was causing some progression difficulties (FEFC, 1994 p.15) and that H.E. requests for 'additionality' was becoming the norm. This situation was

officially acknowledged by the FEU and UCAS bulletin on progression to H.E. as the following extracts indicate:

> *"Although GNVQs are recognised by many H.E.I.s for progression purposes, it is not unusual for some enhancement of, or addition to, the GNVQ to be required, especially for a student to be offered a place on a degree programme. However, this is consistent with the alignment between Advanced GNVQs and GCE A-Levels. Although two GCE A-Levels are usually the minimum requirement for entry to a degree, more than the minimum is usually required to obtain a place on a programme".* *(FEU/UCAS, 1995 p. 2)*

> *"Where H.E.I.s specify a GCE A-Level for entry to a particular H.E. programme, the specified GCE A-Level will usually still be needed when applicants offer a GNVQ as their main qualification for progression. Irrespective of the need for a specified GCE A-Level for progression purposes, there is a tendency, at the moment, for students whose declared intention is to take a degree to be expected to take a GCE A-Level as well as the GNVQ".*
> *(FEU/UCAS, ibid p.3)*

Indeed, in 1994, approximately 30% of GNVQ students applying to H.E. had one or two GCE A-Levels as well as their GNVQs. However, this practice does carry implications for the quest for 'parity of esteem' - as the FEU and UCAS recognise:

"However, this tendency should not become the rule since it could undermine attempts to let the qualification earn parity of esteem as a route to H.E.. Rather, the decision to add a GCE A-Level to a GNVQ should only be taken after careful consideration of the benefits and drawbacks". (FEU/UCAS, op.cit. p.3)

Indeed, there could be disadvantages of GNVQ students taking an A-Level in addition to their vocational programme. It could result in study overload, and confusion or frustration among students through trying to manage two quite different approaches to learning, grading and assessment. With some subjects, for example Business there was considerable overlap as the content of the two courses was very similar, which would hinder progression to H.E. - since H.E.I.s would see this as duplication, rather than evidence of additionality.

In addition, in contrast to A-Levels, there were substantial differences in the grading system used in GNVQs which caused difficulties for students' progression. To get beyond a mere Pass grade, GNVQ students had to demonstrate skills in 'Planning', 'Information Seeking and Handling', 'Evaluation' and 'Quality of Outcomes' (NCVQ, 1994). As the FEU and UCAS acknowledge:

"Where admissions tutors are more interested in the generic skills developed in the student through the entire GNVQ programme, this approach to grading is particularly appropriate. However, where the primary concern is to

differentiate vocational skills, knowledge or understanding, or to differentiate achievement in respect of a particular unit of the qualification, the GNVQ grading system is less than useful. In these cases, H.E.I.s may require applicants to offer some other forms of evidence of vocational achievement beyond that required to pass the GNVQ". *(FEU/UCAS, op.cit. p.3)*

Likewise, while GNVQ students may have taken core skills in Application of Number, Communication and Information Technology (I.T.) the first two

> *"... are not generally accepted as alternatives to GCSE in Mathematics and English for progression purposes: many H.E.I.s still require successful applicants to have GCSE grade C, or above, in these subjects, irrespective of core skill achievement".*
> *(FEU/UCAS, ibid p. 3)*

Moreover, the DfE criteria for entry to initial teacher training (ITT) courses required *all* entrants to have achieved a standard equivalent to GCSE Grade C in English and Mathematics, and those wishing to teach in secondary education had to have an A-Level or equivalent qualification in their main teaching specialism. Although the Advanced GNVQ was supposed to be comparable in demand and coverage to two GCE A-Levels it did not meet these requirements. Indeed, lack of parity of esteem on this dimension was acknowledged by the FEU/UCAS report on progression to H.E., which also carried a warning to centres offering GNVQ centres:

> *"At the moment, it is likely that successful applicants to some teacher training courses will be expected to hold a GCE A-Level*

> *in their subject specialism. It is also likely that successful applicants will be expected to have a grade C at GCSE in English and Mathematics. The DfE criteria and the position on GNVQs adopted by those offering ITT should be taken into account by GNVQ centres when devising GNVQ programmes for students who wish to enter, or keep open the prospect of entering, the teaching profession".* *(FEU/UCAS, op.cit. p. 4)*

However it can be argued that Advanced GNVQs could provide *better progression* for students wishing to progress to *vocational* degrees.

> *"So, for example, most H.E.I.s offering degrees in Business Studies look favourably on the Advanced GNVQ in Business as a preparation for this degree. However, although progression from Advanced GNVQs to non-vocational degree programmes in a related subject is possible - for example, to degrees in Sociology or Psychology from the Advanced GNVQ in Health & Social Care -* ***the Advanced GNVQ on its own is less likely to be perceived as an adequate preparation for these degrees".***
> *(My emphasis FEU/UCAS, op. cit. p. 2)*

Likewise, one assessment advantage that GNVQ students had over A-Level students regarding progression to H.E., was that their final grade could be reliably forecast on the previous year's assessments. By contrast, A-Level students were reliant on their examination performance over one or two days, and there could be a considerable difference between their predicted grades

and their actual grades achieved although this advantage of GNVQ programmes was not widely acknowledged. (Shirtliff, 1996)

But to what extent can research into 'value-added' help to predict GNVQ students' performance? 'Value-added' is a technique which is used predominantly in secondary education at Key Stage 4 and post-16 where students' attainment in GCSEs and internal school assessments at a particular point in time provides baseline data for predictions about their likely future performance. A report by the Audit Commission/OfSTED (1993) *Unfinished Business,* suggested that 'value-added' might be easier to measure in GNVQs than in other vocational courses. However, Shirtliff's research does not support this. Based on her sample of 32 GNVQ Business students from her own college, she found a poor correlation between students' GCSE grades and their final GNVQ grades. For example, one student with seven grade Bs at GCSE, only achieved a Pass at GNVQ Advanced, while many of his peer group with only four Cs (i.e. the minimum entry qualifications for the GNVQ course), gained a Merit. Of the eight students who achieved Distinctions, only three had 'good' GCSE results (i.e. mainly grade As and Bs). (Shirtliff, 1996)

Shirtliff concludes:

> *"A lack of correlation between GCSEs and GNVQ grades is, unfortunately, likely to attract a degree of suspicion as to the rigour and credibility of GNVQ, given the much stronger connection between GCSE and A-Level grades, setting a clear pattern".* *(Shirtliff, 1996 p. 16)*

However, there was increasing evidence that GNVQs were not achieving parity of esteem with A-Levels because of the shallow subject content and coverage which could not be deemed equivalent preparation for degree courses compared with GCE A-Levels.

> *"Requirements to add to the GNVQ programme vary from H.E.I. to H.E.I. (and from H.E. programme to H.E. programme) for a number of reasons. An H.E.I. might accept the GNVQ alone for HNDs in Science, Engineering and Mathematics, for example, but require the addition of a GCE A-Level in Mathematics or a Science for entry to the BSc (Hons) programmes in these areas. Where H.E. programmes are over-subscribed and admissions tutors need to set fair and neutral criteria to differentiate the cohort, evidence of additional study is likely to be required for selection purposes. Requirements will also depend upon the content of the H.E. programme.*
>
> *... GNVQs are broader than the qualifications they may replace (typically BTEC National Diploma), and in some cases (admissions) tutors have suggested that, although the general skills and abilities are those which are necessary for H.E. study, GNVQs are too general for progression onto those H.E. programmes where a specialist knowledge base is needed (for example, those in pure sciences or languages)".*
>
> *(FEU/UCAS, ibid p. 3)*

Shirtliff's research into higher education applications based on a sample of 32 Advanced GNVQ Business students at her own FE College which were made in October 1995, indicated that the main factors influencing offers from UCAS were:

> "... *the students' GCSE grades (although this was not important for mature students) their predicted GNVQ grade and, probably most important, the particular university and popularity of the course. Suitability of the student for the level of course was also important; students with mainly C's at GCSE, predicted to achieve Merit, generally received at least six offers if they applied for HND courses but perhaps only two or three if they applied exclusively for degree courses". (Shirtliff, 1996 p. 38)*

Shirtliff found that where her GNVQ students were also taking an A-Level, their applications to the most popular degree courses at long-established universities were well-received. However these students were required to achieve both a Distinction in their GNVQ, as well as a specified grade at the A-Level, whereas no offers were attached to any GNVQ Additional Units which they may have been studying. Shirtliff bemoans this fact but concludes:

> *"As the new 1995 GNVQ specifications include a wide range of Optional Units for Advanced Business, it seems sensible to offer students a clutch of these options, which are all gradable and can therefore count towards the final grade, rather than the ungraded additional units"*

But she recognises that ...

> *"funding considerations are bound to influence college policy on additional studies, with respect to both A-Levels and additional GNVQ units".* *(Shirtliff, 1996 pp. 38-39)*

Nevertheless, the FEU and UCAS are at pains to stress the flexibility of GNVQs as a progression route compared with A-Levels:

> *"Unlike GCE A-Levels, however, an Advanced GNVQ programme can be customised or focused through the choice of units which make up the qualification. The programme is enhanced by the inclusion of core skills and can be extended by the addition of another qualification or additional units. The flexibility of the qualification and the programmes associated with the qualification is a major strength of GNVQs when used as a progression route to H.E.".* *(UCAS, op. cit. p. 2)*

3.8 Government strategies to promote GNVQ students' progression to H.E.

Considerable 'behind the scenes' work has been promoted by the Government and the DfEE in order to facilitate progression by GNVQ students to H.E.. This includes establishing the UCAS GATE Committee (GNVQs and Access to Higher Education), sponsoring research studies, plus information and directives to H.E.I.s to encourage them to clarify their official position regarding admissions policies for GNVQ applicants. For example, the GATE Committee, in partnership with UCAS produced a database of

staff contacts at H.E.I.s regarding GNVQ applications. This database was published as an extensive manual showing the H.E.I.s' official position on GNVQ applications to individual H.E. programmes, and whether particular combinations of Optional Units, and Merits or Distinctions were required.

In addition, schools and colleges were encouraged to establish 'compacts' or progression agreements for GNVQs with their local H.E.I.s. As the FEU/UCAS bulletin points out:

> *" While GNVQs are establishing themselves, progression agreements are valuable in smoothing progression pathways for students and bringing to the attention of institutions the characteristics of GNVQs ... before it has fully earned 'parity of esteem' with GCSEs and GCE A-Levels.... Progression is likely to be easier when the H.E.I. is consulted over the type of assignments, experiences and processes in which the student is involved. Students can only benefit, and be better motivated, from making well-informed choices, being better prepared for the selection process and having a far clearer idea of the expectations of H.E.I.s".* (FEU/UCAS, 1995 pp. 4-5)

Progression agreements for GNVQs could take several forms from the formal to the very informal depending on whether the university courses recruited on a national or regional basis and whether the programme was under or oversubscribed, as the following extract from Sheffield Hallam University demonstrates:

"Sheffield Hallam University has identified three positions of varying formality for involvement with schools and colleges...

Minimum Position: GNVQ recognised for entry purposes and information is given to potential applicants and GNVQ centres via the prospectus on preferred units of study where option areas have significance in terms of university course content.

Middle Position: Required option units clearly specified in the prospectus.

Maximum Position: University schools/departments become involved at the curriculum design level of the GNVQ programme in order to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the HE programme". (FEU/UCAS, op. cit. p. 5)

Indeed, there was a rapid growth in local 'compact' arrangements between schools and colleges and their local H.E.I.s in order to secure progression from GNVQ Advanced Level programmes to degree courses. A major obstacle to such progression was the lack of knowledge and understanding among H.E. admissions tutors about the nature and rationale of GNVQs which 'compact' agreements were helping to address.

Nevertheless, poor GNVQ completion rates had a knock-on effect on student progression to H.E.. While 'teething troubles' (FEFC, 1994) involved in implementing a new pilot curriculum could partly account for this, non-

completion of GNVQ programmes was by far the most substantial factor. As Spours observes:

> *"Poor completion rates would jeopardise the overall performance of GNVQs and, in particular, would produce a negative impact on progression to the next qualification level. However, there is little consensus as to the cause of the problem. The main question is whether these are problems of implementation or problems of curriculum design".*
>
> *(Spours, 1995 p.,13)*

'Parity of esteem' was certainly an issue in the 1993/94 FEFC's first national survey of GNVQs. There were numerous cases reported in inspectors' 'notes of visits' across eight regions that H.E. admissions tutors were not recognising GNVQ Advanced qualifications for entry to degree courses and many were either rejecting GNVQ applicants outright or demanding distinctions plus an A-Level to supplement the GNVQ. Both employers and admissions tutors were unclear about the standard of the new awards and their validity and reliability. In one example quoted from the South West region, a GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care student was refused access to nurse training because of the change in name of the GNVQs in 1993/94. Originally GNVQs had been known as levels 1, 2 and 3 but this status was changed to 'Foundation', 'Intermediate' and 'Advanced' to clarify the 'equivalence' of GNVQs with GCSEs and A-Levels and help to promote 'parity of esteem'.

However further moves in this direction indicated by the Dearing Report (1996) were rejected by the Government. Dearing had sought to confer greater status on Advanced GNVQs by re-naming them as "Applied A-Levels" in order to give parents a better understanding of their value, whilst emphasising their distinctive approach to learning - namely, the *application of knowledge* (Dearing 1996: 9.14), but this proposal was quashed despite its popularity with the Labour Party and several teacher associations, and even Dearing recanted on this idea.

Some theorists argue that the quest for parity of esteem has been clouded by the emphasis on the 'new managerialism' in post-16 education, where the income of educational institutions was linked to 'simplified and unexamined assumptions of quality', measured through performance indicators. (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995). Increasingly, funding was being awarded only on successful completion and students certification but as Gleeson and Hodkinson argue:

> *"quality becomes synonymous with passing, the intrinsic value of the course becomes marginalised. From this perspective, all that matters about GNVQ is i) how many young people can be persuaded to enrol and ii) how many of them can achieve successful completion. While such measures might satisfy some politicians and policy makers, they at best deflect attention from the really important issues about educational quality within GNVQ and at worst undermine it." (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1998 p.10)*

Gleeson and Hodkinson conclude that the 'new managerialism' was based on a fallacy, for there was no agreed, unproblematic notion of what educational quality is

> *"and despite the broad overall consensus about the need for change in post-16 provision, the nature, purpose and content of education remains contested and the subject of struggle."*
> *(Gleeson and Hodkinson, op. cit. p. 10)*

Indeed, the policy-makers' obsession with outcomes and qualification achievement resulted in the explicit focus on learning processes within GNVQ specifications being lost. The worries of Smithers (1994) and others about the reliability of GNVQ assessment, put even more emphasis on 'measurable attainments' to the detriment of students' educational experience. However, it could be argued that many of the most important aspects of vocational education were not directly measurable. Moreover, current managerialist approaches to education risk reducing teachers to technicians, who simply 'deliver' the official curriculum to young people. This ignored the phenomenological perspectives on policy-implementation and the fact that:

> *"teachers don't merely deliver the curriculum. They develop, define it and re-interpret it too. It is what teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get". (Hargreaves, 1993, p. ix, quoted in Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995 p.11)*

The response by stakeholders at the micro-political level was crucial to the whole process.

3.9 An historical perspective on vocational education

But why is 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels such a problem? Finegold et. al. (1990) argue that the root of the problem lies in the long-standing division between high status academic courses and low status vocational courses. Indeed throughout the twentieth century, vocational education and training in England has been characterised by low status and marginality. This is been perpetuated by the long-established tripartitism evident in the English education system, which derived from social class divisions and the widespread 'common sense' view of dividing people into Plato's men of gold, bronze and iron and attempts to replicate these 'natural' divisions in the education system. The assumption behind this 'classical humanist view' was that people naturally fall (both socially and genetically) into three types of ability - academic, technical and practical and that these also correspond to the needs of the labour market.

The tripartite system established under the 1944 Education Act merely reinforced the academic-vocational divide with vocational courses being designed for lower ability groups. In secondary modern and technical schools vocational education and training revolved around developing craft skills (typically woodwork and metalwork for boys and typing and cookery for girls), while the grammar schools concentrated on providing academic courses which offered progression to H.E., the civil service and the professions. Although some writers have seen technical schools in a positive

light and have recognised their achievements (Sanderson 1994), others argue that they only catered for a minority of pupils and never really established a coherent and credible vocational curriculum (McCullough 1989).

There are several cultural and historical reasons for the failure of technical education in England and Wales. Firstly, following the 1944 Education Act, technical schools were not uniformly established in all LEAs. Most LEAs concentrated their resources on developing existing grammar schools and converting elementary schools into secondary moderns rather than building new technical schools: the latter tended to be developed where they had been established in association with a particular local industry. Secondly, most middle class families wanted their children to attend the prestigious grammar schools and take academic courses, and regarded both technical and modern schools as more appropriate for the working class. Likewise, the upwardly mobile working class were more likely to aspire to the academic grammar schools in order to further their children's career prospects. Thirdly, transfer to secondary education was done by selection at the 11+ examination, with the most able pupils being offered a grammar school place and the next tier being offered technical school places.

> *"Thus a technician was identified not through positive interest in, or aptitude for, technical studies, but simply as someone who was not judged capable of an academic career". (Gleeson et. al., 1995 p. 8)*

So from a cultural perspective, few people pro-actively 'chose' the technical route: it was allocated by negative choice. Thus a complex interaction of

social and cultural perceptions and aspirations, combined with, and reinforced by, separate curricula and institutional provision, with different progression routes and associated employment opportunities - made technical/vocational education a less attractive option.

More recently, Conservative Government attempts to expand this middle sector by establishing City Technology Colleges (CTCs) in the mid 1980s, have suffered similar problems (Whitty et. al., 1993), while the development of specialist sixth form colleges offering traditional academic A-Levels, has added another layer which is supporting the elitist academic ethos surrounding GCE A-Levels.

So what implications does this have for the introduction of GNVQs? According to Gleeson et. al. things do not bode well.

> *"The risk is that if high status institutions like public schools and sixth form colleges do not take GNVQ seriously, the new middle vocational track will be squeezed every bit as effectively as were technical schools in an earlier age. Furthermore, a belief in a technical strand for other people's children and for other educational institutions, reinforces the status and sense of well-being for those who have succeeded on the academic route. From this point of view, a middle stratum that is weak in practice but strong in rhetoric, meets the status needs of the academic elite. To succeed where technical schools failed, GNVQ must break out of this ideological closed circle". (Gleeson et. al., 1995 pp. 8 -9)*

However, Gleeson et. al. have ignored some key structural differences between GNVQs and technical schools. GNVQ is not a separate institution: it is an alternative curriculum which is being implemented nationally with substantial Government support, legislative backing and funding incentives. It had a very large take-up and it was not been left at a 'discretionary' level for LEAs to implement or not as they saw fit. In addition, GNVQ courses were offered across the whole range of educational institutions, including state schools, sixth form colleges, CTCs, FE colleges as well as in approximately 20% of private schools - so there was a more concerted attempt to establish GNVQs as mainstream provision.

Nevertheless there are ideological tensions underpinning GNVQ implementation. Considerable emphasis has been put on GNVQ as a vehicle to re-structuring mass education and training in England and Wales following the high youth unemployment in 1970s and in order to address the perceived skill requirements of industry and the needs of students staying on post-16. This ideology, advocated by the CBI and referred to by Skilbeck (1976) as 'reconstructionism', argues that in order to make British industry more competitive and ensure future prosperity, vocational education must be improved. This led to the introduction of National Targets for Education and Training (NTETS) by the Conservative Government in the mid 1980s which set quotas for young people achieving Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the year 2000 and beyond. But as Gleeson et. al point out:

> *" Such universalist views of attainment run counter to the classical humanist view that a norm-referenced distribution of ability and therefore appropriate qualifications, is part of the*

natural order of things. Paradoxically, the British Government can at the same time, proclaim NTETS as official policy and create new A (starred) grades for A-Level and GCSE because 'too many people are getting an A'. Constant talk of A-Level as the 'gold standard' has set GNVQ a difficult cultural and educational task. To succeed, at least in terms of these Government directives that brought it into existence, GNVQ must establish a credible middle track whilst simultaneously raising levels of education and qualification in ways that are acceptable to the mass of the English public, including parents, students, teachers, employers or politicians". (Gleeson et. al., 1996 p. 9)*

3.10 Summary

As Spours points out in 1995, GNVQs were still a relatively new development hence it was difficult

> *"to assess their performance in terms of encouraging participation, retention, attainment and progression. Evaluation will be easier once all the vocational areas become generally available, when institutions have got used to them and when early GNVQ graduates have made their way through H.E. and into jobs. Only then will we have a reasonable picture about their performance. The initial signs are mixed". (Spours, 1995 p. 12)*

Although the UCAS/GATE report (1996) contains some positive comments regarding the first tranch of GNVQ applications to H.E., it was based on a

relatively small sample and more detailed breakdowns of student applications and destinations are necessary in order to draw firmer conclusions.

GNVQs are still not well-known and even less well understood within H.E., and are viewed with some suspicion. Criticisms of the GNVQ assessment system by senior academics such as Professor Smithers, and allegations that GNVQ results are "hopelessly unreliable" and based on a "cosy, confused relationship between student and tutor, who is also the examiner" (O'Leary, 1994), raise serious issues about the validity and reliability of the qualification which need to be addressed.

Indeed, statistically it is worrying that 35% (i.e. more than one third) of the 1236 GNVQ Advanced students who completed in 1994 were awarded Distinctions, which is supposed to be equivalent to grades 'A' and 'B' at A-Level, whereas only 25% of GCE A Level candidates achieved these grades - yet GNVQs recruited from a lower ability pool. Such statistics do indeed lend support to Professor Smithers' criticisms since it could be argued that this discrepancy of 10% should have been allocated to a lower grade i.e. a Grade 'C' at A-Level or a GNVQ Merit.

As Shirtliff points out:

> *"On this basis, at least one third of GNVQ Distinctions are only worth Merits - but as one cannot tell which third, all Distinctions appear questionable. By the same token, Merits may not be worth more than Passes, and a Pass might not be deserved either. Although the latter has little significance for degree courses, which in the main require a Distinction, at least for Business*

courses, there are implications for acceptance on to Higher National Diploma and part-time Certificate courses. If the whole GNVQ assessment system is questioned, then for entry to Higher National Diploma programmes even one A-Level grade E could be preferred to a GNVQ pass (equivalent to two A-Levels grades D to E). Until GNVQ assessment is on a firmer footing, it cannot be assumed that GNVQ applicants to higher education will always be as warmly welcomed as the "guinea-pig" cohort was in 1994". *(Shirtliff, 1996 pp. 28-29)*

A national survey undertaken by the Times Higher Education Supplement in 1995 concluded that since GNVQs were being included in universities' admissions policies, they must be gaining the confidence of H.E.I.s, and that some admissions tutors preferred GNVQ students because of their work experience and attitude to business. (Tysome and Targett, 1995) However, there has been a lot of 'behind the scenes' work by the DfEE to smooth the progression of GNVQ students to H.E., to ensure that Government policy was working and that the 'guinea pig' first cohort of GNVQ students were not disadvantaged. Indeed, it appears that H.E.I. admissions tutors were complying with their own particular institution's admissions policies by accepting some GNVQ students - but generally those with Distinctions and only with evidence of some *known* "additionality" e.g. an A-Level. However, there is also some evidence that admissions tutors were ignoring applicants' GNVQ Additional Units when making offers and also relying on GCSE results as a predictor of future performance (Shirtliff, 1996). She concludes:

"It has been assumed that university admissions tutors are conservative by nature and will stick to what they know best (A-Level applicants) if they have the choice, and that this situation will persist for several years even in the face of contrary official university admissions policy of giving equal consideration to GNVQs, until GNVQ is well established. On the other hand, so much effort by NCVQ, the awarding bodies and GATE has been devoted to informing admissions tutors about GNVQs via seminars and publications .... that some of this conservatism may have been countered". *(Shirtliff, 1996 p. 12)*

"Much will depend on the GNVQ students going through university during the next few years - how well they perform, how many of them drop out, what class of degrees they obtain and so on. Only after a full cycle has been completed will universities really know what to expect from, say, a GNVQ applicant with a Distinction as opposed to a merit - or compared with a student offering two Bs and a C at A-Level". (Shirtliff, 1996 pp. 12-13)

Moreover, the GNVQ final grading system is a broad tool compared to the GCE A-Level grading scale, and the former cannot differentiate between an outstanding GNVQ student who has achieved Distinctions for every assignment throughout the course, and a student who has only managed to achieve Distinctions for one in every three assignments, or who was strong on some grading criteria and not on others. (Shirtliff, 1996)

Although "parity of esteem" between the two qualifications was a key Government policy objective, and GNVQs were aligned to A-Levels with their equivalence being specified within the new national qualifications track, "parity of esteem" has not been achieved. Between 1992 and 2000, the two qualifications competed for the same students on very unequal terms, with GNVQs attracting students from the lower ability range. Moreover, poor GNVQ completion rates combined with issues of public concern about the reliability and integrity of the GNVQ assessment processes, seriously undermined the quest for "parity of esteem" and resulted in major revisions of the GNVQ assessment model with an 'academic drift' towards A-Levels.

Even as late as 1997, The Guardian was reporting Government concerns about the public credibility of GNVQs and that it was still pursuing strategies for enhancing "parity of esteem" with GCE A-Levels. Thus despite a change of Government, ministers had still not grasped the underlying problems.

> ***" Tougher testing for vocational courses".***
>
> *"Students on GNVQ vocational courses are to be tested more rigorously, because ministers are concerned that the reputation of these courses suffers from the lack of a challenging exam...*
>
> *The Government is understood to view more rigorous testing as essential in promoting parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications".* *(Carvel, 1997)*

Moreover GNVQs were also 'failing to meet the needs of the job market' as another extract from The Guardian (6th June, 1997) illustrates:-

"More than 250,000 youngsters are studying for vocational qualifications that have failed to meet most of the objectives set for them when they were introduced five years ago, a study published yesterday showed... Despite a multi-million pound investment by the Government, GNVQs were not providing young people with a broad preparation for employment - their principal aim - and were unlikely ever to achieve "parity of esteem" with academic qualifications such as A-Levels". (Clare, 1997)

Although the 'popularity' of GNVQs amongst students could be seen as a measure of "parity of esteem", it is only one dimension. A more critical measure is progression to H.E. but even here, the demands for 'additionality' by H.E.I.s requiring GNVQ students to take an A-Level in parallel to their GNVQ programme, indicates that GNVQs have not achieved 'parity of esteem' and are indeed of a lower standard than A-Levels.

Notwithstanding all the high aspirations for the post-16 framework expressed by Sir Ron Dearing in his Interim Report (Dearing, 1995), it is clear that 'parity of esteem' cannot be given by Government edict or by changing a qualification's name. Indeed, some theorists argue that 'parity of esteem' is a 'false rhetoric' used by policy-makers which undermines notions of justice and equality. (Young, 1994; Gleeson, 1995). From this perspective, the central fallacy is the 3-tier qualifications track and the Government's failure to reform A-Levels and provide a unified system of post-16 qualifications. Until this new policy emerges, 'parity of esteem' rather than 'equality' will remain on the political agenda as the unattainable 'holy grail'.

CHAPTER 4

Research Methodology

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction: What is Knowledge? What is Truth? What is Social Reality?

What is 'knowledge'? What is 'truth'? What is social reality? How can we be sure what we know? How can we describe the 'social world'? When undertaking educational research what kinds of research methods can (or should) be used to ensure the 'validity' and 'reliability' of the data collected? These are important questions which need to be addressed when undertaking any form of social research.

However, as Cohen and Manion argue, educational knowledge in the western world has made limited progress because of an excessive reliance on ..."experience, as a means of advancement and a corresponding reluctance to apply the principles of research to educational issues". (Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 5). But why should this be so?

> *"Perhaps a major reason for the slow and unsure progress in education has been the inefficient and unscientific methods used by educators in acquiring knowledge and solving their problems. An uncritical acceptance of authority opinion that is not supported by objective evidence and an overdependence upon personal experience have been characteristic of the educator's problem-solving techniques".*
>
> *(Borg, 1963 quoted in Cohen and Manion, op. cit. p. 5)*

(Borg, 1963 quoted in Cohen and Manion, op. cit. p. 5)

However, the extent to which *any scientific evidence* can be described as totally 'objective' raises other philosophical issues. Even in 'natural science', the measuring instruments which are used to study nuclear particles, such as an electron microscope, actually influence the subjects being studied.

One of the limitations of educational research per se is that it has no particular research methods of its own, but borrows heavily from the social sciences, psychology and management. However, the selection of any research method in social science presupposes certain philosophical assumptions about the relationship between social structure and social action, about ontology, epistemology and indeed, about human nature. (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Cohen and Manion, 1996; McKenzie, Powell and Usher, 1997; May and Williams, 1998). Consequently, any chapter on research methodology needs to be prefaced by a brief discussion of the history and analysis of the nature and understanding in the social sciences and the philosophical problems which are implicit in the various methodologies.

4.1.1 Philosophical issues underpinning research

There are two competing perspectives within social science which stem from radically different conceptions of social reality. On the one hand, what is frequently referred to as the 'positivist perspective' (or 'naturalism'), argues from a 'macro' perspective that there is essentially no

difference between the subject matter of the social sciences and that of the natural sciences in that there is an 'objective' social reality 'out there' independent of individuals and that the task of the social scientist is therefore to focus on discovering the natural and universal laws which govern human social behaviour. In attempting to be as rigorous as the natural sciences, positivists undertake empirical research using quantitative research techniques typically based on large samples in order to be able to make generalisations about the 'whole'. Research methods usually involve large-scale social surveys which as far as possible are standardised to avoid 'subjectivity' and 'bias'. Official statistics are also frequently used, although positivists tend to regard these as 'objective' and to treat them non-problematically.

By contrast, the second and more recent perspective - sometimes called 'interpretivism' or 'anti-positivism', maintains that there *are* fundamental differences between the social and the natural worlds and individuals are essentially unique. Hence the task of social research is to understand at a 'micro' level how actors make sense of meanings and interpretations within their social world so as to better understand and express its emergent properties and features. Neither social surveys can be used to capture this 'social world', nor official statistics - since these are socially constructed. Instead, interpretivists favour observation techniques and in-depth methods which yield 'qualitative data'.

However, as May and Williams point out, 'interpretivism' actually encompasses a huge range of theoretical views and technical approaches, including 'hermeneutics', 'ethnography', 'field research' and 'qualitative

methods' and while there are subtle differences between them, essentially they all reject the assumptions of positivism in that they

> *"prioritize the interpretation of the actions and meanings of agents, over measurement, explanation and prediction".*
> *(May and Williams, 1998 p. 7)*

As Denzin puts it:

> *"The interpretivist rejects generalisation as a goal and never aims to draw randomly selected samples of human experience".* *(Denzin, 1983 p. 132)*

Thus with interpretivism:

> *"Methodologically ... we arrive at the idea that we can know the social world discursively via an analysis of the symbolic systems through which life worlds are constructed and acted upon. However, we cannot 'know' macro phenomena in the same way. Allusion to such an entity as 'class', therefore, is rhetorical not empirical".* *(May and Williams, 1998 p. 2)*

However, such 'relativism' of the interpretivist stance causes serious problems for social researchers. For if empirical research studies are so 'unique' and 'variable' - then any similarity between individual expressed meanings or actions would be coincidental - so generalisations cannot be made. But this would render such research pointless.

As May and Williams point out:

> *"The interpretivist is on the horns of a dilemma. Assert that generalisation is impossible because of the variability between the agents and the research can suggest nothing beyond itself".* *(May and Williams, op.cit. p. 9)*

However, all research carries the implicit assumption of a quest for difference or typicality - even if this is rarely admitted by interpretivists.

> *"Almost every classic interpretivist study, while acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher and the uniqueness of the repertoire of interactions studied, nevertheless wishes to persuade us that there is something to be learned from the situation that has a wider currency".*
> *(May and Williams, op. cit. p. 8)*

May and Williams offer a compromise 'solution' to this dilemma.

> *"If the researcher makes 'moderatum' generalisations of the kind 'if X occurs in the situation S, it is likely that in a situation resembling S, X may well occur in the future, then she is asserting at least the existence of some similarities (however weak) between situations. This assertion seems far more plausible than its denial for if it is the case (as phenomenologists would assert) that we can employ a repertoire of typifications in the lifeworld, then these are forms of everyday moderatum generalizations and precisely*

the means by which the researcher can know the world of the researched". *(May and Williams, op. cit. pp. 8-9)*

However, some theorists, notably Bhaskar (1989), Archer (1995) and Layder (1997) find that both of these competing perspectives 'unsatisfactory in terms of their ontological assumptions and their translation into methodological injunctions'. Instead, they propose an 'analytic dualism' in order to provide a more adequate explanation of the relationship between social action and social structure, since they argue that social reality is multi-faceted. (May and Williams, 1998). My research will attempt to do this by combining official statistics and a quantitative survey approach with qualitative in-depth interviews and observation.

The above discourse serves to illustrate a point stressed by May and Williams, namely, that methodological and ideological stances adopted by researchers have very deep and often unacknowledged roots. Moreover:-

> *"Many empirical and theoretical and questions flow from the adoption not just of one or the other methodological approach, but from the assumption (usually implicit) of philosophical or methodological positions.*
>
> *(May and Williams, op. cit. p. 6)*

4.1.2 The value base underpinning my research

It is important to acknowledge the value base of this research at the outset. My study has not been undertaken from a totally independent or neutral position, although this is not to imply that a researcher can be completely

'objective' in the analysis and presentation of any research. From a philosophical point of view, complete objectivity is not possible as we are social beings, living and working in particular cultural and historical contexts and we can never totally divorce ourselves from our own 'cognitive maps' - our pre-conceptions, beliefs, interests and prejudices derived from our 'social' world. (Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1965). Even the choice of research questions and research methods demonstrates an 'interest' or bias towards our subject matter. We can, nevertheless, attempt *to strive towards objectivity* by clarifying our value base and seek to interpret and present our data and research results with an integrity which is open to scrutiny and challenge from other researchers in the field. Thus we may achieve an 'inter-subjectivity' and triangulation that validates our analysis and research processes.

My interest in GNVQs started in 1991 with the Government White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century (DES/DE, 1991)* and the consultation process led by NCVQ on the proposals for the new vocational award. As an LEA adviser for post-16 education between 1990 - 1993, I was responsible for supporting curriculum developments in schools and colleges. Thus in September 1991, when the Government first allowed BTEC awards to be offered in schools, I helped to organise meetings with local schools along with another colleague, to clarify the resource implications for delivering these qualifications. But the new vocational awards, GNVQs, soon eclipsed this DES policy development and became the focus of a major national initiative and my interest was further kindled.

Subsequent professional roles have brought me into close interface with GNVQ developments at national level. In 1993, in my part-time role as BTEC Chief Examiner for GNVQ Health & Social Care, I was responsible for leading a team of item writers and reviewers and producing the GNVQ external tests for the Phase 1 Pilot Centres. I was also responsible for maintaining the quality assurance procedures for the test production and responding to any complaints from centres. In this role I soon became aware of the technical and political issues surrounding the implementation of GNVQs and tensions between NCVQ, awarding bodies and pilot centres over the GNVQ specifications and the assessment regime.

Between 1993 - 1995 as a full-time FEFC inspector, I was asked to lead the first national survey on GNVQs in 1993-94, *(FEFC, 1994)* which involved analysing over 100 inspectors' reports *(NOVs - notes of visit)* on GNVQ implementation in individual colleges in eight regions. This gave me access to internal documents which were not in the public domain, and which were totally uncensored. These gave graphic accounts of the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQs based on classroom observations and discussions with senior managers, course leaders, lecturers and students. Although along with another colleague, I was responsible for producing the first drafts of the FEFC report, it was considerably edited by a senior inspector prior to publication and was preceded by a press release from the Chief Inspector outlining the 'teething troubles' of the new award. In February 1994 I gave some informal feedback to the DES on the main findings to date, which became incorporated into Tim Boswell's (Minister for Education), "Six point plan" in March 1994.

In my role as an FEFC inspector, I had also attended an NCVQ working party over several months which was developing the "Quality Framework", which set out the standards for centre delivery of GNVQ programmes (NCVQ, BTEC, CGLI and RSA 1995). In this context I became aware of the influence and work of Gilbert Jessup, who had crafted the 'GNVQ Mark 1.' He was very much a political animal and it was evident that he had pre-meetings with key individuals prior to the main working party meeting in order to drive through his objectives.

In 1995, working as a full-time independent consultant, I participated in a FEDA research project on "Learning and Assessment in GNVQs" involving fieldwork in eighteen colleges, although this was never published. This again took me into colleges where I heard at first hand from GNVQ students and teachers what was working well and what was not. In the Spring of 1995, I attended a number of BTEC meetings with GNVQ centres and produced a report on issues regarding implementation across nine GNVQ programme areas, as well as standing in as BTEC's Chief Examiner again for GNVQ Health & Social Care for six months. Concerns about the GNVQ assessment model were high on the agenda.

It was at this time that I decided to undertake a doctorate to investigate the relationship between GNVQs and progression to H.E. How were students taking to the new curriculum? Was the design of GNVQs facilitating learning? If so, in what ways? How were H.E. admissions tutors responding to GNVQ applicants? To what extent was GNVQ achieving 'parity of esteem' with A Levels and becoming an accepted progression route to H.E. ? These were to become focal issues for my research.

Between 1996 - 1998 I was working as a consultant on FEDA's GNVQ Support Programme, in charge of staff development and a budget of £0.5 million, developing courses nationally for post-16 GNVQ teachers in schools and colleges. Subsequently, I was involved in delivering Key Skills training regionally to consortia of schools and colleges, as part of FEDA's Key Skills Task Force, as government funding and policy priorities changed.

This context and my professional work roles have increased my knowledge and understanding of GNVQs both from the technical implementation of the curriculum model from the designers' and users' perspectives, as well as the macro and micro political dimensions involved in the implementation of Government policy. Initially I sought funding for my PhD from FEDA, but I soon became aware of the editorial control and constraints on intellectual debate that my research would be subjected to if it became even marginally part of the 'official research programme', a problem recognised by Ecclestone (1998) and discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis. It would have been very much the case of 'He who pays the piper calls the tune' as Wolf discovered following an uncensored press release on a FEDA-funded research project that she was leading. (Wolf, 1997a; Crowne, 1997). So in the interests of academic freedom and the quest for objectivity I decided not to pursue that avenue. Instead, I applied to Southampton University for a research bursary and started to fund my own research.

Both in my professional consultancy role and in my independent research, I have tried to maintain an ethical neutrality and to record things as I observed them and as they were told to me, using an ethnographic approach and keeping as far as possible to the actual words of the students, teachers, respondents and other stakeholders, rather than re-interpreting the data and adding any 'spin'. Awareness of the dangers of bias in its various forms is the first step against protecting one's research from it. Validating the data through a process of triangulation across several sources and using one's tutor as a 'critical friend' are the next stages in this process.

Notwithstanding the 'filtering process' that inevitably accompanies the cognitive process of interpreting data and writing up the research, my original source data which I have collected are open to scrutiny and challenge from colleagues and other researchers using the same research methods and perspectives. In addition, the availability of my field notes, 146 questionnaires with open-ended responses and the tape-recorded interviews should help to support my quest for value-freedom as well as demonstrating my ethical neutrality. Regular checks on the British Education Index and other sources and following up new articles, research and references on GNVQs and progression is yet another way of checking out my findings and helping to validate my data or challenge my findings and interpretations.

4.1.3 Why do social research?

Social research is undertaken for a wide variety of reasons, for example:

(i) to increase our knowledge about society

(ii) to solve particular social problems eg. poverty; crime; homelessness

(iii) to investigate a particular aspect of social structure or social institution e.g. changes in patterns of social mobility

(iv) to study a particular group or locality, or

(v) to test a sociological theory (Stacey, 1970)

The reasons for choosing my particular research topic have already been outlined in the previous section above, but they essentially represent a combination of reasons (i) - (iii).

But what other research has been done in my chosen field? Although there have been some research studies into GNVQs and progression, these have tended to take a macro focus. For example, Government-funded research has tended to look at the general picture of progression to H.E. using official statistics (UCAS/GATE, 1994; FEU/UCAS, 1995), or take the form of generic articles written by civil servants employed by NCVQ and heralding the success of GNVQs which appear more like Government propaganda than academic research. (Coward, 1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b; 1996; Jessup, 1994; Harrap, 1995)

There has been some University-based research into GNVQs and progression to H.E. involving 'compact' arrangements e.g. the Tyneside Progression 2000 study (Miller, 1995), UCAS, Gloucester College of Arts and Technology (GLOSCAT) and the University of the West of England (Higgins and Megson, 1995), and the University of Salford (1998), as well as generic research funded by FEDA looking at a range of issues including GNVQ enrolment and delivery patterns 1993-97 (Wolf, 1994; 1995; 1998), progression to H.E. (FEU/UCAS, 1995) and GNVQs and non-completion (HEFC, 1997; Davies et. al., 1998; Morris, 1998;).

In addition, a number of independent research studies on progression have been undertaken by individual researchers although these have tended to 'track' the progress of particular student cohorts (Shirtliff, 1996), or focus on particular GNVQ subjects, notably, GNVQ Advanced Business (Mills, 1996; Shirtliff, 1996; Swailes et. al., 1998), GNVQ Advanced Science (Gadd, 1998) and GNVQ Advanced Hospitality & Catering (Curtis, 1995). Most studies have concentrated their research on offers received by GNVQ students from H.E. and have stopped short of examining students' actual progression to H.E. (Mills, 1996; Shirtliff, 1996). There has been little research into students who have taken GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care and for whom progression has been reported to be problematic (FEFC, 1994). Furthermore, few studies have used an interpretivist approach or focused on the perceptions and experiences of the various stakeholders - namely, the GNVQ students themselves and their teachers.

My research aims to address these gaps by adopting a more longitudinal approach and examining four groups of students' initial perceptions of

GNVQ Health & Social Care and their career aspirations for H.E. and tracking them through to the offers they receive and their end of GNVQ course results. The research then follows up a small sample of students after their first year in H.E. to see how they have adjusted to the demands of their H.E. programmes. This is followed by perceptions from some of their H.E. tutors about the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQs as a preparation for higher education.

4.2 An overview of the research methodology

The research methodology was based on a purposive sampling technique of four F.E. colleges, three in Hampshire and one in Lancashire and involved 146 students and their GNVQ course tutors. The main focus of the research were GNVQ Health and Social Care students, for whom progression to H.E. and/or professional training had been proving problematic (FEFC, 1994). A small sample of GNVQ Business students were used as a control group for the initial part of the research since progression was reported as less problematic for them. (Mills, 1994; Shirtliff, 1996;)

Students were interviewed in their second year of their two-year Advanced level courses and in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with eighteen of the Health and Social Care sample who achieved places in higher education institutions. These in-depth interviews focused on students' perceptions of their progress after their first year in H.E.

The general design of the initial questionnaire was quasi-experimental, combined with reflective research and explores students' perceptions of GNVQs, their reasons for embarking on their chosen course and their career aspirations.

The research project draws on a range of theoretical perspectives both macro and micro to evaluate Government policy and political processes and to interpret the research data. The research was mainly qualitative in approach. Socio-political models were used to interpret the dialogue between Government policy and practice and an analysis of the economic, philosophical and political debate on the purpose of education and training and the links between education and the economy. Phenomenological approaches (Schutz, 1967; Garfinkel, 1968; Burrell and Morgan, 1979) were used to interpret the questionnaires, interviews and qualitative data while structural functionalist perspectives were used to analyse the quantitative data. The study explores some of the contradictions within GNVQ philosophy namely, the tensions between progressivism, technical rationalism and free marketism and the relationship between knowledge and control.

Although my research focused on a particular cohort of students with the aim of evaluating the effects of the new vocational award on their progression to H.E., the situation became increasingly complex because of the changes being made to the structure and assessment of GNVQs during the eight year period. In particular, there were changes to the GNVQ specifications and assessment strategies, modifications to the grading themes, as well as revised models being piloted alongside the original

GNVQ model in different centres. This moving picture also needs to be seen against a changing political climate, a General Election and the micro-politicking of different stakeholders. Indeed, as Foskett points out:

> *"Change is rarely a picture painted on a clean canvas and is never being instituted in a politically-neutral environment".*
>
> *(Foskett, 1995 p. 88)*

4.3 Reliability and Validity

Two key concepts which need to be considered by a researcher when choosing his/her particular research methods are 'reliability' and 'validity'. 'Reliability' essentially revolves around the notion of consistency in measurement. Thus to what extent can the results of a particular research study be replicated over time, if the same research methods were to be used - either on the same sample of respondents or on another comparable group? A test, experiment or piece of research that is not reliable will yield *different results* each time that it is undertaken. One measure of reliability is to use test-retest coefficients, which is equivalent to the correlation of test results obtained on two separate occasions. (Anderson, 1995)

Data based on personal impressions or intuition tend not to be reliable. By contrast, data based on 'objective' criteria which relate to counts of frequency or physical measurements, are generally reliable. However, in the field of social science and educational research, where questionnaires and interviews are used, much depends on how the questionnaires are phrased, whether they ask leading questions or whether they ask

respondents to select their answers from a pre-coded range or allow them to answer open-ended questions in their own words.

By contrast 'validity' refers to the extent to which the research methods used are appropriate for the nature of the research issue under study. Are they 'fit-for-purpose' and will they measure what they are supposed to be measuring? For example, if our research focused on measuring time, it would be appropriate to use a clock or watch, sundial or candle to do this, but not a tin of soup.

> *"Thus an I.Q. score is assumed to be a measure of intelligence and is assumed to be a valid representation of intelligence in quantitative terms. Similarly, the enrolment of a school is assumed to be a valid measure of its size."*
>
> *(Anderson, 1995 p. 13)*

With interview questionnaires, sometimes researchers talk about 'face validity', that is whether the questions asked look as if they are measuring what they claim to be. There are ways of checking this as Cohen and Manion point out:

> *"One way of validating interview measures is to compare the interview measure with another measure that has already been shown to be valid. This kind of comparison is known as 'convergent validity'. If the two measures agree, it can be assumed that the validity of the interview is comparable with the proven validity of the other measure".*
>
> *(Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 281)*

A distinction is frequently made between 'internal validity' and 'external validity'. Internal validity refers to the validity of the data measure referred to above. It also relates to issues such as the truthfulness of responses, the accuracy of records, the authenticity of historical artefacts (Anderson, 1995 p. 13). By contrast, 'external validity' refers to the extent to which the results obtained can be generalised to other similar situations. Thus can the results of studies into school effectiveness in Bristol be generalised to schools in Cambridge or Manchester? As Anderson points out:-

> *"We require 'internal validity' to be confident that the results obtained are true for those participating in a study: we need 'external validity' to be in a position to generalise them."*
>
> *(Anderson, 1995 p. 13)*

One of the ways of achieving greater validity is to limit the amount of potential 'bias' as much as possible. For example, with 'interviews' there are three main sources of bias: the interviewer; the respondent and the way the questions are framed. Thus data collection can be influenced by the interviewer's own attitudes and opinions; by over-emphasising certain parts of the questions; by mis-understanding or mis-coding the respondents' answers and by a tendency to seek answers that support pre-conceived notions. Even the interviewer's age, sex, race religion and social class can be potential sources of bias in an interviewing situation. Cohen and Manion argue that a number of strategies can be employed to minimise bias. For example, careful formulation of questions which are simple, well-focused and avoid ambiguity; thorough training of interviewers and raising their awareness of potential sources of bias;

probability sampling of respondents using another interviewer, and sometimes by matching interviewer characteristics with those of the sample being interviewed (Cohen and Manion, 1996).

However, even if such strategies are employed, tensions still remain in the pursuit of 'validity' and 'reliability'. The result is always a 'judicious compromise' as Kitwood points out:

> *"In proportion to the extent to which 'reliability' is enhanced by rationalisation, 'validity' would decrease. For the main purpose of using an interview in research is that it is believed that in an interpersonal encounter people are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves, their thoughts, their feelings and values, than they would in a less human situation. At least for some purposes, it is necessary to generate a kind of conversation in which the 'respondents' feel at ease. In other words, the distinctively human element in the interview is necessary to its 'validity'. The more the interviewer becomes rational, calculating, and detached, the less likely the interview is to be perceived as a friendly transaction, and the more calculated the response also is likely to be."*
>
> *(Kitwood, 1977 p. 39)*

Respondents are also an important part of the interactive equation. Thus when constructing questions to be used by an interviewer, the researcher needs to consider their likely effects on the respondents. Will the questions 'educate' or 'lead' the respondent in a particular way thereby inducing the answers. In answering a question, will the respondent want to be seen in a

good light or try to anticipate what the interviewer wants to hear? This is known as normative conformity to the interviewer and it can be a problem.

When comparing different research tools, mail questionnaires can be more 'reliable' but less 'valid' than interviews. Since they are anonymous and self-administered, mail questionnaires can result in more honest responses. They are also cheaper in terms of time and money, since they are sent by post. However, they also have disadvantages. They may result in a low response rate and no clarification of the questions is possible since an interviewer is not present to sort out any misunderstandings. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that they are actually completed by the people for whom they were intended. There may also be problems for people with limited literacy.

One way round the 'either'/'or' choice of using particular research methods is 'triangulation', which can enhance validity and reliability. This involves using two or more methods of data collection - or validating answers from one group of respondents by studying the same issues from another standpoint. Ultimately the researcher must choose a particular research method for its 'fitness for purpose'. Thus where a researcher studies a particular phenomenon and wishes to make generalisation to the wider populations, methods yielding statistical data will be the most appropriate. However, where the researcher is using a phenomenological perspective to focus on 'experiences' and 'processes', then in-depth interviews will work better. Thus as Anderson concludes:

"Valid data collection requires clearly developed procedures and the involvement of researchers or data collection personnel who can follow procedures consistently and who will not themselves influence the data collected"....
"To maximize 'reliability' one needs to use procedures and measures which will lead to consistent results no matter who is involved in collecting the data".

(Anderson, 1995 p. 124 - 126)

The Framing of the Research

4.4 The Key Research Questions

My study focuses on a number of key research questions attached to which are some subsidiary questions.

4.4.1 Key Question 1

(KQ1) To what extent were GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students gaining entry into H.E. and professional training?

(SQ1) How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care for H.E. - on its own, or in combination with GCE A Levels or other 'additionality'?

(SQ2) Was this GNVQ more acceptable in some H.E. establishments than others?

(SQ3) If GNVQ Health & Social Care students progressed to H.E., how did *they themselves* feel that they had coped with their H.E. course, namely, with the academic content and teaching and learning styles there?

4.4.2 Key Question 2

KQ2: How did GNVQ Advanced students feel about their GNVQ teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for H.E.?

(SQ1) What was the 'value-added' of GNVQs from their perspectives?

(SQ2) Did the students identify any particular limitations of the GNVQ curriculum for progression to H.E.?

4.4.3 Key Question 3

KQ3: Did the H.E. tutors identify any particular strengths and weaknesses in GNVQ students on undergraduate courses?

(SQ1) How well did GNVQs prepare students for independent learning within an H.E. environment?

(SQ2) Was there any need for "accommodation" in the teaching and learning styles in H.E. undergraduate programmes in respect of GNVQ students, or was there a good 'fit'?

4.4.4 Key Question 4

KQ4: To what extent did GNVQs gain parity of esteem with A-Levels?

(SQ1) Did GNVQs 'bridge the academic-vocational divide' and from whose perspective?

(SQ2) To what extent were Government policy objectives regarding GNVQs achieved?

Choice of research methods

In view of the nature of the Key Questions a number of research techniques will be used, including questionnaires, in-depth interviews and official statistics. Since the study aims to tap the *perceptions* and *experiences* of a sample of GNVQ students who had first-hand experience of the implementation of the Government's new policy on vocational qualifications, phenomenological perspectives will be used, with open-ended questions to gain data in students' own words. Similarly, in order to gather information on how they fared in H.E. semi-structured, open-ended in-depth interviews will be used to explore students' experiences. This data will be triangulated with the perceptions of their H.E. tutors.

The next section clarifies some of the preliminary decisions and processes that had to be made prior to undertaking the fieldwork.

4.5 Phase I of the research

4.5.1 Selection of the sampling frame

My research involves a longitudinal study of eight separate GNVQ student cohorts in four different F.E. colleges, three in Hampshire and one in Lancashire. The selection of the colleges was 'purposive' and based on pragmatic considerations of time, funding and geographical factors in contrast to using any statistically random or probability sampling methods. This was in line with current research practice involving 'non-probability sampling' as Cohen and Manion point out:

> *"Small-scale surveys often resort to the use of non-probability samples because, despite the disadvantages that arise from their non-representativeness, they are far less complicated to set up, are considerably less expensive, and can prove perfectly adequate where researchers do not intend to generalise their findings beyond the sample in question ...*
>
> *(Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 88)*

> *"In purposive sampling, researchers hand-pick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of typicality. In this way they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs".*
>
> *(Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 89)*

I decided to focus on F.E. colleges rather than schools, since F.E. is my specialist phase and the FEFC inspection reports gave me a lot of original

qualitative background data on which to reflect and derive my questions. Since it was not feasible for me to investigate all F.E. colleges, I chose three within a 50 mile radius of Southampton University on the basis of their 'typicality' within the F.E. sector. Hence I selected a large general F.E. college based on two sites with predominantly 16-19 students (College 'A'), a large general F.E. college based on one site with both 16-19 students and a large proportion of mature students (College 'B'), and a small sixth form college which was expanding its range of work into more general F.E. courses (College 'C'). The F.E. college in Lancashire (College 'D') was selected because it had well-established GNVQ programmes and good connections with H.E. establishments in the North-West region. This college had participated in the first GNVQ pilot study 1992-1994. It had a large GNVQ student cohort who were doing a range of Health & Social Care courses, including one year fast track (for mature students), two year full-time and two year part-time programmes and I also had contacts with course tutors there.

4.5.2 Ethical issues

One of my first considerations was how to undertake the fieldwork involving people. When conducting any form of research it is important to adhere to certain codes of ethics and principles. Indeed, ethical considerations need to be applied not only to the methods and procedures of research, but also to the subject matter. Even the reasons for sponsorship can generate ethical dilemmas as the 'Project Camelot' research into the causes of revolution in Latin American countries in the 1960s demonstrated (Anderson, 1995 p.18). Although the focus of my

research would not involve administering electric shocks to learners as in the Milgram experiments (1960 - 64), nor giving psychedelic drugs to fifty-two unsuspecting patients as Cameron did between 1957- 60, nevertheless there are still many ethical considerations within the field of education as Anderson points out:

> *"In education, countless children have been routinely forced to learn non-sense syllables; native children have been taken from their parents and punished severely for speaking their mother tongue; generations of left-handers have been forced to write with their right hands; most children are at some time asked to participate in questionable experiments in teaching methods; and all of us are called upon incessantly to fill out meaningless questionnaires."* *(Anderson, 1995 p. 17)*

These points needed to be thought through carefully and the possible impact of the research. I decided to use overt methods and declare my true purpose to the various participants, since covert methods are rather dubious from an ethical point of view and anyway these would not have yielded the form of data and interviews which I needed to undertake. Initially I made contact with a senior manager at each college, usually the Vice-Principal (Curriculum) or Director of Studies and explained the purpose of my research first by telephone and then by a follow-up letter. I was then given permission to contact the GNVQ Co-ordinator or particular course leader to negotiate my entry into the teaching groups. In College 'D' this sequence was reversed since I knew the GNVQ Health & Social Care section leader, and she paved the way for my contact with the Head of Faculty and Director of Studies.

I was particularly keen to stress the importance of 'informed consent' and the right of participants to be fully informed about the precise nature and purpose of my research. It was agreed that the participating colleges would remain anonymous and that students would be invited to take part in the research, but would not be compelled to do so by the college staff.

In order to minimise disruptions to lessons, I was invited to join whole group tutorial sessions in which to explain my objectives to the students and to administer the questionnaires, subject to their agreement. Only GNVQ students in the second year of their GNVQ programmes with H.E. aspirations were included in the sample. The visits took place in the Spring Term 1997 in order to avoid disrupting end of term assessments in December 1996 and students' preparation for external tests.

This was in line with the basic principles governing research which are frequently found in the ethical guidelines of universities as the following extract from the Faculty of Education, McGill University demonstrates:

> *" Care must be exercised to protect the human rights of individual groups and large collectivities. Among these are:*
> *a) The right to be fully informed about the precise nature and purpose of the research in which participation is sought, so that consent may be given or withheld.*
> *b) The right to know the risks and benefits involved in participation.*
> *c) The right to assurance that privacy will not be invaded and that any information disclosed will remain confidential.*

d) The right of cultural groups to accurate and respectful description of their heritage and customs and to discreet use of information on their daily lives and aspirations.

e) Considering the vulnerability of children, special care must be exercised to respect the individual rights of children involved in research protocols and ensure that the research will not bring them psychological or physical harm.

f) The right to freely abstain from, enter into or withdraw from a research project on the basis of a fully informed personal decision". (Quoted in Anderson, op. cit. p. 21)

No students declined to participate although some students were absent on the days of my visits and in such cases the course tutors gave them the questionnaire and posted them on to me later. All course tutors supported my research without reservation in the initial stage of my research. However, I experienced problems with College 'B' at stage 2 of the research (obtaining students' results and progression details) as college staff were reluctant to give me students' names and addresses to follow up their progression. This was ostensibly 'because of Data Protection issues', however I felt that there may have been other reasons for this, such as poor student outcomes, since this college had two GNVQ groups, one of which contained students who were very disgruntled with GNVQs and clearly had little motivation for engaging with the teaching and learning processes. I surmised that Staff would have administrative problems in collating the results because of students drop-out and non-completion.

In College 'A', the Course Tutor had taken early retirement by the second stage of my research and I had to deal with a number of part-time staff

pending the appointment of a new course leader and the data was not always in a transparent form.

The most complete data on students' progression to H.E. came from College 'D', although in following up students to H.E. in Phase II of my study, there was a lot of sample mortality as students had moved from their home addresses or their telephone numbers were defunct. In these circumstances, it proved impossible to pursue these students.

Figure 4.1 Sample size GNVQ students

College	Health & Social Care	%	Business	%
A	17	19	12	21
B	26	29	16	28
C	9	10	5	9
D	37	42	24	42
Total = 146	89	100	57	100

4.5.3 The Survey Approach

According to Cohen and Manion, surveys are one of the most commonly used descriptive methods in educational research with the primary purpose of ...

"describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationship that exists between specific events. Thus, surveys may vary in their levels of complexity from those which provide simple frequency counts to those which present relational analysis".

(Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 83)

Although their scope and complexity may vary depending on funding and purpose and indeed, on whether they are large-scale and carried out by a government agency or independent organisation, or small scale, and undertaken by a single researcher, all surveys necessarily involve one or more of the following data-collection techniques:

- structured or semi-structured interviews,
- self-completion or postal questionnaires,
- standardized tests of attainment or performance and
- attitudes scales.

(Cohen and Manion, op. cit.)

However, like any research method, surveys contain a number of advantages and disadvantages. When designing a questionnaire care must be taken to avoid ambiguity and not to build in bias through 'leading questions'. Another major issue for the researcher is whether or not to use 'open' or 'pre-coded questions' a subject which has generated a good deal of research and debate and which again carries implications for different theoretical perspectives.

"In an open question the respondent is given freedom to decide the aspect, form, detail and length of his answer and it is the interviewer's job to record as much of it as she can... In the case of pre-coded questions, either the respondent is given a limited number of answers from which to choose or the question is asked as an open question and the interviewer allocates the answer to the appropriate code category".

(Moser, 1977 p. 229)

An ideal questionnaire has certain characteristics as Davidson points out:

"It is clear, unambiguous and uniformly workable. Its design must minimize potential errors from respondents ... and coders. And since people's participation in surveys is voluntary, a questionnaire has to help in engaging their interest, encouraging their co-operation, and eliciting answers as close as possible to the truth."

(Davidson, 1970 quoted in Cohen and Manion, op. cit. pp. 92-93)

Bearing these points in mind, I proceeded to design and test my self-completion questionnaire.

4.5.4 The pilot study or 'pre-test'

The questionnaire used in Phase 1 of my research was first drafted and then amended in the light of discussions with my PhD supervisor. It was

then piloted at College 'C' as this involved a relatively small number of GNVQ students and a number of questions were revised accordingly and the questionnaire layout was modified to provide the final draft. (See Appendix 1).

There are three main types of questions which can be used in designing a questionnaire:

a) *factual/information questions* (e.g. What is your name? How old are you? Where do you live?);
b) *opinion questions* (e.g. Do you think that the Government is doing a good job?) and
c) *attitude questions* (e.g. How useful has your GNVQ course been in preparing you for H.E.?).

(Goode and Hatt, 1974; Moser, 1977).

My questionnaire involved a combination of these, but I was particularly keen to use an interpretivist perspective with open-ended questions in order to elicit students' spontaneous opinions/responses, rather than prompting particular answers with pre-coded answers which tend to constrain them.

After a brief letter of introduction giving the rationale for my research and an overview of three of my key research questions, students were invited to participate by completing the questionnaire individually, on a voluntary basis and in confidence. The first part of the questionnaire focused on short, factual questions to obtain background data from the student such as

his/her name, sex, date of birth, particular college where he/she was studying and tutor group. In addition students were asked to identify their ethnic origin from nine pre-coded categories, and also give their father's or mother's occupation (or their own, if they were mature students), their previous secondary school, qualifications obtained and chosen career.

My intention was to use the Registrar General's five-point scale to identify students' social class and to see whether there were any subsequent correlations with other variables, including type of secondary school and ethnicity. This part of the questionnaire was designed to be short and in a user-friendly layout to encourage participation by students and completion. However, the penultimate question in this first section on 'previous qualifications obtained', subsequently proved problematic and difficult to code because of the range of responses and types of qualifications given by students. Some students gave full details of their qualifications (i.e. individual subjects taken and respective grades), while others either just listed the total number of GCSEs they obtained, but did not identify the particular subjects or they omitted to identify their individual grades - so one could not be certain whether these were "passes" (i.e. grade C or above), or perhaps GCSEs at lower grades which had been awarded. Since this was *basic* background data, I could live with this, but with hindsight, a more focused pre-coded question could have yielded more standardised data for comparative purposes.

The next set of questions combined factual and opinion questions and sought to establish in the students' own words reasons for enrolling on a GNVQ Advanced Level course (Q1), whether they had previously taken a

GNVQ Intermediate course (Q2) to determine their familiarity with GNVQ pedagogy and to tap their perceptions of any differences between their GNVQ programme and previous courses they had taken (Q.3). Questions 1-3 were open-ended to minimise interviewer bias and to allow students to give spontaneous answers in their own words.

Questions 4-5 were factual questions which aimed to establish whether 'additionality' was being pursued by the students in the form of optional or additional GNVQ units, or by a GCE A level. Questions 6-9 involved more open-ended questions and focused on students' H.E. aspirations, the courses they had applied for, their geographical locations and any offers received to date as well as reasons for their choices.

Questions 10-11 were open-ended questions which were designed to tap students' attitudes and opinions on the value of GNVQ teaching and learning activities in respect of helping them with their H.E./professional training course and future careers.

In order to look at the vocational elements within GNVQs, questions 12-14 focused on whether students had undertaken any work experience and if so, how valuable they perceived it in facilitating their progression to H.E./professional training. The last question involved a grid with 10 pre-coded possible forms of teaching and learning. This was fairly complex and yielded the most queries and non-response. Students were asked which of these teaching and learning styles they thought they might experience in H.E. (12a) and then which of these had been developed most through their GNVQ course (12b) and which had been helped least by it.

When sorting through the completed questionnaires, I found that most open-ended questions had a finite number of responses which enabled these to be grouped on an EXCEL table for subsequent statistical analysis and the production of various charts and tables.

4.6 Phase II of the research

Phase II of the research involved following up the GNVQ Health & Social Care students' completion and destination results in the summer of 1997.

This information was sought from Course Tutors in each of the four colleges, initially by telephone and then by letter if necessary. As mentioned earlier, difficulties emerged with College 'B' as the Course Tutor was reluctant to disclose the results and students' names, addresses and telephone numbers 'because of the Data Protection Act'. With hindsight, this point should have been anticipated during the setting up stage with the Colleges and clarified then. However it resulted in a large loss of data to analyse and follow up which I could do nothing about. In addition, the results from College 'A' took a long time to obtain following the unexpected early retirement of the GNVQ Health & Social Care Course Tutor.

Phase II of the research involved following up 18 students from my original sample who had progressed to H.E. and interviewing them about their perceptions and experiences after their first year in H.E.. This stage sought to examine the extent to which students progressing to H.E. felt that

their GNVQ had been an adequate preparation for H.E. and whether they perceived any deficiencies.

The follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone, and tape-recorded wherever possible, with the full knowledge and agreement of the participants. A standard questionnaire was used with prompting and probing where necessary which is recorded on the tapes. The findings are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

4.7 Phase III of the research

In an attempt to 'triangulate' the data obtained in Phase II of the fieldwork, a small number of H.E. tutors were also contacted to ascertain their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the GNVQ entrants compared with traditional A-Level ones. These were selected from the H.E.I.s to which my sample of 18 students had progressed.

Initially I attempted to arrange in-depth face-to-face interviews with the tutors as I was working peripatetically and nationally for a number of clients, however, their dispersed geographical locations, time and constraints of my consultancy role ultimately precluded this. Consequently, as with the students, the follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone, and tape-recorded wherever possible, with the full knowledge and agreement of the participants. A standard questionnaire was used with prompting and probing where necessary which is recorded on the tapes. The findings are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

4.8 Summary

Undertaking social research is not a neutral activity. It inevitably contains pre-conceptions and biases which are reflected in the research tools used and in the philosophical assumptions on which the paradigms are based - whether these be 'positivist' or 'interpretivist'. Even the choice of subject matter for research reflects the 'preference' or interest of the researcher.

Nevertheless, by acknowledging the value-base at the outset of the research and by clarifying the reasons for choosing particular methods, the researcher can strive towards an 'objectivity' that can be open to scrutiny and validated (or otherwise) by other researchers. Two key concepts in this process are 'validity' and 'reliability'. The former hinges on the extent to which the chosen research methods are appropriate for the particular research issue under study. Will they measure or yield data on what they are supposed to be measuring? By contrast, 'reliability' refers to consistency in measurement: namely, the extent to which the results of a study can be replicated over time using the same subjects.

My study used phenomenological perspectives and qualitative research methods in order to focus on students' perceptions and experiences of GNVQs and the teaching and learning styles that they encountered in higher education. These revolved around the use of semi-structured questionnaires and open-ended in-depth interviews to gain data in students' own words, which was then triangulated with the perceptions of their H.E. tutors. However some quantitative methods were also used, namely, official statistics to provide a more macro picture of GNVQ

student progression to higher education. By combining both positivist and interpretivist perspectives this permitted an ‘analytic dualism’ which yielded a more adequate explanation of the relationship between social structure and social action within the policy context.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis of results: Phase I Research

Chapter 5

Analysis of results : Phase 1 research

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on my research methodology as well as discussing the philosophical issues underpinning research and key concepts such as validity, reliability and ethics. It also clarified the four Key Questions and the three stages in the longitudinal study.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the analysis of the results in the light of the three stages and the Key Questions identified in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents the descriptive statistics obtained from Phase 1 of the research, based on a sample of 146 students from four F.E. colleges and examines the background data such as gender breakdown, age range, social class, choice of GNVQ course, qualifications on entry, and chosen career (if known). This is followed by an analysis of the qualitative data derived from the open-ended questions used in the self-administer questionnaire which focuses on the subjective perceptions and experiences of GNVQ students in the second year of their two-year course, their career aspirations and applications to HE. Since the students' actual progression could not be evaluated until the August 1997 GNVQ results, this data was used to answer Key Question 2 first, namely: "How did GNVQ Advanced students feel about their teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for HE.?".

Chapter 6 focuses on students' progression to HE. In order to set the scene, this chapter examines the national picture on GNVQs and progression statistics provided by UCAS between 1995-2001 which were obtained from their statistical enquiry service via their web-site. However these statistics are fairly generic and only show progression by *all* GNVQ students to *various* degree courses: they do not show the progression from individual GNVQ subjects - in particular, Health & Social Care, which was the focus of my research, which was less helpful for my analysis.

The completion and destination results of my GNVQ Health & Social Care students in the summer of 1997 are also considered along with 'additionality' and Key Question 1, namely, "To what extent were GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students gaining entry into HE and professional training?" and the related sub-questions.

Chapter 6 also focuses on Phase II of the research which follows up 18 GNVQ Health & Social Care students who have progressed to HE and considers their *retrospective perceptions* of GNVQs based on their *actual experiences* in HE during the first year of their degree or diploma course. This data enables me to answer Key Question 1, Sub-Question 3 namely, "If GNVQ Health & Social Care students progressed to HE, how did they themselves feel that they had coped with their HE course?" This incorporates a discussion from a phenomenological perspective about the 'academic-vocational' divide, from the students' actual experience and perceptions, which provides a contrast to the macro-functionalist perspective implicit in the previous section on the official statistics on progression.

Chapter 7 then presents the results of Phase III of the fieldwork, namely the perceptions of twenty-four HE tutors, and their views about the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ students compared with traditional A-Level student entrants. In order to retain some congruence and continuity with Phase II of the fieldwork, these tutors were selected from a small sample of H.E.I.s to which the GNVQ Health & Social Care students in my sample had progressed. In most cases they had been named by students as either their course tutor or the admissions tutor at their H.E.I..

This evidence helps to triangulate students' answers to Key Question 3, by clarifying whether HE tutors were aware of any strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ students on degree and diploma courses. The chapter concludes with a discussion about whether there needs to be any 'accommodation' by HE tutors in the teaching and learning styles they use with GNVQ students, or whether there was a 'good fit' between them. (Key Question 3, Sub-Question 2)

Chapter 8 reviews all of the Key Questions, but focuses on the last Key Question 4 which raises issues about the adequacy and sufficiency of the GNVQs in terms of their curriculum design and the thorny questions about 'parity of esteem', bridging the 'academic-vocational divide' and the extent to which Government policy objectives were achieved. Further changes in the metamorphosis of GNVQs are considered in the light of the Curriculum 2000 changes.

5.2 Descriptive statistics from Phase 1 research

A total of 146 students took part in the study the exact breakdown of which is given in Figure 5.2.1 below.

Figure 5.2.1 Student numbers by course and college

College	Health & Social Care	%	Business	%
A	17	19	12	21
B	26	29	16	28
C	9	10	5	9
D	37	42	24	42
Total = 146	89	100	57	100

Of these 146 students, 90% were doing a full-time 2-year GNVQ programme, of whom 56% were second year GNVQ Health & Social Care students and 34% were second year GNVQ Business students. A total of 10% of the sample were doing a 1-year Fast Track GNVQ (5% in Health & Social Care and 5% in Business) which was only offered by College D. Three quarters of the sample were female which is fairly typical for the subject areas. The majority of students 84% were white, 5% were of Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin, 4% Black Caribbean or Black Other, 2% were Chinese, while 3% described themselves as 'other' with 2% non-response. See Figure 5.2.2

Figure 5.2.2 Students' Ethnicity

Racial Group	%
White	84
Indian/Asian	5
Black Caribbean/Black Other	3
Chinese	2
Other	2
Non-response	4
Total:	100

In terms of social class measured by parental or own occupation, 80% could be classified by the Registrar General's 5 point scale, 10% fell into the categories of 'unemployed', 'housewife', 'student' or 'retired' and 10% of the sample left this question blank. See Figure 5.2.3 below.

Figure 5.2.3 Students' Social Class

Professional/Managerial	5%
Lower Professional etc.	16%
Skilled Manual etc.	27%
Semi-skilled Manual	18%
Unskilled	14%
Unemployed/Housewife/Student/Retired	10%
Non-response	10%
Total	100%

5.2.1 Career choices:

In the Health & Social Care group seventeen different career choices emerged and fourteen for the Business students. In order to present the data in a more meaningful way, the careers were grouped into more generic occupational categories for both GNVQ groups. Thus various types of nursing, health visiting and health promotion were grouped together, followed by professions allied to medicine (PAMS) including O.T., physiotherapy, speech therapy, and radiography; then social work and its various forms, leaving teaching and the police force/probation as separate categories.

By far the most popular career was nursing, with 38% of Health & Social Care students choosing this. However, if one added Midwifery, Health Visiting and Health Promotion to this category, the figure is 45%. Social Work, Social Care, Counselling etc. was the next largest field with 21%. The other groupings were as follows:

Figure 5.2.4 GNVQ Health & Social Care students' career choices

	%
Nursing; Midwifery; Health Visiting; Health Promotion	45
O.T.; Physiotherapy; Speech Therapy; Radiography	10
Social Work; Social Care; Counselling; Youth Work; EWO	21
Police Force; Probation	3
Teaching	8
Don't Know/Uncommitted	13
Total	100

Likewise with GNVQ Business students' choices, careers in advertising, marketing, estate agency and selling were grouped together, as were financial services, banking, accountancy and the stockmarket. Personnel, law, and transport and logistics were kept as separate categories.

The majority of the GNVQ Business students were interested in Marketing or Financial Services which involve practical, 'hands-on' type careers. Only 3% of the students wanted to become a barrister or lawyer which would necessitate a more theoretical/academic career. However, nearly half of the sample were uncommitted (46%) compared with 12% in the Health & Social Care group. It could be that Health & Social Care students are more committed to their career as a vocation than Business students.

Figure 5.2.5 GNVQ Business students' career choices

	%
Management	2
Advertising; Marketing; Estate Agent; Sales	19
Financial Services; Banking; Accountancy; Stockmarket	11
Personnel	7
Law	3
Transport and logistics	5
Don't Know/Uncommitted	46
Total	100

Moving on to the analysis of the qualitative data, it is important to clarify a key aspect of the methodology here. The questionnaire used with the original sample of students (Appendix 1) was essentially open-ended, with the exception of some basic questions which required either a YES/NO answer. With the open-ended questions, the students' responses resulted in a finite range of answers which could used as the basis of the EXCEL data columns. Thus similar answers could be grouped together and their frequency determined and cross-referenced with other variables such as course, gender, age, social class etc. as appropriate. This facilitated a more phenomenological approach to the analysis of the data, since the attitudes and opinions were based on their own choice of words rather than constraining them to answer within pre-coded categories.

However, one disadvantage of this was the range of answers given. Also some students gave two or more reasons in their answers all of which had to be identified and coded. For example, with Question 1: "Why did you enrol on your GNVQ Advanced Level course?" students gave 12 main reasons. Of 146 students, 144 answered this question, including multiple answers, yielding a total of 270 replies. Thus the average student gave two answers to this question. (See Appendix 1 for questionnaire schedule).

The most significant reason for enrolling on a GNVQ Advanced course from the students' perspective was its perceived 'relevance for progression to future career' which accounted for 25% of the responses. This was followed in joint second place by 'preference for vocational course with work experience' and 'to gain further qualifications and knowledge' of the career field each with 11% . (See Figure 5.2.6)

Figure 5.2.6 Reasons for enrolling on a GNVQ course:

	No.	%
1. Started GCE A/Ls, but unhappy/having difficulty	9	3
2. Most relevant for progression to future career	69	26
3. Opportunity to work with particular client groups	16	6
4. Alternative to A/Ls/perceived as easier/dislike of exams	24	9
5. Preference for vocational course with work experience	30	11
6. Perceived benefit of GNVQ qualification	18	7
7. Modular structure of GNVQs/ short tests/no big exams	12	4
8. Interested in field of Health & Social Care/Business	20	7
9. To gain further qualification/broaden knowledge of field	32	12
10. Following careers advice	16	6
11. Most appealing/suited my needs/liked the interviewer	22	8
12. Course which allowed expression and enterprise	2	1
Total:	270	100

Thus students in my sample had considered the courses carefully: they were certainly future orientated and had their feet on the ground and had not chosen GNVQ for esoteric reasons. Their answers revealed a long-term vision or perspective rather than a superficial hedonistic one. Fewer than 1% of the students chose GNVQ Advanced Level for the intrinsic reasons of promoting self-expression and enterprise.

If (R3) and (R5) are grouped together (vocational work and work experience) the total response is 46 (or 17%). Overall, 'instrumental' reasons seem to dominate the students' responses whereas relatively few of them 7% identified 'expressive' reasons for their choice (R8) e.g. intrinsic interest in the particular field. (See Figure 5.2.6)

Of the 69 students choosing (R2), 12 of them also gave (R5) as a second reason, and a further 7 of these also chose (R9) and 7 chose (R4).

5.2.2 Links with previous courses

Of the 146 students, although all 4 colleges offered GNVQ at Intermediate Level, only 25 of them had done GNVQ at Intermediate Level, which represents 17% of my sample. This was split into 13% Health & Social Care students and 4% Business students. This may suggest that the majority of GNVQ Intermediate students progress to employment rather than continuing their academic studies to the next level. However, this hypothesis needs further investigation in relation to colleges' entry requirements for GNVQ Advanced Level courses.

When asked how the GNVQ Advanced Level course differs from previous courses they had taken, students identified 8 main reasons. Again, some students identified more than one reason in their answer. (See Figure 5.2.7). Clearly, the most significant feature of GNVQs which accounts for one third of the responses, is (R3), namely, the practical elements of the course and less formal teaching. If (R3) is added to (R6) then 47% of

students are very much aware of GNVQ offering a different teaching and learning style compared with other courses which they have experienced.

Figure 5.2.7 Students' perceptions of how GNVQ Advanced Level differs from previous courses which they have taken

GNVQ requires/involves:-	Number	%
1. ... more self-motivation/more demanding	46	23
2. ... more research skills/independent learning	28	14
3. ... more coursework, more practical, less teaching	67	34
4. ... more interesting/enjoyable/new activities	10	5
5. ... involves considerably more paperwork	6	3
6. ...mainly assignments/continuous assessment, unit tests and no big exams	26	13
7. ...more depth/detail/more strict about presentation	12	6
8. ...less visible course structure	4	2
Total No.	199	100

However, GNVQ is certainly not seen as a soft option, but is identified as a demanding course (R1) accounting for nearly one quarter of the total responses. Again, independent learning and research skills (R2) also feature quite high in students' perceptions. Although this question did not ask students for negative perceptions of GNVQ, only "differences", their responses are predominantly positive features with the exception of (R5). In spite of considerable reported criticisms and complaints from GNVQ students and teachers nationally (FEFC 1994; OfSTED 1995; Wolf 1997a; Capey 1995), only 3% of responses identified the amount of

paperwork as a major difference. Thus the students in my sample seem fairly happy with GNVQs.

5.2.3 Additionality

An important aspect of GNVQs which is linked with progression to H.E. is 'additionality' which is one of my sub questions (Key Question 1, SQ 2).

"How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care for H.E. - on its own, or in combination with GCE A-Levels or other additionality."

One of the problems with the introduction of a new qualification such as GNVQ, is determining its relative value or 'equivalence' with established qualifications and how it is perceived in the education market place both in respect of entry to H.E. and to employment. Although Government policy decreed that GNVQ Advanced Level was equivalent to two A-Levels, this was by no means widely understood or accepted in H.E.I.s, as discussions with GNVQ college lecturers and my interviews with H.E.I. tutors illustrates.

Likewise, students in my initial sample were concerned about whether GNVQ would give them entrance to H.E.. Although 95% of the 146 students were taking Optional and Additional Units as part of their GNVQ course, few of them were confident that the 18 Unit GNVQ alone, would be acceptable for entry to H.E. Students who had offers from universities were frequently being asked for a Distinction at GNVQ, plus an A-Level.

Of 146 students in my sample, 105 of them (i.e. 72%) had applied for a place on a university or professional training course. Of these, 42 students or 40% were also taking GCE A-Levels or other qualification. Twenty-one of the students were taking an extra A-Level in order to 'further career or progression opportunities, and to have a better chance of getting into university'. A total of 12 students were 're-sitting an essential subject' either GCSE Mathematics or English.

It is interesting to note that only 3 students were combining GNVQ with NVQ Units which supports Wolf's research in 1996 that students were using GNVQ Advanced as an alternative route into H.E. rather than combining it with NVQs for progression to employment. The precise breakdown of the additional qualifications being taken by students in my sample is given below in Figure 5.2.8.

Figure 5.2.8 Additionality:

	Number	%
Other qualifications being taken alongside GNVQ		
GCE A-Level	21	50
GCE AS	3	7
GCSE Mathematics	7	17
GCSE English	5	12
NVQ Units	3	7
Other qualification	3	7
Total =	42	100

Thus 105 students, nearly three-quarters (72%) of the total sample of 146 students aspire to H.E. Of these, 61 are GNVQ Health & Social Care students and 44 are studying GNVQ Business. Students were asked to clarify the type of course for which they had applied. (See Figure 5.2.9)

Over half of the 105 students applying for places in H.E. wanted to do a degree course. If the figures for HND courses are added to the degrees (since HNDs are usually considered as ordinary degrees), this figure increases to 69%. As can be seen from the table, just under a third of these students were applying for a range of H.E. Diploma courses.

Figure 5.2.9 Applications for a University or professional training course

	Number	%
Degree course	56	53
Diploma course/Project 2000	31	30
HND course	17	16
Taking a year out	1	1
Total =	105	100

One of my hypotheses at the outset of my research was that GNVQ students would be more likely to apply for places at post-1992 universities (i.e. the former polytechnics) since these were more likely to offer vocational courses and be a natural progression from GNVQ courses. Also they usually catered for the lower ability range of the post-18 market, including HND and 2 year Dip. HE students. Consequently, it was

hypothesised that they were also more likely to accept GNVQ students than the pre-1992 universities (which I shall now refer to as the 'established universities').

Figure 5. 2. 10 Applications by type of Establishment

	Number	%
Type of Establishment		
Pre-1992 University	4	4
Post-1992 University	62	60
Both	28	28
College of Higher Education	4	4
Other	4	4
Total =	102	100

Indeed, the majority of students in the sample 62 students out of 102 (60%) applied *only* for courses at post-1992 universities, 28 students (28%) hedged their bets and applied to both, while only 4% applied solely to pre-1992 universities and 4% applied to Colleges of Higher Education. (In addition, there were three non-responses). Of the 4 students applying *only* to the pre-1992 universities, all were Health & Social Care students and were applying for degrees in nursing, midwifery and speech therapy. All 4 students had between 6-10 GCSEs. The most significant reason for students' choice of H.E. course was to 'further their career' (66%) while 17% chose them because they 'appealed to them most' with 6% citing their 'interest in helping people' as the reason. Only 1% admitted choosing their course for geographical reasons - 'near the coast'. There were also a range of fragmented answers which had no statistical significance.

However, when asked why they had applied to particular institutions proximity to home and relatives far outweighs all other reasons (60%). When this data is cross-tabulated with social class, 42 of the 61 students (68%) come from skilled manual, semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds. Consequently, they may be choosing their H.E.I.s for financial reasons, as it is cheaper to live at home.

Looking at other reasons, suitability of course is the next most important. If one adds reasons 7, 8 and 10 on the grounds of similarity to 'Most suitable courses for me', this then accounts for another 18%. Only 5% chose the H.E.I.s for their 'attractive geographical area'. Thus students are choosing their H.E.I. for very pragmatic reasons. (See Figure 5.2.11)

Figure 5.2.11 Students' reasons for applying to their particular HEIs

	Number	%
1. Recommended by former student/tutor/careers adviser	2	2
2. Institution accepts GNVQ students	3	3
3. Rejected by other H.E.I.s	1	1
4. Looked nice in prospectus/Open Day/good facilities	5	5
5. Proximity to home/relatives	61	60
6. Attractive geographical area	5	5
7. Most suitable course for me	8	8
8. Only a few places where my course is offered	2	2
9. Opportunity to travel/study away from home	7	6
10. Reputation of institution/standard of training	8	8
Total =	102	100

5.2.4 Students' perceptions of GNVQ teaching and learning styles as a preparation for H.E.

Returning to my second Key Question, namely, "How did GNVQ students feel about their teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for H.E.?"

The overwhelming response from students was positive. Out of the 146 students, 132 felt that GNVQ teaching and learning activities would help them with their H.E./professional training courses. See Figure 5.2.12.

Figure 5.2.12 The perceived value of GNVQ teaching and learning activities

Q. Will GNVQ teaching and learning activities help you with your H.E./professional training course?	Number	%
YES	132	98
NO	3	2
Total =	135	100

When asked to identify what in particular would help them, 33% felt that it was the 'underpinning knowledge', with 'researching'and 'developing independence' being second equal with 10% each, 'work placements' 9% and 'teamwork/communication skills' at 8%. See Figure 5.2.13 below.

Figure 5.2.13 How GNVQs help students with their HE/professional training courses

	Number	%
1. Researching/CD ROM etc.	14	10
2. Building my self-confidence	8	6
3. Developing independence	14	10
4. Work placements/working with clients	12	9
5. Developing underpinning knowledge	45	33
6. Teamwork/communication skills	11	8
7. Preparation for H.E.	20	15
8. Learning to cope under pressure	7	5
9. Don't know.	4	3
Total =	135	100

Similarly, when students were asked whether GNVQ would help them with their future careers, 122 out of 131 (i.e. 93%) answered 'Yes'. Again, the main reason was the 'underpinning knowledge' with 46% and Work experience coming second as a reason, with 16%.

Students particularly valued the work experience placements which were an integral part of their GNVQ course. Generally-speaking they found that the different placements helped to crystallise their career identity as well as give them insight into professional practice.

5.2.14 How GNVQs help students with their future careers

	Number	%
1. Work experience/raises awareness of work environment	19	16
2. Help me work more independently	16	13
3. Underpinning knowledge	55	46
4. Fostering greater confidence	10	8
5. Underpinning skills	8	7
6. Developing communication skills/teamwork	8	7
7. Don't know/not sure	4	3
Total =	120	100

5.2.5 Work experience

The majority of the students in my sample had undertaken work experience as part of their GNVQ course and had found it beneficial in a variety of ways. (See Figure 5.2.15)

Only 28 students had not done any work experience. Of these, 25 were doing a GNVQ course in Business at College D, which had chosen not to offer work experience as an integral part of the course because of other practical elements within it. The remaining 3 students were mature students on the 1-year fast-track GNVQ Health & Social Care course, who had been employed in the care sector, and for whom it was not deemed necessary. Ninety per cent of the students undertaking work experience

had done between 1 and 4 placements during the 2 year course, with 64% of students having done either 3 or 4 placements.

The most important benefit to students in undertaking work experience was to provide insight into their future career or vocational area, with nearly 50% of students citing this reason. A further 12 % felt that work experience had helped them to crystallise their career choice.

Figure 5.2.15 Perceived value of work experience in assisting students' progression to H.E./professional training

	Number	%
1. Valuable for interviews/progression to H.E.	9	9.5
2. Valuable for working with people	5	5
3. Generally very useful	10	11
4. Insight into vocational area/future career	44	47
5. Not very helpful/valuable	6	6
6. It crystallised my career choice	11	12
7. It enhanced my personal confidence	9	9.5
Total =	94	100

5.3 Summary

The majority of students doing GNVQ Health & Social Care in my sample were predictably, white females and came predominantly from skilled

manual, semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds (59%). By contrast, GNVQ Business students were predominantly white males, and also from the same range of socio-economic backgrounds. However, the majority of Health & Social Care students (87%) were already committed to a career field at the outset of their GNVQ course, compared with 46% of GNVQ Business students who were 'uncommitted'.

The most popular destinations for the Health & Social Care students were degree courses combined with professional qualifications with 45% of them aspiring to careers in nursing, midwifery, health education or health visiting. The second most popular career destination was the social work/ social care/counselling group which accounted for 21% of the responses, while 10% aspired to professions allied to medicine (PAMS) e.g. O.T., physiotherapy, radiology and speech therapy.

Mature students with existing vocational experience particularly favoured Diploma courses, notably in Social Work, Counselling and Youth and Community Work. However GNVQ students were also applying to a range of community, social, behavioural and health-related degree courses such as Community Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Behavioural Sciences, Social Administration, Social Policy and Education.

A minority of students had applied for places on HND courses e.g. in Social Care, Caring Services and Early Childhood Studies.

So, to address my Key Question 2:

(KQ2) How did GNVQ Advanced students feel about their GNVQ teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for H.E.?

(SQ1) What was the 'value-added' of GNVQs from their perspectives?

(SQ2) Did the students identify any particular limitations of the curriculum for progression to H.E.?

GNVQ was an appealing course to students in my sample. They pro-actively chose to enrol on it for a variety of reasons. Whether for Business or Health & Social Care students, GNVQ was perceived as a beneficial qualification (7%), relevant for their progression (26%), providing them with opportunities to work with particular client groups (11%), to broaden their knowledge of their chosen field (12%) and was meeting their needs (8%). In addition, it was chosen as an alternative to A-Levels, and because of its modular structure which was perceived as 'easier' and because of students' dislike of exams.

GNVQs were providing an attractive 'alternative' curriculum for students. GNVQs were perceived as more practical, involving more coursework, research skills and independent learning (48%). Nearly one quarter of the students (24%) had a realistic understanding of GNVQs in that they were aware that the curriculum was more demanding and required more self-motivation. Some of the main attractions were the assignments, the continuous assessment and the absence of big exams.

Ninety-eight per cent of the respondents (i.e. 135) felt that 'GNVQ teaching and learning activities would help them with their

H.E./professional training course'. They identified the 'value-added' as the 'underpinning knowledge', 'work placements', 'researching', 'developing independence' and 'teamwork and communication skills' as the main benefits accruing to them.

There was also some additional evidence on 'value-added' based on my fieldwork notes. What students liked most about GNVQ was the modular delivery which they found was an easier way of learning (i.e. "in bite-sized chunks"). They felt that this provided an easy way to monitor their progress and they felt encouraged to proceed to next stage. Much also depended on the support from Course Tutors - their enthusiasm, their personal warmth and how they valued the students, and the confidence-building, problem-solving and careers advice which they received.

Students enjoyed participating in GNVQ presentations, role playing and group work e.g. on medical ethics which they felt they would not have known how to do - had they done an A-Level course. Students appreciated the course mix, namely, having mature students and young students on the same course, as they helped each other.

In general, most students valued the work experience placements which gave them insight into clinical factors, and managing professional relationships with clients, but they felt two weeks was not enough.

> *"You just get to know the Team and you have to finish".*
>
> *(Fieldwork notes)*

However, it was important that the students were given meaningful roles in the work placements and were treated as part of the team, could talk to clients and were allowed to use their initiative. Students were not always treated well by nurses in hospital work placements. Generally speaking, work placements usually helped students to make up their minds about future careers, although they did not help *everyone.*

Nevertheless, there were also some negative comments from students about GNVQs. They disliked:

> *"The Action-Plans .. they are a lot of rigmarole and monotonous. Once you've got the skill, why do it again?"*
> *(Fieldwork notes)*

Students found note-taking and abstracting key points, and essay-writing most difficult. Also the GNVQ assessment regime was perceived as 'complex' and 'unfair'. They felt that there was no clear standard and that assessment was inconsistent.

However students' main concern was about the acceptability of GNVQs as an entry qualification for H.E. Indeed, 40% of the students in my sample who were applying to H.E., were also taking GCE A-Levels or other qualification to facilitate their progression. But generally-speaking, students felt that GNVQs and A-Levels did not mix. Although there may be an overlap in content e.g. A-Level Human Biology and Unit 3 GNVQ, the teaching and learning styles were so very different and they felt less comfortable with A-Levels.

Students were concerned about the lack of recognition of GNVQs by H.E.I.s as a qualification in their own right and the demands for "additionality" from H.E. Some H.E.I.s were asking for a Distinction in GNVQ plus a grade C in A-Level (e.g. for Speech Therapy).

> *"With hindsight, I would like to do GNVQ but not if I don't get into University" (prospective Speech Therapy student).*
>
> *(Fieldwork notes)*

In addition, some GNVQ students felt that some H.E.I.s treated them as second-class citizens when they were applying to H.E. There was also evidence of some concern from some H.E.I. schools of nursing that there was insufficient science in GNVQs, which resulted in 'offers' being tied to additionality (i.e. A-Level Human Biology)

CHAPTER 6

Analysis of results: Phase II Research

Chapter 6

Students' Progression to Higher Education: Analysis of results - Phase II Fieldwork

6.1 Introduction

Since 1994 when the GNVQ Phase I Pilot had completed the second year of its two-year cycle and GNVQs had been introduced into mainstream education, there was a massive increase in the number of GNVQ approved centres and student enrolments. Thus the initial 115 'pilot centres' with approximately 3,000 GNVQ students, mushroomed to 1,400 'approved centres' stimulated by Government funding incentives, and by 1993-94 a total of 83,000 students were registered on GNVQ programmes. However FEFC inspection reports indicated that progression to H.E. was a cause for concern, particularly for Health & Social Care students. (FEFC 1994; 1995)

6.2 UCAS Progression statistics - the national picture

Since 1995 there was a corollary growth in GNVQ student applications to higher education. In order to facilitate their progression to H.E. the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) guaranteed interviews to all GNVQ applicants, again reflecting the micro-political influence of officials to facilitate the implementation of Government policy. (Nash, 1995a)

In 1994, 905 students from the GNVQ Advanced Level 'Pilot' applied to H.E.I.s, of whom 772 (or 85%) received at least one offer of a place, and 463 students actually took these up. This represented 0.13% of the total student body entering higher education. (UCAS 2001). However, as Shirtliff comments:

> *"It does indeed seem both surprising and intriguing that GNVQ applicants have been luckier than the average UCAS candidate in obtaining offers."* *(Shirtliff, 1996 p. 9)*

She concludes:

> *"... it may be that a higher proportion of A-Level students than GNVQ students, including many weaker ones, try their luck with UCAS. In other words only the "best" GNVQ students apply, so that they as a group, have a stronger chance of success than the more disparate group of A-Level students."* *(Shirtliff, ibid)*

However, an alternative interpretation based on informal discussions with an HMI for Higher Education is that University vice-chancellors were 'encouraged' to ensure that GNVQ applicants were given 'offers'. There are similar echoes from some H.E. tutors in a TES article expressing concerns about 'undue pressure' from UCAS, quoted below (Nash, 1995a). If these evidence sources are accepted, it again reflects the pro-active 'behind-the-scenes' influence of government officials trying to ensure the successful implementation of Government policy - namely, enhancing GNVQs as a progression route to H.E.

By 1995 there was a ten-fold increase in applications to H.E.I.s from GNVQ Advanced students, with a total of 9,600 GNVQ students aspiring to join HE courses. In 1996, 14,030 GNVQ students were accepted for H.E., which represented 4.7% of the total accepted applicants. By 1998 these figures had increased to 19,495 and 6.8% respectively and in 2001, 27,945 GNVQ students had achieved places in H.E. (or 7.8% of the total student body). Thus in 2001, nearly one in thirteen students on H.E. courses had entered via the GNVQ route - with GNVQ as their main qualification. (UCAS 2003) See Figure 6.2.1 below.

Figure 6.2.1 GNVQ applications to H.E.

Year	Accepted applicants with GNVQ as main qualification	Total Accepted Applicants	GNVQ acceptances *
1996	14,030	295,807	4.7 %
1997	19,495	336,338	5.8 %
1998	22,329	329,788	6.8 %
1999	23,622	334,594	7.1 %
2000	25,782	339,747	7.6 %
2001	27,945	358,041	7.8 %

* As a percentage of total acceptances (Source:UCAS 2003)

Thus, looking at the situation over a 6 year period from a macro level of analysis, UCAS statistics *appear to indicate* that GNVQs were facilitating

progression to H.E. for *some* students, although the majority of students were still gaining access through the GCE A-Level route. However this does not necessarily mean that GNVQs were achieving 'parity of esteem' with GCE A-Levels, as the following extract from the TES which quotes some university tutors' perspectives illustrates.

> *"University tutors slate GNVQs*
>
> *An attack on General National Vocational Qualifications has been launched by university tutors who say they are an inadequate alternative to A-Levels as preparation for academic life.*
>
> *Criticisms of GNVQs, at the annual meeting of the Association for Science Education in Lancaster last week, have deepened a rift between the pro and anti lobbies in higher education.*
>
> *It comes at a sensitive time, just when the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) was hoping for a second year running to guarantee interviews for all GNVQ applicants to HE. Students on the new courses were guinea pigs and deserved compensatory advantages, the UCAS said.*
>
> *But some tutors have accused the UCAS of "blackmail" and of applying undue pressures. They insist no such further guarantees will be given".* *(Nash, 1995b)*

Again, the depth of underpinning knowledge within GNVQs appeared to be a major issue for progression onto some degree courses. Even the efficacy and long-term value of GNVQ students' study skills for H.E. programmes were called into question.

> *"Richard Collins, director of admissions at the University of Lancaster, dismissed the new courses as second rate. "The good do A-Levels, the rest do GNVQs" he said. Dr. Collins insisted that, while the methods of study may be "inspirational to those not suited to A-Levels", such skills were "lost or forgotten" within a year and were ill-suited to academic study.*
>
> *"The subjects where most problems will occur are in science and engineering and these will come in the transfer to university", he said. The general science courses were not good preparation for single honours, which required a clearly-defined body of knowledge.*
>
> *A sizeable minority of tutors supported Dr. Collins' views. But many challenged him, insisting they had evidence to support other routes to excellence."* (Nash, ibid.)

So where does the truth lie or are the various proponents talking about different things? What light can my research shed on these issues?

One difficulty with the UCAS statistics is that they are rather broad and do not permit a more detailed level of analysis by GNVQ programme area

and hence may obscure some critical differences between GNVQ and GCE A-Level entrants. This raises a number of related issues.

For example, to what extent are GNVQ students gaining access across the full range of H.E.I.s and courses, or are they being accepted for some courses and establishment types more than others?

Having secured places in H.E. are GNVQ students staying there or are there retention issues for this particular group? There were some indications when I was trying to establish my follow-up sample, that retention was an issue as a number of students could not be traced at the H.E.I. to which they had supposedly progressed.

A research paper by Abramson and Jones (2001) which looked at strategies for improving the retention of GNVQ students at the University of Central Lancashire, indicated that there was indeed some cause for concern.

> *"In 1998, for example, the institutional average for first year non-completion stood at 25%, whilst non-completion for Advanced GNVQ entry students stood at a disturbing 36%. These figures resulted in a rush of initiatives at all levels to enhance first year retention. Faculties created 'retention task forces', discussion papers poured onto the agenda of Academic Board sub-committees and a new Learning Development Unit, focusing on the first year experience was created. To address the issue of Advanced GNVQ retention directly, a bridging programme funded through the HEFC*

Widening Participation initiative has been piloted since 1999... ". (Abramson and Jones, 2001 p. 34)

So if H.E.I.s were providing 'bridging programmes' to facilitate the retention of GNVQ students on higher education courses, to what extent could it be said that GNVQs were *actually bridging the 'academic-vocational divide' in providing an alternative route to H.E.?*

Looking at a more micro level of analysis, to what extent did the teaching and learning styles of GNVQ programmes prepare students for independent learning within a university environment? This was a major focus of my research, and indeed, a serious issue of concern which was raised by Richard Collins, director of admissions at the University of Lancaster at a conference of the Association for Science Education in 1995. (Nash 1995a)

In particular, were GNVQ students entering H.E. with any particular advantages or disadvantages compared with students from the GCE A-Level route? Evidence from my fieldwork Phase I and II and other sources shed some light on these *general issues* later in this chapter.

Returning to the *particular issue* of student progression from GNVQ Health & Social Care programmes, although the UCAS statistics do not record progression data from separate GNVQ subject areas, they do provide some information on the type of H.E. courses which GNVQ students are joining. Consequently, it may be possible to draw some tentative conclusions about GNVQ Health & Social Care students' progression. See Figure 6.2.2 below.

Figure 6.2.2 Applicants accepted for H.E. courses (HND, Degrees etc.) with GNVQ as their main entry qualification for England 2001

Degree subject	Code	Males	Females	All Applicants
Anatomy/Physiology	B1	21	39	60
Pharmacology	B2	6	16	22
Pharmacy	B3	29	26	55
Nutrition	B4	2	15	17
Opthalmics/Audiology	B5	8	5	13
Sports Science	B6	365	138	503
Nursing	B7	36	871	907
Radiography	B8	22	59	81
Others related to medicine	B9	64	416	480
Combined courses	BB	7	11	18
Pre-clinical medicine	A1	2	6	8
Totals:		562	1602	2164

(Source: UCAS 2003)

It appears that, regardless of specific programme area, a significant number of GNVQ Advanced students (27,945) were progressing to H.E. courses (UCAS 2003).

Of these, approximately 1660 students progressed to health-related degree courses. The table above indicates that the three most popular degree course destinations recorded by UCAS were Nursing, Sports Science and Other Courses Related to Medicine. There were also significant numbers of GNVQ students progressing to Radiography, Pharmacy, Anatomy and Physiology. A very small number of students were entering pre-clinical medicine.

While it might be reasonable to infer that students progressing to Nursing and other courses related to medicine were most likely to be from GNVQ Health & Social Care programmes, some students could have done GNVQ Science.

Likewise, students progressing to Nutrition degree courses in H.E. could have done Advanced Level GNVQs in Science, Health & Social Care or even Hospitality & Catering. However, those progressing to degrees in Sports Science were more likely to have taken GNVQ Leisure & Tourism courses so these figures could be excluded.

6.3 Overview of completion/destination statistics of my cohort

Returning to my fieldwork, how did my sample of 146 GNVQ Advanced students fare regarding their completion and destination statistics?

Overall there was a 90% pass rate with 20% achieving Distinctions, 47% gaining Merits and 23% with Pass grades.

Figure 6.3.1 Overall GNVQ results for the 4 Colleges

Grade Achieved	No. of students	%
Distinction	29	20
Merit	69	47
Pass	33	23
Non-completion	15	10
Total:	146	100

These results can be further broken down to show the results for the individual colleges which are broadly similar. Some variation was evident, with College 3 gaining 64% Merits but only 7% Distinctions, but this is most likely to reflect a distortion of the small sample size of 14 students.

Figure 6.3.2 GNVQ results by individual Colleges

	College 1		**College 2**		**College 3**		**College 4**	
Grade	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
Distinction	6	21	10	24	1	7	12	20
Merit	11	38	16	38	9	64	33	54
Pass	9	31	12	29	1	7	11	18
Non-completion	3	10	4	9	3	22	5	8
Totals:	29	100	42	100	14	100	61	100

When comparing GNVQ Health & Social Care students with GNVQ Business, the Health & Social Care group achieved an overall combined

higher percentage of passes at Distinction and Merit grades (9%) : they also had a lower non-completion rate. This could reflect the different motivational levels of the two groups since 88% of the Health & Social Care students were committed to a particular career at the outset of their GNVQ course, compared with 46% of the GNVQ Business students who were "uncommitted". See Figure 6.3.3 below.

Figure 6.3.3 GNVQ results by course

GNVQ Grade	Business	%	Health & Social Care	%
Distinction	10	18	19	21
Merit	25	44	44	50
Pass	15	26	18	20
Non-completion	7	12	8	9
Totals:	57	100	89	100

Looking at the variable of age/maturity of students, my data does not support the hypothesis that mature GNVQ students achieve higher grades on average than the 17-20 age group. On the contrary, they achieved 7% fewer Distinctions but 6% more Merits compared with the 17-20 age group. See Figure 6.3.4 below.

Figure 6.3.4 GNVQ completion rates by age

GNVQ Grade	Aged 17-20	%	Aged 21+	%
Distinction	25	22	4	12
Merit	52	46	17	52
Pass	25	22	8	24
Non-completion	11	10	4	12
Totals:	113	100	33	100

However, gender differences were apparent with female students gaining 8% more Distinctions than males, and 11% more Merits, although male students gained 7% more in the Pass category than females, but they also had a 12% higher non-completion rate than girls. This may reflect the greater commitment of females to specific careers in the Health & Social Care group 88%, compared with the Business students of whom 46% were 'uncommitted'. See Figure 6.3.5 below.

Figure 6.3.5 GNVQ completion rates by gender

GNVQ Grade	Females	%	Males	%
Distinction	24	22	5	14
Merit	55	50	14	39
Pass	23	21	10	28
Non-completion	8	7	7	19
Totals:	110	100	36	100

Progression to H.E.

The final results indicated that 64% of the students in my sample progressed to HE. Of these, one third of the cohort achieved places on degree courses and nearly a quarter gaining access to diploma courses and 8% to HND programmes. A further 18% went on to employment, 5% deferred their entry and 10% were unemployed. See Figure 6.3.6 below.

Figure 6.3.6 GNVQ students' destinations

Destination	Number	%
Degree	49	33
Diploma	33	23
HND	12	8
Other	4	3
Employment	26	18
Deferred entry/re-sit	7	5
Unemployment/unknown	15	10
Totals:	146	100

An interesting finding emerged about the type of H.E.I. to which the GNVQ students in my sample were progressing. Nearly three-quarters of them obtained places at the post-1992 universities, 16% went to pre-1992 universities and 12% to Colleges of Higher Education. These figures can be further broken down by type of course as Figure 6.3.6 indicates. It may be that the former polytechnics (post-1992 establishments) are more likely

to offer vocational courses which provide a more natural progression from GNVQ programmes, than the pre-1992 universities.

6.4 Analysis of Phase II Fieldwork

Methodology

Follow-up interviews with GNVQ students who progressed to H.E./professional training in Health & Social Care was the second phase in my fieldwork. After receiving the results and destination details of the GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students in the autumn of 1997, a sample of eighteen students was selected with a view to conducting follow-up interviews with them about how they had progressed during their first year of their degree/diploma and professional training course.

The students were selected to cover the broad range of chosen careers in the field of Health and Social Care. This included degrees and diplomas in Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work, general degrees in Youth and/or Community Studies and degrees in Radiography and Occupational Therapy. Although in the original fieldwork a small number of students had expressed an interest in pursuing careers in Health Visiting, Health Promotion, Speech Therapy, the Police Force and Probation, the student destination data indicated that none had progressed into degrees or professional training in these areas, consequently these were automatically eliminated from the follow-up research. Similarly, although some students were considering careers in teaching, it was decided to exclude this area in

order to focus on the main thrust of the research, namely, progression into the field of Health and Social Care.

Since the eighteen students in my sample had progressed to a wide range of H.E.I.s which were geographically quite dispersed, it was decided to conduct telephone interviews with them as personal interviews were impractical in terms of logistics, and constraints in time and travelling costs. Indeed, it proved more feasible to invite students to participate in a focused telephone interview than try to arrange a face-to-face interview in the light of their study commitments and clinical work placements.

All students who were contacted agreed to the telephone interviews, which were tape recorded with their knowledge and permission. However, not all students were able to be followed up owing to incorrect data on their home addresses and/or telephone numbers, or because they had moved house. Seven students fell into this category. In a further four cases, students could not be traced to the H.E. establishment to which they had supposedly progressed. In addition, one college was reluctant to supply information because of the Data Protection Act, consequently students from this establishment could not be followed up.

The telephone interviews yielded some rich data about the strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ in facilitating students' progress in H.E. Six main issues emerged from the follow-up interviews.

- The extent to which GNVQ students were gaining access to H.E. and professional training;

- How they were progressing in H.E. in relation to other students on the course;
- Aspects of H.E. which GNVQ students were most confident with, and why;
- Aspects of H.E. which GNVQ students were least confident with, and why;
- The extent to which GNVQ teaching and learning styles were helping or hindering their progress in H.E., and
- The perceived value of the GNVQ and work experience in facilitating students' performance in H.E.

6.4.1 Progression to H.E. and admission requirements

All but one student in my follow-up sample gained a place at either their first or second choice H.E.I., with one student obtaining a place through the UCAS Clearing House on a general degree in Community Studies. This marked a considerable improvement on the situation regarding progression to H.E. which had been reported in inspectorate reports in 1994 and 1995 (FEFC 1994, 1995). However, from my small sample of interviews with students, progression from GNVQ courses seemed easier to the diploma in nursing courses than to degrees in O.T., Radiography and Midwifery.

There was no consistent policy evident on the entry requirements and offers made by different H.E.I.s to students in my sample. Some H.E.I.s demanded a Distinction or Merit at GNVQ while others accepted a Pass. In some cases, students were asked for 'additionality' in the form of GCE

A-Levels or GNVQ Optional and/or Additional Units. Much depended on the type of H.E.I. and the courses for which the students had applied. For example, the majority of students who had applied for Diploma in Nursing or Midwifery courses were asked to get a Merit in their GNVQ. However, where students were applying for Degree courses leading to careers in Nursing or para-medical professions such as Radiography or O.T., additionality in the form of a GCE Advanced Level in Biology was usually required.

With more general degrees, for example the B.Sc. Degree in Community Studies, some students were accepted at Clearing with a GNVQ Pass. With the Degree/Diploma in Social Work courses, offers ranged from Pass to Distinctions at GNVQ but the students' age and maturity, their motivation and the amount and range of work experience which they had undertaken were also taken into account for these courses by H.E.I.s.

An interesting dimension which emerged during the follow-up interviews with students was the variety of ways in which the "offers" were made. Most students had to attend interviews at the H.E.I., and some were requested to bring GNVQ portfolio evidence with them. Some H.E.I.s held both individual and group interviews. This was particularly evident where students applied for Social Work and Nursing courses. One H.E.I. only made offers for its Diploma in Nursing courses based on the results of telephone interviews using psychometric tests. In other cases, students were not required to attend interviews and offers were made through the post based on their UCAS application forms and references. However, most students preferred to attend an interview since this two-way

interaction enabled them to see the campus and locality, to meet tutors and to get a better understanding of the demands of the course and teaching and learning styles which they would experience.

6.4.2 Proportion of GNVQ students on the H.E. courses

It is difficult to assess the exact percentage of GNVQ students on H.E.I. courses, as neither UCAS nor the H.E.I.s which I contacted had records of this. However, a broad picture emerged from the follow-up interviews with students, as they were all very much aware of how many other GNVQ students were on their respective courses. Although this is not 'hard' statistical data it does give a snapshot of what was happening in my research group. Generally speaking, the percentage of GNVQ students on the various H.E. courses in my follow-up sample ranged from 3% to 17%. However this data is presented tentatively since it is based on information from the students interviewed rather than from any official source, and hence may not be totally reliable. Most students reportedly came from the traditional A-Level background, but there was a significant proportion of other non-standard entrants e.g. ACCESS and BTEC National Diploma students. For example out of 26 students taking a Radiography degree, 81% had done A-Levels, mostly sciences, 12% were ACCESS students and 7% had done GNVQ. It was not possible to give figures for the B.A. Degree in Community Studies as there were reportedly 'hundreds of students doing the course' across a wide range of modules, although there were 62 students who were doing the compulsory module, including 4 GNVQ students.

In general, the GNVQ students in my follow-up sample were enjoying their H.E. courses. However they were aware that they were not high fliers academically but rated their practical skills quite highly in relation to other non-GNVQ students, as the following comment illustrates:

> *... "I feel I'm pretty much in the middle. I think that academically I'm not any further than anyone else. I think there are certain areas where I feel that I may be a bit better e.g. talking to patients - knowing how to act with patients - that sort of thing - I'm more comfortable with".*
> *(MS - Radiography degree student)*

GNVQ students were most comfortable with their H.E. course where the knowledge base clearly overlapped with that of their GNVQ programme:

> *"GNVQ students are finding it easier than those who've come in with straight A Levels because a lot of modules are similar". (LT - Nursing degree student)*

My research indicated that GNVQ appeared to mesh well with most, *though not all*, of the H.E courses in my sample and that there was a good deal of continuity. This particularly applied to diploma courses in nursing and social work.

> *"I'm quite confident with the course in general because it's really an extension of what I've been taught on the GNVQ e.g. the physiology, sociology, psychology ... the*

research and ethics, which all seems to follow on from the GNVQ". (MAS - Nursing diploma student)

"They do a lot of case studies on the Diploma (in Social Work course). *And we had a lot of case studies in the GNVQ, so in that respect, I felt as though I was familiar with a lot of the teaching methods that were adopted. So that was quite an advantage, yes."*

(KB - Social Work diploma course)

6.4.3 GNVQ students' general progress on the H.E. courses

The majority of students interviewed felt that they were making sound progress during the first year on their respective H.E. courses as the following extracts illustrate:

"I feel that I'm doing very well actually. I've achieved quite good grades academically and I'm doing quite well practically. So I'm actually very happy with the way things are going at the moment. We get percentages at the end of the first year... They do some sort of formula and you come out with an overall average. And I've got an average of 68.4% in the year - which is a borderline First ... so I'm hoping to maintain that this year." (LW - Midwifery degree student)

In some cases students cited the practical aspects of the course and communication skills which they felt most comfortable with.

(I'm doing) ... *"Pretty all right really... the same as everyone else.. I've done a few assignments and achieved a couple of two-two's and a two-one... We're graded like a degree now... We've done a few seminars and presentations to the whole class and I've had some good grades for that... I've been told I've got a natural ability to speak to other people".*

(MS - Radiography degree student)

However, essay-writing skills and the initial research process was challenging for some students as well as presenting assignments to the specification required in H.E., as the following comments illustrate.

"I think I'm doing very well with the different modules ... I've improved my essay-writing skills over the last year and the way I deal with them ... The process, the research process is longer, but I've improved the way I've approached them. I am finding myself stretched a little bit."

(LT - Nursing degree student)

"Good progress ... I think I managed quite well in the first year. Some of the assignments were quite difficult ... to get into them and do them the correct way they wanted you to do them." *(AP- Nursing diploma student)*

However, some students admitted feeling 'stretched' by the academic level and the pace of their H.E. course as well as the lack of structure and 'learning guidelines'. This particularly applied to science-based degree courses.

"I think my first year (in H.E.) was very difficult for me ... especially the different learning techniques... GNVQ was more relaxed and you had the guidelines on what they were actually looking for... Whereas with the degree it was much more open-ended ... It was very much exams and tests in the first year of the degree and you had to pass the first year to carry on to the second year". (CA O.T. degree student)

But some students on the Project 2000 Diploma in Nursing course appeared to be struggling when asked to comment on their personal progress as the following extract illustrates:

"Not much. They are concentrating more on the academic side of your essay writing and it's getting used to the standard they want from you... I'm getting there slowly, but not as fast as I would have hoped."

(VR- Diploma in Nursing student)

But whether this was a function of the student's ability or the change in the teaching and learning styles on the H.E. course itself, is difficult to evaluate, although students making these comments had usually passed GNVQ at Merit level.

However, one student who had achieved a Distinction in her GNVQ and had progressed onto a B.Sc. Degree in Nursing course, felt that she had made the wrong choice both in respect of the university and the course.

"I initially progressed to 'Q' University where I started a B.Sc. in Nursing Studies. Then after a year, I transferred to 'H' University where I started on an Advanced Diploma in Clinical Nursing".

"Can you say why you moved?"

"Well, I didn't do my research well enough ... and I didn't attend an interview. The nursing degree that was offered at 'Q' University was a very science-based degree and it wasn't until I started that I realised how science-based it was... It involved a lot of micro-biology and bio-chemistry modules... It was very science-based. It was very difficult and it was very exam-orientated... I did struggle with all the science-based modules and the fact that they used exams at every point of the course to assess your competencies - that's why I subsequently changed to 'H' University, which was assessed more on an assignment level". (AMB - Nursing degree student)

"So you didn't feel that you were making much progress then?"

"Not a lot to be honest because I found it so hard there. Initially I thought twice as to whether I was capable of doing a degree and actually completing it. I never had any queries with the practical side. But obviously, because I found it a very difficult course at 'Q' I was very despondent ... it was so incredibly hard." (AMB - Nursing degree student)

In some cases, where H.E.I.s were aware of such potential problems, they had endeavoured to ease the transition of students into H.E. with a bridging programme either in the form of a concentrated summer school prior to the start of the degree course, or a graduated first year with no examinations and with special classes to assist students with a range of essay-writing and study skills. The former was evident with the Midwifery degree where it was recognised that students from diverse academic backgrounds might struggle without particular underpinning knowledge in areas such as biochemistry, anatomy and physiology. The latter strategy was offered on a social work degree course where students were predominantly mature, direct entry from work or with non-traditional entry qualifications e.g. ACCESS or GNVQ.

Such bridging strategies were recognised and valued by students as the following comments illustrate:

> *" I think the way our degree course was set up it was about preparing us for our second and third years. I think that GNVQ prepared me a lot for the first year - but the actual degree set out to ensure that it was a nice process into the degree so that it wasn't too much of a struggle. It was quite a steady process. You know they prepared you throughout the first year ... it was a gradual process. I didn't find it difficult in the first year...*
>
> *... A lot of the students were mature students who had come from work rather than an academic background, therefore compared with them I didn't really struggle because the tutors progressed us into it". (EM - Social Work degree student)*

6.4.4 Perceived differences between GNVQ and H.E. teaching and learning styles

Indeed, the students were aware of significant differences in the teaching and learning styles particularly on the degree courses, and the increasing intellectual demands of H.E. compared with their former GNVQ course. It was much more intense, pitched at a higher level of knowledge and involved a lot more research using a range of books. It was also usually more career-specific and the required essay length was much longer than students' previous GNVQ assignments.

> *"Because of the change of learning style (that) I was doing on the Degree course compared to the GNVQ, I found I had to do a lot more research and I was having to do essays ... which was quite a new thing ... quite daunting for me ... having to produce a 2,000 or 3,000 word essay for the degree and also having to do exams again with which I wasn't familiar. Obviously I had had to do exams for my GCSEs, but with GNVQ the exam conditions were different ... it was multiple-choice. I felt that doing the degree in H.E. I was under a lot more pressure and the work was a lot more demanding".*
>
> *(CA - O.T. degree student)*

> *"There was a big difference. You certainly felt the higher level ... the work was a lot more demanding... "*
>
> *(EM - Social Work degree student)*

> *"You don't get as many assignments as we did from the GNVQ ... but my H.E. assignments have more depth to them and take more time ... and you need to do more reading and research. So it's still a big work load, but not as many little assignments as GNVQ". (VR - Nursing Diploma student)*

The most noticeable difference as one mature student pointed out was in the depth of knowledge required by the H.E. course.

> *"Yes... The depth of knowledge. You could just skim the surface with GNVQ, but you needed to go into a lot more detail and read many more books with H.E. With GNVQ if you got one good book, that would do, possibly two. But with H.E. you really need to read everyone's point of view before you can make a start on an essay".*
>
> *(ME - mature student Community Studies degree)*

> *" It was not only the exams but the contrast in the written work ... doing long essays, exams and the stress involved with the referencing and things ... that was all completely new... With the written work and things, we found it quite tough going. Definitely." (CA - O.T. degree student)*

6.4.5 Students' perceptions about the value of doing work experience placements

All but one of the students interviewed felt that their work experience placements during their GNVQ course had been invaluable in helping them with their professional training in H.E. This was particularly the case where the work placement was a specialist one and related directly to the student's chosen career. However where placements had been more generic e.g. social care in residential homes or with children in primary schools or not directly related to the student's chosen career, there was less 'value-added' reported. For example, one mature student whose chosen career was housing management, had not found much benefit in working in an infants' school and a centre for people with severe learning difficulties. However this response was not typical.

Much also depended on the degree to which students had been accepted in their work placement setting and extent to which they had been welcomed and involved by the staff there. This fact emerged during the Phase 1 of my research as well as in the follow-up stage.

> *"I did a placement in Midwifery - working on the Ward and one with a Health Visitor. The Health Visiting one wasn't too bad because it was more one-to-one and it's difficult to ignore you when you're in the car with them. But on the Ward, I just felt in the way. We weren't encouraged to do anything or participate ... because there were actual student nurses (like myself now) and they got preference... I was excluded ... so I talked to mothers with new babies, rather than mix with the*

staff. To be quite honest, it made me think at some points whether I wanted to go on into those careers ... to nursing or midwifery. But I must admit the difference now when I'm on a Ward ... I can't believe it. It's brilliant".

(MAS - Nursing Diploma student)

The main gains from GNVQ work placements were the developing of students' interpersonal skills with patients and clients, and their confidence knowing how to act in a clinical setting. On the whole, work experience, even negative ones, had helped to crystallise students' career identities and had given them confidence in their clinical work on their H.E. courses as the following comments illustrate:

"Over the 2 year GNVQ course, I had six chances to have a feel of what it's like to work in a hospital. That really helped me. ....When I went into placement, talking to patients - knowing how to act with patients ... that sort of thing I'm more confident with". (MS - Radiography degree student)

*"I worked in a Head Injuries Day Centre, then in a primary school and finally I had a placement with Social Services O.T. Department. We weren't really allowed to do the latter but because my Mum's friend was an O.T., I was allowed to go in for two weeks. Yes. they ... (*work placements*) helped me. They gave me experience of different areas of work that I had not done before ... the understanding and practical experience with clients and doing the job."*

(CS - O.T. degree student)

"I had three placements during my GNVQ course. One week on a female surgical ward, a week with a Health Visitor in a Health Centre and two weeks on a children's ward ... They helped me? Definitely... They prepared me for actually being in the job I wanted to do". (LT - Nursing degree student)

One student contacted a local hospital to do a placement in their O.T. Department, but was turned down owing to staff shortages. So she became a volunteer on the wards instead which proved most beneficial because of the range of clients and medical problems that she covered.

" I did my work experience working on different wards in the Hospital as part of my GNVQ and that was more beneficial at the time because I had the scope of all different types of work ... and I spent some time in Radiography, and up on the wards ...I really, really enjoyed that, but I still wanted to do O.T.

... I also worked at X College with people with learning difficulties. Then I worked with the younger children in the creche (laugh!) but found that wasn't for me ... And I did some work experience with the elderly people, which I enjoyed. So I worked with different age groups and people - which was very good, and even though I didn't get a chance to work within the O.T. Department ... I think that made me stronger in what I wanted to do". (CA - O.T. degree student)

Work placements were not only important for enhancing students' confidence but in developing the student's professional value base which was necessary for working with particular client groups.

> *"The placement side of GNVQ was a positive thing because they prepared me for the placements on my degree course ... Work experience gave me more confidence when I went into the degree...I had an understanding of the work environment ... developing my values started to come into play and understanding the different client groups. Yes, the placements were quite beneficial for my degree."*
>
> *(EM - Social Work degree student)*

6.4.6 Aspects of the H.E. course with which GNVQ students felt most confident

GNVQ students were most confident with knowledge and skills which they had covered before in their GNVQ courses, in particular - the social sciences, the work placements; patient care; communicating with patients; group work, researching and computer skills as the following extracts illustrate.

> *"I felt particularly confident with the psychology side because we did a lot of psychology in the GNVQ. The law and ethics part was very useful too, and the sociology. In fact I found the GNVQ to be very useful ... Nursing seemed to be the next step from the things that we had covered in the GNVQ. It was very helpful."* *(TT - Nursing diploma student)*

"I'm particularly confident with patient care ... talking to strangers, knowing what to say and how to act in a hospital setting... Yes, communicating with patients - which is quite an important part of this course".

(MS - Radiography degree student)

"With the GNVQ I could use my experiences in the hospital and relate it back ... whereas with the degree, you had to know your stuff and you had to know the theory. The GNVQ was more practical and that suited me better. However, I thrived on my practical assessments at the University because that's what I enjoy". *(CA - O.T. degree student)*

In some cases, students felt most confident with the information-seeking and planning skills which they had acquired on their GNVQ course.

"The planning and motivation of working through assignments... I feel confident in planning an assignment and getting it done on time and making sure I'm including things I need to include." *(LW- Midwifery degree student)*

"We had a lot of practice at gathering information and deciding which aspects were relevant during the GNVQ. And finding out how to get information...and where to get the best information. I've met students at this university who've never heard of 'Social Trends' ... who don't know where they can get information from and who don't know properly how to use a

library. There are people who have done the full year and still can't use the catalogue".

(ME - mature student - Community Studies degree)

Thus it appeared that the first year of the degree and diploma courses involved some repetition of the content of the GNVQ. However, this was providing reinforcement, engendering confidence and the consolidation of learning, rather than duplication and frustration among most students. In this context, and at this level, GNVQ was helping to bridge the academic-vocational divide.

"Yes, initially the work we did in the GNVQ was duplicated in HE. In fact it was a bit tedious really. But as the HE course has progressed I feel we're doing it in more depth. The first six months were repetitive, but it gave me a lot of confidence that we did already know something and I could build on it... It sort of ... got us gradually into higher education without too much panic, I suppose". (MAS - Nursing Diploma student)

GNVQ students also felt that they had benefited from training in computer and research skills as the following comment illustrates:

"And certain subjects such as Psychology, Sociology and Social Policy - I certainly felt that I had a good grounding from the GNVQ course. And I.T. skills definitely, because although we did a module on I.T. skills on the Diploma for a lot of people who were not computer literate at all, it was extremely difficult for some people to get to grips with,

whereas we had done quite extensive work on the GNVQ. So that was certainly a bonus, and the research skills ... definitely, because we did a research module on the GNVQ course. I felt quite confident with those skills."

(KB - Social Work diploma student)

6.4.7 Aspects of the H.E. course with which GNVQ students were having difficulties

My research indicated that students in my sample were having greatest difficulties with science subjects such as micro-biology, physics, anatomy and chemistry. This finding was also supported by comments from the H.E. course tutors, which is reported in the next section. Although the GNVQ had given students *some* background knowledge across *some* of these areas, there was certainly a shortfall in the range and extent of the knowledge in comparison to A-Level students who had studied the discrete subjects.

"I think that I struggled with some subjects and not others. The GNVQ was good because it had lots of different modules - so you did a bit of everything. But the first year of the Degree was physiology and anatomy-based and sociology/psychology based. I had done a bit of sociology and psychology - so I felt O.K. with that. But I felt a bit disadvantaged compared with people who had done biology, physiology and anatomy-specific A-Levels because I had not done that, and that would have been very useful." *(CS - O.T. degree student)*

"Patho-physiology in Midwifery. I feel personally that I'm lacking basic physiology." (LW- Midwifery degree student)

"The Chemistry part ... Well, we didn't really do a great deal of Chemistry in the GNVQ and I hadn't really done Chemistry at school to the extent that we were doing it in Nursing".
(TT - Nursing Diploma student)

This situation was exacerbated when two other variables were present, namely, where the H.E.I. was very examination orientated and also used mass lectures to deliver the knowledge to two hundred plus students. This provided such a contrast to the teaching and learning styles within GNVQs, and presented a major hurdle for some GNVQ students, as the following comments illustrate:

"Well, obviously, with the GNVQ it was all done with small groups 15-20 students in our tutor group and that's what we were pretty much used to... But because the main focus in H.E. in the first year at 'Q' University was these massive lectures ... and we're talking about 200 - 300 people in a mass lecture ... you'd have student nurses, midwives, undergraduate micro-biology students - you know doing straight micro-biology degrees ... so you would get a real mix, including nutritionists, dieticians, you'd get the whole spectrum of students in these mass lectures." (AMB -Nursing degree student)

"Were you able to take notes and abstract key points from these lecture situations?"

> *"If I could understand the content, yes. But a lot of the time the micro-biology and macro-nutrients and stuff ... involved a lot of bio-chemistry. However, I never did straight Biology, straight Chemistry or Physics at school ... I did a mishmash of all of it and found that science-wise, it was very difficult to grasp what was going on...*
> *And in that mass lecture situation, you can't stop the lecturer and say - 'Oh could you just explain that?' - because there are 300 people there. Yes, that was quite difficult. And a lot of the time in those mass lectures, I really didn't understand the subject matter. It was very difficult."*
> *(AMB -Nursing degree student)*

'How did you feel you were getting on in comparison with other students on the course e.g. 'A' level students. Were they struggling? Some of them?'

> *"No, rarely, no. They seemed to be O.K. I think it was the whole exam thing. They seemed to be a lot more up on it than I was, obviously coming from a GNVQ background. They were more geared up to the University course at 'Q' because it was all exams... I found it quite hard ... and failed a few exams. It was getting to the point where I think that if I hadn't persevered and transferred back to 'H', then I could quite easily have given it all up." (AMB - Nursing degree student)*

The combination of examinations, large lectures and a vast body of knowledge to absorb affected other GNVQ students on degree courses too.

> *"It was not only the exams but the contrast in the written work and actually having lectures ... quite large lectures ... And with the GNVQ you do it in blocks but with the degree we have to cram so much in ... the sociology, the anatomy, the physiology ... there were lots of things going on ... lots to take in all the time, which I wasn't used to doing. Maybe if I had done A-Levels and had a few other subjects, I would have been used to it".* *(CA - O.T. degree student)*

However, in some cases, where students had focused early on a career and had chosen to do an additional 'A' Level or GCSE alongside their GNVQ, this 'additionality' facilitated their progress on their H.E. course, particularly in nursing or the para-medical professions, as the following extract illustrates:

> *"Well, I didn't find Anatomy, Biology or Physiology a problem - but that may have been because I did Human Physiology alongside the GNVQ as a GCSE in my last year at College ... so I was quite up on the anatomy and physiology. In school, it was all Combined Science GCSE, but I chose to do Human Physiology to give me the background knowledge before I went to University."* *(TT -Nursing Diploma student)*

Examinations proved a major hurdle for some GNVQ students in my sample, though not all. Much depended on the teaching and learning styles adopted by the H.E.I.s. Generally-speaking, the H.E.I.s fell into two main categories: those where teaching and learning was predominantly assignment-based with few, if any examinations in the first year of the course. These H.E.I.s tended to be post-1992 universities, namely, the former polytechnics and usually involved the diploma in nursing or social work courses. Secondly, H.E.I.s where the emphasis was on delivering substantive knowledge, usually science-based, which was formally tested in several three hour unseen written examinations, usually at the end of each semester. This mode of delivery was most evident in traditional universities and on degree courses such as nursing, midwifery, radiography and O.T.

The following comment was made by a GNVQ student on a nursing degree course, who, although she had gained a Distinction in her GNVQ, found the combination of mass lectures delivering discrete subject knowledge and frequent examinations too much to cope with at her chosen H.E.I.. She left after the first year and transferred to a nursing diploma course at a different H.E.I. where the teaching and learning styles were more assignment-based, which she found more compatible to her needs.

> *"I mean there were the exams... You'd do a whole semester or a whole module in a particular subject (and there wasn't that with GNVQ), ... and trying to revise a whole three months worth of lectures and knowing what to revise and all those sorts of things was quite troublesome because you wouldn't have any indicators what the ground the exams would be on. It*

was just a micro-biology exam and micro-nutrients ... just a huge file of lecture notes, half of it didn't make sense and I'd have to try to revise from them for the exams and it wasn't really happening." *(AMB -Nursing degree student)*

In reflecting on this experience the student concluded:

"I think GNVQ prepared me very well for the 'H' University course, because they are more assignment-based and they only have one lot of exams which they run at 18 months after the common foundation exams ... But 'H' were very good because they would say to you 'This is basically what you need to start thinking of for the exams' ... So they would give you a bit of an indication on what your exam questions would be. Not that they would give you the questions - but give you the general idea what topic areas to revise."

(AMB -Nursing degree student)

I have no data on *other* GNVQ students who may have dropped out of their H.E. courses during their first year because of not coping with the subject knowledge and examinations. However, other research indicates that non-completion of GNVQ students in HE was indeed a problem. (Abramson and Jones, 2001) and this needs further investigation.

Other degree students found the combination of subject knowledge and examinations challenging as the following dialogue illustrates:

> *"Patho-physiology in midwifery. I feel personally that I'm lacking basic Physiology."* (LW - Midwifery degree student)

"So it's the subject-area rather than the actual exam that is bothering you?"

> *"The two combined to be honest with you. I don't like exams. I've always done O.K. in exams, but I prefer to be assessed in an assignment way or practical way - not a three hour paper with essay-type questions."* (LW - Midwifery degree student)

The most difficult aspect of the degree, diploma and professional training courses which all GNVQ students cited, was essay writing. Indeed, the analytical skills of breaking down an essay title into its component parts, reading and abstracting evidence from a wide range of sources and synthesising an answer into a coherent argument in the form of an essay, proved a challenge to GNVQ students. It was these skills with which the GNVQ had helped the students least and proved to be one of the most critical things for H.E.I.s to address with their new students.

> *"I think the essay-writing was a weakness initially, not having done much essay-writing on the GNVQ course... Yes, my main weakness was essay-construction to begin with ... although I feel that I overcame it."* (KB - Social Work degree student)

> *"Essay-writing... it's just a completely different style of writing from College. You need to do your referencing and lots more books to read. And they ask for it to be typed up on*

the computer ... or if it's hand-written, double-space it. It's just at College they accepted my work, but in H.E. I'm getting comments like: 'Reads too much like a story. Child-like style of writing'. So it's a question of trying to mature my style a bit." *(VR - Diploma in Nursing student)*

"I found assignment writing/essay writing most difficult... trying to make sure that it was structured correctly. Assignment writing and reading are not necessarily my strong points unfortunately. It's one of those things and it's why I chose GNVQ rather than A-Levels".

(AP - Nursing diploma student)

"We didn't have exams in the first year, but with essay-writing, that was always a bit difficult because we hadn't really been prepared for that during the GNVQ... Referencing - that was taught on the GNVQ but it was a different structure for the degree. I required a lot of assistance. I went to special classes during the degree to do writing skills and referencing". *(EM- Social Work degree student)*

Nevertheless, it appeared to be a transitory problem for most of the students in my sample: it was a learning challenge which they generally met depending on the extent of help and additional support that they received from the H.E.I.. However, many GNVQ students not only had problems with essay-writing, but with mastering the referencing requirements in H.E. although generally-speaking H.E.I. tutors addressed these worries as the following comments demonstrate.

*"Learning the structure of essay-writing in a different way to what the GNVQ was, was difficult. Well, it was a lot different in style and using a new reference system which I hadn't used before in the GNVQ took a while to learn. And the essay length was a lot longer as well 3,500 to 5,000 word essays ... But they (*the H.E. Tutors*) were very good at teaching us the way they wanted the essays written ... Yes, we had lots of preparation". (TT - Nursing Diploma student)*

"The only thing that initially got us into a panic was the referencing for essays .. that was something we did not do on GNVQs ... and the structure of an essay. They really focused on it when we first arrived because we were a bit panic-struck about all this referencing. But we soon got used to it."
(MAS -Nursing Diploma student)

"I knew the basics of referencing, but that's one area that definitely needs to be addressed in GNVQ because it's something that shouldn't be a problem. But for six months of the first year we all found it quite a challenge - which we shouldn't have had to worry about."
(LW - Midwifery degree student)

6.4.8 Perceived usefulness of the GNVQ for their H.E. course.

Most students found their GNVQ course very useful in facilitating their transition to H.E. It gave them a good grounding in a wide range of

knowledge and skills and, with the exception of the essay-writing and referencing problems mentioned above, it prepared them well for H.E. Generally speaking, there was a good 'mesh' between the underpinning subject knowledge in the GNVQ and the H.E. courses, and the GNVQ had given the students useful training in research skills and experience of group work as the following extracts demonstrate:

> *"I felt the GNVQ was quite a good stepping-stone to the Diploma in Social Work - they weren't very far apart really."*
>
> *(KB - Social Work diploma student)*

> *"The GNVQ course prepared me very well... With the courses being similar in many ways, I don't think I'd be where I am now if I hadn't done the GNVQ course. GNVQ helped me with the type of learning that I'm experiencing in H.E. My tutors (in F.E.) really helped me with group work. I don't think I'd be where I am now without that help or the course ... I wouldn't have been prepared enough for it. It really did help".*
>
> *(LT - Nursing degree student)*

> *"I think that just doing the GNVQ was brilliant groundwork for me ... especially for my transition from doing my GCSEs and because the GNVQ incorporates such a wide and varied research and a lot more group work, it prepared me well for my H.E. course".* *(CA - O.T. degree student)*

> *"The GNVQ was quite good. It certainly helped me. I did A-Levels for one year and didn't do particularly well. I wanted*

to do something health-related so I had a talk with my Tutor and she suggested that I try the GNVQ course and do an A-Level with it. So it all worked out for me. I did A-Level Human Biology and got a grade E".

(MS - Radiography degree student)

Preparation in time management was another aspect of the GNVQ course which was identified and valued by GNVQ students, as the following comment illustrates:

"I think it prepared me well for my Nursing Diploma course because the GNVQ is a lot of work to get done in two years. I think it prepared me in my time management skills, definitely. It gave me a nice basic background for the Project 2000 course and it covered the psychology, biology and sociology factors and it also helped me having the practical side of GNVQ because that helped me go onto the Ward as a new student. So I think it prepared me well."

(TT - Nursing Diploma student)

It was evident from some students that the modular approach in GNVQs and short external tests of GNVQs had given them confidence to proceed in small progressive steps.

"I think that from doing my GCSEs I became slightly more relaxed, not having a big exam at the end ... whereas I quite liked the style of having little exams (GNVQ tests) during the term and I think that being able to pass those little modules

gave me the confidence to move on... I just preferred that type of learning than an exam at the end of the whole year, which was quite daunting". *(CA - O.T. degree student)*

"The second year of the GNVQ course at 'Y' College helped a lot with my confidence. The course at 'Y' College changed me a lot... I'd recommend others to do the GNVQ course because it's good preparation if you want to go into this kind of career". *(LT- Nursing degree student)*

Although not intentionally designed for mature students, evidence from my research indicated that some colleges were using GNVQ courses as a 'return to learn' course for mature students, which was also helping to bridge the academic-vocational divide. In reply to the question: "Do you feel that your GNVQ course prepared you for your H.E. course?" one mature student replied:

"Yes. Definitely. It brought me back into study. I had only been out of studying for a couple of years but the course that I'd done before was at GCSE level, so that wasn't too taxing... I do think that the GNVQ was very useful. The worst thing about the GNVQ was the performance criteria etc. which was difficult to grasp. But saying that, as a qualified practitioner now, I'm doing NVQ with the assistant O.T's and I'm actually going on an NVQ assessors' day tomorrow and I know that it will help me doing that because it's performance criteria again, which I'll have a very good understanding of from doing it myself at College." *(CS - O.T. degree student)*

In some respects the GNVQ course had given students a head-start over other students in their first year in H.E.. This had the effect of boosting their confidence at a very vulnerable time and easing them into their new teaching and learning environment.

> *"Having the chance in the GNVQ to do different placements was very useful ... yes.*
> *The coursework, researching, computer skills ... that was excellent because I was more advanced than most students on the O.T. course in these respects". (CA - O.T. degree student)*

> *"It's certainly given us the grounding. I mean a lot of the subjects I did in GNVQ we're doing now, but in greater depth. So at least I've heard of some of the things that we're talking about and I've got a very basic knowledge before they start the lectures".*
> *(ME- mature student - Community Studies degree)*

> *"Yes, GNVQ helped me in the subjects we covered. Also doing the grading sheets. It's perhaps made me a bit more resourceful about where to get information from. When we get together to talk about the essays, the other students always say 'You always know what to do and where to go for information'. But it's only through doing this on the GNVQ e.g. going to the Health Authority, different Councils, interviewing a dietician..." (MAS -Nursing Diploma student)*

However, my research indicated that GNVQs helped students *least* with essay writing, referencing and coping with large lecture situations. They were not accustomed to note-taking in a lecture environment and were somewhat daunted by this.

> *"GNVQ didn't prepare me for the large lecture of the kind that I'm experiencing now". (LT - Nursing degree student)*

> *"The GNVQ work-load was sufficient and I managed it. It's the same as at University, but I think they could have given you more study-skills lessons in the GNVQ and taught you more about your essay-writing for when you go on to H.E. and make it an option". (VR - Diploma in Nursing student)*

> *"All the form-filling in GNVQ didn't help at all at H.E. level. And some things were missing at GNVQ which would have helped at H.E. ... how to reference properly. That's very important at H.E. But we were never taught the skills at GNVQ. And we never actually got any training on how to form the basic structure of an essay, or how to analyse or synthesise ... that was quite a shock when we went into H.E."*
> *(ME -mature student - Community Studies degree)*

The following extracts sum up the value of GNVQ in helping to bridge the academic-vocational divide from the students' perspective:

> *"Overall, the GNVQ was extremely useful for me. The teachers on the GNVQ course were extremely directed.*

towards health care jobs and made it very easy for me to access the Nursing Boards and helped me with my applications. Overall it was a fantastic learning curve for me and it was really very useful for my Higher Education. I would recommend it to anyone wishing to go into a practical nursing-type job." *(TT - Nursing diploma student)*

"I thoroughly enjoyed both courses. (GNVQ and HE) *The GNVQ - I was not very familiar with it when I embarked upon it, but I found it an absolutely brilliant course, and it was extremely informative. I think for anyone who is going on to do O.T., nursing, social work, probation work ... whatever it may be, it was certainly very, very good grounding and I do know there was quite a debate about the comparison with A-Levels etc. and it certainly did spark a healthy debate on my H.E. course. But I certainly benefited from it and I can only say that to people ... that I had a good experience and felt that it helped me immensely. I've kept all my portfolio work from it, which I still look at now, even now I'm working."*

(KB- Social Work diploma student)

"I found the GNVQ course really helpful. It helped me with all my subjects and with my computer skills, communication skills and with lots of different subjects ... and bridging the University course - it was really helpful. I didn't realise at the time how helpful it would be." (AP - Nursing diploma student)

Thus to conclude: compatibility between the teaching and learning styles of GNVQs and the H.E.I. appeared to be a crucial factor in facilitating students' progress on their H.E. course. Perhaps the GNVQ Distinction student who changed H.E.I.s after her first year on a degree course should have the last word:

> *"I think the GNVQ was a good course. It enabled so many people who aren't good at exams to progress. It's a shame to see people not progress because of the pressure of exams. I think I was very fortunate that the Advanced Diploma in Clinical Nursing that 'H' University offered was so much more suited to me.*
>
> *... I don't know whether this was because the two education centres* (the F.E. College and the H.E.I.) *were close together and worked together. It just seemed that to progress from the GNVQ course to 'H' University ... was a much more linear thing than trying to take myself off to a much more academic university that 'Q' was.*
>
> *... 'H' has got a good reputation for offering good vocational courses and nursing, being a vocational course, 'H' has definitely got the right idea. And GNVQ did help me for the way 'H' subsequently developed my progression .... my knowledge and skills. The GNVQ helped me immensely for the*

type of course that 'H' ran ... But it didn't help me at 'Q' University. *(AMB-Nursing degree student)*

6.5 Summary

Higher Education to-day is a very different picture compared to 1963. It is no longer the privilege of a minority elite. Government policy to expand H.E. towards a 'mass' system model has resulted in substantial increases in full-time students participating in higher education. But notwithstanding this policy combined with the policy of widening participating, class factors are still operating. The evidence indicates that funding mechanisms, student loans and changing patterns of access has resulted in higher education becoming increasingly differentiated by class, with middle class students predominantly attending the better resourced and more prestigious institutions. As Trowler concludes:

> *"The professional classes constitute 20% of the population; 80 per cent of young people from these classes go on to higher education. For the least skilled only 10% go on to higher education and in no other social groups does the figure exceed 50%.....* Furthermore -
>
> *Post-1992 universities attract 60 per cent more applications from these groups than pre-1992 universities do. Despite three years of the Labour government's widening participation policy, the number of students from unskilled backgrounds had risen by only five hundred by the year 2000: from five thousand in 1995."* *(Trowler 2002 p.81)*

This evidence is also supported by the findings of my own research where progression to H.E. by GNVQ students was predominantly to the post-1992 institutions with students choosing to attend local H.E. provision due to financial constraints and being able study while living at home. Thus the Government's policy on widening participation has only partly worked.

Evidence from the UCAS statistics over the 6 year period 1996-2001 indicates that student progression from GNVQ programmes to higher education increased by one and two thirds - from 4.7% in 1996 to 7.8% in 2001 *of the total HE entrants*, although the majority of entrants were still from traditional A-Level backgrounds. These figures were partly achieved through positive discrimination in favour of GNVQ applicants at H.E.I.s guaranteeing them interviews and offers. However, this data is generic and covers *all* GNVQ programmes: no separate figures are available for GNVQ Health & Social Care applicants. Some data is available on the *type* of HE course to which GNVQ students progress, but some of these students could have come from GNVQ Science, GNVQ Leisure & Tourism or GNVQ Hospitality & Catering as well as Health & Social Care programmes. Nevertheless, it appears that a significant number of GNVQ Advanced students were progressing to Nursing, Radiography, and other courses related to medicine, and on balance it is likely that most of these would be from GNVQ Health & Social Care programmes.

But what conclusions can be drawn from my research data and how can these address some of my Key Questions?

(KQ1) To what extent were GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students gaining entry into H.E. and professional training?

(SQ1) How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care - on its own, or in combination with GCE A-Levels or other 'additionality'?

(SQ2) Was this GNVQ more acceptable in some H.E. establishments than others?

(SQ3) If GNVQ Health & Social Care students progressed to H.E., how did *they themselves* feel that they had coped with their H.E. course, namely, with the academic content and teaching and learning styles there?

Evidence from my research indicates that 64% of students in my sample progressed to H.E., but progression was predominantly to the post-1992 universities and included degree, diploma and HND courses. The majority of GNVQ students in my sample gained access to either their first or second choice of H.E.I., but no consistent policy was evident on entry requirements and offers made by H.E.I.s. Some establishments required a Distinction or a Merit at GNVQ, while others accepted a Pass. However, progression seemed easier to diploma courses in nursing, and social work and to general degree courses than to degrees in O.T., radiography and midwifery - where 'additionality' in the form of a GCE Advanced level, was usually required. Indeed, 40% of students in my original sample (Phase I fieldwork) took at least one A-Level alongside their GNVQ

Health & Social Care course in order to enhance their chances of progression to H.E.

This 'additionality' requirement did cause GNVQ students some anxiety, but with hindsight it was justified to enhance their depth of knowledge and understanding of subjects like biology, chemistry and physics particularly on para-medical courses, since it was these subjects with which they frequently struggled. My research supports the concerns of some H.E. admissions tutors that GNVQs "were not good preparation for single honours courses which required a clearly-defined body of knowledge." (Nash 1995a)

GNVQs appear to be more acceptable in the post-1992 universities. However, this is not surprising as the former polytechnics are more likely to offer vocational degree courses which provide the most likely or suitable progression from GNVQ programmes, rather than straight degree courses. But having progressed to H.E., there are certainly some concerns about GNVQ student retention rates (Abramson and Jones,2001)

So what are the issues affecting the retention rates of GNVQ students? At a more micro level of analysis, to what extent have the teaching and learning styles of GNVQ programmes prepared students for independent learning within a university environment?

Did GNVQ students enter H.E. with any particular advantages or disadvantages compared with students from the GCE A-Level route?

This brings us back to some more of my Key Questions.

(KQ2) How did GNVQ Advanced students feel about their GNVQ teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for HE?

(SQ1) What was the 'value-added' of GNVQs from their perspectives?

(SQ2) Did the students identify any particular limitations of the GNVQ curriculum for progression to HE?

From the students' perspective, the majority of them in my follow-up sample felt that they had made good progress by the end of their first year in H.E., but they were aware of the higher level work and they felt 'stretched' by the pace. Their GNVQ Health & Social Care programmes had facilitated their progression to some extent by providing useful underpinning knowledge of both academic subjects and professional values and had given them confidence in using computers, in researching assignments and communicating with patients and clients. However, their main difficulties were developing the required essay-writing skills for H.E., coping with science-based modules, mass lecture teaching situations and adjusting to three hour, unseen written examinations.

GNVQs have provided an alternative route to H.E. for *some* students. However, the suitability of GNVQ for H.E. depended *both* on the type and standard of the H.E. programme and the teaching and learning styles embedded within it. Where H.E. programmes focused on disseminating

knowledge of particular science-based subjects e.g. anatomy, physics, micro-biology, and where these were delivered by large lectures to multi-disciplinary students with frequent hurdles involving three hour unseen examinations, in these circumstances, GNVQ Health & Social Care students fared less well than their A-Level counterparts.

GNVQ students fared best where they progressed to vocationally-focused diploma and degree courses in H.E.I.s, which provided a natural extension of their GNVQ course and where the H.E. teaching and learning styles meshed with those which they experienced on their GNVQ programmes. GNVQs did not prepare students as well as GCE A-Levels in essay-writing skills, analysis and synthesis, or note-taking in mass lecture situations and unseen examinations. It is fair to conclude that the GNVQ curriculum provided a 'stepping-stone' to H.E.: there were some substantial gaps or shortfalls that GNVQ students needed to make up in order to successfully function on H.E. courses. GNVQs were a good stepping-stone to higher education, but not a complete bridge.

CHAPTER 7

Analysis of results: Phase III Research

Chapter 7

Perspectives from Higher Education: Analysis of results - Phase III Research

7.1 Introduction

There has been a mixed reaction nationally from H.E. tutors to GNVQ students who have progressed to H.E. On the one hand, an article by Nash in the Times Educational Supplement (TES) in 1995 claimed that some university tutors maintain that GNVQs are ... "an inadequate alternative to A-Levels as preparation for academic life" (Nash, 1995 p.5) and clearly, the new vocational qualifications have not achieved 'parity of esteem'. The anti-GNVQ lobby, led by Richard Collins, Director of Admissions at the University of Lancaster, speaking at an annual meeting of the Association for Science Education in 1995,

> *"... dismissed the new courses as second rate" (Nash, ibid.)*

Focusing particularly in science, Collins cited inadequate subject knowledge, poor study skills and 'a woeful lack of mathematics in the Science GNVQ' as key weaknesses in the new vocational courses.

> *"The good do A-Levels, the rest do GNVQs... The subjects where most problems will occur are in science and engineering and these will come in the transfer to university" he said. "The general science courses were not good*

preparation for single honours, which required a clearly defined body of knowledge". *(Nash, op. cit. p.5)*

However, other H.E. tutors criticised Dr. Collins and his faction for not supporting alternative entry routes to H.E., especially in the light of higher education's need to expand. They cited evidence from a study at Kent University which showed that students from non-traditional F.E. backgrounds performed better on degree courses than those with A-Levels (Nash, 1995). However this divergence of opinion may be due to the two factions looking at things from different perspectives, the former group focusing on the adequacy and sufficiency of underpinning subject knowledge to undertake a specialist degree, the other group looking at the policy issue of widening participation in H.E. A more worrying issue is the widescale problem of first year H.E. non-completion by GNVQ students which does indicate some fundamental pathology. (Abramson and Jones, 2001)

7. 2 Views from other H.E. tutors

A more recent study conducted by Sadie Williams, also from Lancaster University, examined the effectiveness of GNVQs as a preparation for H.E. (Williams, 2000). Using a qualitative research approach involving telephone interviews with 27 H.E.I. tutors, Williams found some perceived deficiencies with GNVQs which she located within the competence/progressivism debate (already discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis).

In contrast to my research which focused on GNVQ Health & Social Care students' progression, Williams' research focused on progression to Hotel & Catering Management and Retail Management. Her higher education tutors were drawn from a range of courses, including HNDs and from both old and new universities as well as CHEs (College of Higher Education). As with my research, Williams found considerable variation in H.E. admission requirements between institutions.

Figure 7.1 Entry requirements by course type and subjects

	HCM HND	HCM: degree	RM: HND	RM: degree	Total
GNVQ Pass	5		1		6
GNVQ Merit	4	3	1	3	11
GNVQ Merit + extra units		1			1
GNVQ Merit or Distinction		4			4
GNVQ Distinction or Merit + extra units or an A-Level			1	5	6
GNVQ Distinction		1		5	6
GNVQ Distinction + extra units or an A-Level				1	1
Total:	9	9	3	14	35

(Williams, 2000 p.355)

Generally speaking HND courses accepted GNVQ students with Pass or Merit grades while the Degree courses required Distinctions usually with some 'additionality'. But the picture was very varied.

Williams concludes:

> *"There was an extremely wide range of admission requirements, partly reflecting the different academic standards demanded by different types of institution but also reflecting differences between courses at different levels. Some courses only asked for a Pass at GNVQ, while others wanted a Merit or Distinction. Some wanted students to have taken extra GNVQ units or an A-Level in addition, while several suggested that they would look for either Merit or Distinction, accepting the lower level of qualification if the student brought other attributes. They would take into account not only extra qualifications but work experience or personal qualities like enthusiasm".* (Williams, 2000 p.355)

Williams found that all 27 of her H.E. tutors were willing to accept GNVQ applicants and only two in her sample (both from new universities) expressed doubts about the academic ability of GNVQ students. As with my research, Williams found that some H.E. tutors were reluctant to compare GNVQ and A-Level students.

> *"Once they are here, they are just students to us, whatever their background we don't differentiate"...*

"We don't tend to label them. We try to forget what they came in with". *(Williams, ibid. p. 356)*

Williams concludes:

"These tutors were keen for GNVQ students to be given equal status with other students, and, taken alongside the data on admissions requirements discussed above, such responses would suggest the emergence of a high degree of parity with the A-Level as an entry qualification".

(Williams, op. cit. p. 356)

However, in contrast to Williams, my research findings do not support this interpretation about parity of esteem. The H.E. tutors in my sample, although expressing similar sentiments, reflected an ideological position linked to their self-perception, rather than evidence of 'parity of esteem'. In other words, *they were keen to be seen* as having a liberal, egalitarian attitude to all students rather than discriminating between them.

Some H.E. tutors in Williams' sample were comfortable to identify strengths and weaknesses of GNVQ students compared with A-Level students. Their comments reflected the differences in GNVQ teaching and learning styles:

"They seem to be more mature in their approach to work. They are a lot more attuned to working in groups than the A-Level students and are able to quickly get things up and running in terms of working effectively as a group member".

"They are very good at group work. And presentations, too, they are remarkably good". *(Williams, op. cit. p. 357)*

However, there was a downside:

"The GNVQs are weak in terms of theoretical and conceptual areas. The A-Levels are the opposite, strong in conceptual area but weak in commitment. Each has strengths and weaknesses".

"They are good at group and project work and less good at exams. The A-Level students are the dead opposite. Good at exams and not at group or project work".

(Williams, op. cit. p. 357)

Williams concluded from her research that:

"there was no overall consensus on whether or not GNVQ entrants were significantly less able to cope with the course than A-Level entrants and no consistent differences between types of H.E.I. (old or new university or college/institute) were found". *(Williams, op. cit. p. 358)*

Nevertheless, she discovered critical differences in H.E. tutors' perceptions on how GNVQ students coped with assessment on different types of degree courses. GNVQ students handled assessment on HND courses as well as A-Level students, but there were significant differences

reported about GNVQ students' assessment performance on degree courses. H.E. tutors reported difficulties for GNVQ students regarding essay-writing, examinations and in constructing discursive pieces of work.

7.3 Follow-up interviews with H.E. Tutors

A total of nine H.E.I.s were contacted to participate in the third part of the fieldwork, namely to explore the perceptions of admissions/course tutors of GNVQ students and their relative performance on their respective courses. These were: Salford University; Bolton Institute; John Moore's University, Liverpool; the University of Southampton; Bournemouth University; Plymouth University; Buckinghamshire Chilterns University; Thames Valley University and St. Loye's School of O.T.

These institutions were chosen on the basis of the original GNVQ students' chosen destinations and actual progression onto particular vocational courses. Since the H.E.I. sample had to be restricted to a manageable number, the final selection was determined by the range of courses to which GNVQ students had progressed. Also I wanted to achieve a balance in the range of careers and a geographical spread. Thus where a University offered the GNVQ students in my sample progression to three courses e.g. to the Diploma in Nursing, the Diploma in Social Work and the Diploma in Midwifery this H.E.I. was more likely to be selected than an H.E.I. where there was progression to only one type of course.

A minimum of two telephone interviews were conducted with each H.E.I., which usually included a course tutor who was responsible for interviewing the GNVQ students and/or for ensuring that the H.E.I. entry criteria were met. Course tutors were also interviewed since only they could comment on the GNVQ students' academic progress on their H.E. course. Sometimes the admission tutor was also the course tutor and could therefore speak about the entry stage as well as GNVQ students' progress. Thus in several cases there were up to five interviews conducted with *different* course tutors *at the same H.E.I.*

7.3.1 Familiarity with the GNVQ course structure and mode of assessment

Generally speaking neither the H.E. admissions tutors nor course tutors were very familiar with the structure and mode of assessment of GNVQs as the following comments illustrate:

> *"The only thing that I know about GNVQs is that they are modular ... and there's some kind of vocational aspect to them ... I believe that GNVQs at Advanced Level with a Merit is equivalent to an A-Level".* *(BC) Course Tutor*

> *"I know GNVQs have core units, and optional and additional units - but I'm not over-familiar with it".*
> *(PW) Admissions Tutor*

There was a general awareness among admissions tutors that the GNVQ was a vocationally-oriented course taken by post-16 students in schools

and colleges, but the course tutors usually had a more detailed understanding.

> *"GNVQ is a practically-orientated qualification which students undertake at Secondary level"* and *"there's a lot more objective testing and that's about it really"*
>
> *(MB) Admissions Tutor*

In some cases where H.E. tutors had been involved in some allied research, or where they had been working in close partnership with schools and colleges during the early development phase of GNVQs, their concept of GNVQ was more refined.

> *"I'm familiar with the general structure of GNVQs but not the detailed content and level of the award. There's clearly a balance between Health & Social Care related content, relating both to the physical sciences and the social sciences, and elements of literacy and numeracy ... and certainly with most course providers, there's a fairly strong practice element as well in a range of health and social-related settings."*
>
> *(JB) Admissions/Course Tutor*

> *"It's modular .... and it involves continuous assessment rather than end of year exams. It's portfolio-based and it's vocational rather than academic in that students have to demonstrate in a similar way to NVQ students that they know things rather than to go away and glean the knowledge and sit*

an exam at the end of it... There's also a certain amount of practice involved ... work placements".

(AmB) Admissions Tutor

However, they were unable to compare GNVQs with other entry qualifications such as GCE Advanced Levels, B.TEC National Diplomas and ACCESS courses. Most H.E. tutors were more familiar with ACCESS courses especially where the H.E.I. tended to attract mature students. For most H.E.I. course tutors the type of entry qualifications that students came in with were less important than how they performed on the H.E. course.

"Once we get students on to the programme I don't take a great deal of notice, and I think that I speak for most of us here. We get a sheet round saying what the backgrounds are - but I don't take a great deal of notice of what's gone on before. I tend to take the students at face value .. how they are performing on the course and what their specific problems are there and then. Because our aim is to try to get all students through if we can ... Once we get them onto the course then they're almost starting from scratch." *(SN) Course Tutor*

Indeed, as with Williams' research (Williams 2000) H.E. tutors were not always either able or willing to differentiate between students on their courses.

"We would struggle to differentiate between GNVQ and non-GNVQ students. In fact colleagues wouldn't generally know or

be able to identify an individual on entry grades or entry qualifications - unless they had reviewed the individual's file".

(JB) Admissions Tutor

7.3.2 Suitability of GNVQs as H.E. entry qualifications

Although there was no detailed knowledge of the content of GNVQs, it was evident from the interviews with H.E. tutors that GNVQs were being accepted as entry qualifications for degree courses. This was particularly the case where a 'Compact' arrangement existed with a local F.E. college or H.E. tutors either knew F.E. course tutors or were involved in 'Open Days' run by themselves or F.E. Thus these 'micro' factors seemed to be important in facilitating progression of GNVQ students to H.E.

> *"We would consider them* (GNVQs) *alongside ACCESS students as suitable for our courses. We run Open Days and have local F.E. Colleges attend who are running F.E. Courses - so yes, from that point of view, we do consider them as suitable".* *(MB) Admissions Tutor*

> *"I spent quite a lot of time when I started as an Admissions tutor trying to get to know what a GNVQ was worth. I needed to go and actually compare it and see what level the students were working at ... Now I was quite satisfied that it was at least as good as anything else ... We regard it as a suitable entry qualification".* *(GS) Admissions/Course Tutor*

Nevertheless, not all admissions/course tutors were either aware that GNVQ Advanced was the equivalent to two GCE Levels, or confident that this was the case.

However, much depended on whether the H.E.I. had a policy on the acceptability of GNVQs which in turn was being influenced by Government policy.

> *"The University has a policy on GNVQs which equates them to A-Levels. For non-health courses the GNVQ was only recognised at Distinction level, with some additionality. However, the new points system has changed that. The new AVCE* (which has superseded GNVQ) *is now taken at its face value on the points system...*
> *For Nursing or Midwifery Degrees we would accept students with 310 points. For the Diploma of Nursing course entry would be between 160-180 points. These could be made up from AVCEs, A/S modules or A-Levels."*
>
> *(JB) Admissions Tutor*

> *"Yes, GNVQs are certainly acceptable to the University ... and they're actually encouraged. We've got a little booklet 'A guide to GNVQ progression to H.E.' which lists the entry requirements to the degree courses and whether they require additional units or an A-Level at the side of it."*
>
> *(PW) Admissions Tutor*

It was clear that H.E.I.s were asking for 'additionality' on Nursing Degree courses to ensure a good grounding in the required underpinning knowledge, as it was recognised that GNVQs were lacking in this area as the following comment illustrates.

> *"For Honours courses, we would always advise a further A-Level, normally Human Biology - to solve the under-rating on science in the current AVCE and previous GNVQ programmes. Yes, those students who have done a science A-Level would have a definite advantage on degree programmes in Life Sciences".* *(JB) Admissions Tutor*

However, macro factors such as changing demographic and market trends were also encouraging H.E.I.s to be more flexible on their entry requirements. Increased competition between universities for the same pool of post-18 students, combined with Government policy to widen participation and raise target numbers for H.E. were having an effect particularly on the post-1992 universities.

> *"The University's policy is looking to broaden our base re entry qualifications and people who come in to H.E. ... and GNVQ is seen as appropriate".*
>
> *(SW) Course Tutor post-1992 university*

> *"Certainly, in our discussions about the new degree we are introducing .. we feel that if we target it at GNVQ Advanced students we won't go far wrong".* *(SW) ibid.*

It was clear from the interviews with course tutors that H.E.I.s were using a number of strategies for entry onto diploma and degree courses. In some cases there were one-to-one interviews, occasionally panel or group interviews. Evidence from GNVQ students' portfolios was required by some of the H.E.I.s, while others were looking for 'value-added' derived from work experience, community or voluntary work. One University only did telephone interviews for entry to the diploma in nursing. These involved using psychometric tests and a range of scenarios and practical nursing situations to which the student had to respond. Interviewers were looking for certain key words in students' responses.

It was evident that the H.E. tutors in my sample who were interviewed were not functioning as 'gate-keepers' to H.E. courses, but demonstrated a flexible approach to non -standard entry qualifications as the following comment illustrates:

> *"I'm in favour of anything that allows someone to have access to H.E. and that meets their needs. I'm aware that A-Levels don't meet everyone's needs. We are one of the universities that takes a high proportion of mature students who have maybe got non-traditional qualifications. For example, we have a lot of ACCESS students. So I'm quite open to GNVQs. I think that once people get on to the degree course it's about what they are prepared to do and how they are prepared to work to realise their potential. So anything that enables students to get to a point where they can apply for courses in H.E. can only be a benefit really".* *(SN) Course Tutor*

All degree students had to have suitable qualifications in English and Maths at GCSE or equivalent and be studying for qualifications which were acceptable to the H.E.I.

> *"We accept quite a wide range of entry qualifications - A-Levels, and for mature students, suitable ACCESS courses which have been kite-marked for H.E., GNVQs and the B.TEC Diploma in Science or Health Studies".* *(SN) Course Tutor*

However, GNVQs tended not to have made an impact in relation to other entry qualifications on H.E.I. admissions tutors, particularly where the H.E.I.s were running modular degree courses and their policy was to target a particular segment of the post-18 student market such as mature students

> *"I'd rate ACCESS courses the best because they are geared up to exactly what we do - the modular sort of basis - the Social Science ones".* *(BF) Admissions Tutor*

In some cases there was a heightened awareness among H.E.I. course tutors of particular entry qualifications e.g. ACCESS courses, which had been stimulated by the research being done by external bodies. Indeed, this 'halo' effect can be one of the unintended consequences of research. My own research also raised awareness of GNVQs in one H.E.I. where staff said they would start to compare GNVQ students' progress with other student groups as a result of my questions.

7.3.3 Ability range of GNVQ Advanced students

Most H.E. tutors regarded GNVQs as an acceptable alternative entry qualification for a range of higher education courses but they did not see them as having 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels as the following comments illustrate.

> *"We never felt that GNVQs were as rigorous as A-Levels. GNVQ students struggled with the course from day one and did not seem to cope very well with the demands of the higher level work...*
> *The exams and the essays were the main problems. GNVQ students were fine with the practical aspects of the course, but they struggled most with Anatomy and Physiology and with writing 5,000 word essays. They also did not manage well in large lecture situations".* *(LP) Admissions/Course Tutor*

GNVQ students appeared to struggle most on the para-medical science-based degrees. This was particularly apparent with Midwifery, O.T. and Radiography degree courses.

> *"The girls with GNVQ and one A-Level on the whole do tend to struggle with the academic level in the written work, though not so much with the classwork because we use Enquiry-based Learning. Certainly, they can manage the group work of Enquiry-based Learning, but when they come to their personal written assignments they seem to need more support and achieve lower marks, whereas the A-Level girls achieve much higher marks.* *(CP) Admissions/Course Tutor*

Where there were several GNVQ students on the H.E. course, and they were known to the course tutor, they were usually identified as being in the lower half of the ability range in the group.

> *"I think that people who do GNVQs may not be as academically able as students who are doing straight A-Levels ... And based on some statistics within the Department, which I looked at prior to our telephone conversation, students with GNVQs on the whole tend to be in the lower half of the cohort in terms of performance"* *(SN) Course Tutor*

Generally speaking GNVQ students were perceived as weaker than A-Level entrants. However an exception to this seemed to be the mature GNVQ students, a fact which emerged at two different H.E.I.s, as the following extracts illustrate.

> *"You've mentioned three (GNVQ) students. One of them is a particularly strong student* ...(a mature student)... *she's extremely able and produces some excellent work for me. She is in the top five of the year of 50. The other two are weaker, about average for the year but one of them is a bit below average".* *(MB) Course Tutor*

> *"Of the students we've had come here, it's a very mixed bag. There's one .. I can't see how she's got here in the first place, while 'X'* (a mature student) *is a fantastic student. There's another couple who are not so clever and others who tend to be average".* *(BF) Admissions Tutor*

One post-1992 University which offered a 4 year degree in Social Policy and Social Work was very positive about GNVQ students of whom they had 14 across the 4 year programme. However, all of them were mature students and not 18 year olds which reflected the entry requirements for social work courses. In these circumstances, it is difficult to conclude whether their performance was due to the GNVQ course they had taken or to the age and maturity of the students.

> *"We have until recently been taking ACCESS students and A-Level entrants. However, for the past 3 years we've begun to take GNVQ students and they compare very favourably with the other categories of students that we have... All of them as far as I am aware are doing O.K. They are certainly among the top quarter of the cohort of 50. What is particular about them is the placement element they've done ...* (in their GNVQ courses) *and the fact they are able to understand what social workers do and they are able to use theory specifically for that".* *(SW) Admissions/Course Tutor*

However, students' academic performance was not the only criterion under consideration at the admissions stage as the following comment by an admissions/course tutor in Radiography illustrates.

> *"But academic performance isn't necessarily the only thing we're interested in. They have to be able to meet the degree requirements but in the end we are aiming to produce clinical radiographers who are competent enough to go out and fulfil*

a first post competency requirement. And so we also look for 'added value' when we interview ... such as the kind of work experience they've done, ... team work, working with disadvantaged groups, ... what they've done a gap year, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme or other similar schemes and their Records of Achievement". *(SN) Course Tutor*

7.3.4 The main difficulties of GNVQ students

There was a different level of awareness evident between admissions tutors and course tutors about GNVQ students' progress. In some cases, although H.E.I. admissions tutors were not directly familiar with GNVQ students' academic performance they had formed a perception about this from their academic colleagues as the following extract illustrates:

"I can only tell you what I know from hearsay.... The academic staff don't believe that the students coming in with a GNVQ are as well-prepared as some of our other students... Their study skills aren't so good... (They are less) ... able to analyse a piece of theoretical work and to critically analyse and write an essay .. and to be able to have the academic thoughts that go behind it. They are also less mature".

(AmB) Admissions Tutor

Essay-writing, handling abstract ideas and referencing techniques were the main difficulties that the 18-year old GNVQ students were experiencing according to H.E. course tutors at several H.E.I.s.

GNVQ students seem to have a ....

> *"lack of understanding of how to structure an essay and what should be going into it ... Well, one of them just copied stuff out of books. Plagiarism .. just lifting information out of books and actually not thinking about the issues."*
>
> *(BF) Admissions Tutor*

Based on a range of GNVQ students' profiles, the Admissions tutor for Radiography concluded:

> *"On the whole, GNVQ students probably find it harder to come in with a GNVQ and perform - particularly in exams. They don't have the background that the more traditional A-Level students have, although A-Levels are depending more and more on coursework now. I think they found some topics easier than others e.g. clinical work, patient care and radiography. But the applied physics and anatomy - they found difficult."* *(SN) Course Tutor*

Some tutors expressed concern about the depth of knowledge demonstrated by GNVQ students in comparison with other students' programmes e.g. BTEC National Diplomas, where teaching and learning styles were more holistic.

> *"The GNVQ students for the most part tend not to have quite so much academic experience as the B.TEC National Diploma students. Although they might mention Psychology in group*

discussions - whether they haven't listened to things or they don't have the same interest, they don't display the same depth of knowledge as the BTEC students... That might be due to the GNVQ modules being offered at the different F.E. colleges..." *(PW) Admissions Tutor*

"If you're looking at subject expertise e.g. Biology, Psychology or Sociology, then probably the A-Level students have a better knowledge base than GNVQ students. But when they get here and find they have to work in a community, then the A-Level students are not as well prepared as GNVQ students. I think that GNVQ students have to work to improve their subject-specific knowledge .. but they are much happier with a modular system and working with groups".

(GS) Course Tutor

Adapting to large lecture situations and note-taking also proved a challenge for GNVQ students, a view that was expressed by a number of H.E. Tutors as well as the students themselves.

"I don't think they are quite so happy with large groups ... when we get into a lecture situation ...

The A-Level students are more adept at taking notes in a lecture, but for the smaller group sessions where they are meant to participate, I think the GNVQ students are better prepared". *(GS) Course Tutor*

7.3.5 The main strengths of GNVQ students

GNVQ students' main strengths according to H.E. Course tutors were: interpersonal/communication skills, oral presentations, group work and patient care. This was particularly the case in respect of the 18 year old GNVQ students.

> *"If they did well anywhere it was in the applied radiography and patient care aspects. I guess the things that they were getting reinforced in the clinical studies". (SN) Course Tutor*

> *"I think that GNVQ has been quite a good way of coming into H.E. I think that GNVQ students have been more comfortable moving into nurse education than perhaps the A-Level students have been... GNVQ students are more used to working together ... with group work, and having some experience of care they understand some of the nursing situations better .... They are used to preparing work for presentations and are perhaps not quite so shy about standing up and saying things in class". (GS) Course Tutor*

Where GNVQ students had had some practice-relevant experience, this was perceived as very useful in facilitating their transition to H.E. programmes, especially to medically-based degrees and diplomas.

> *"GNVQ students who have had some relevant work experience on their F.E. programmes are generally able to*

adapt to clinical practice very readily ... although I must say the quality of GNVQ placements varies hugely".

(JB) Admissions Tutor

Much depended on the predominant teaching and learning styles used within the H.E.I. programme. Where courses were structured around enquiry-based learning and small group work, GNVQ students fared well.

"Our courses are all structured around enquiry-based learning and small group work. Students who have done straight A-Levels, - particularly those who haven't done a social science, find working in a group a struggle - but for GNVQ students that wouldn't be the case. They nearly all have had small group work experience and have good presentation and study skills and in my experience they are very sharp - which gives them an edge - but only for the first year at most". *(JB) Admissions Tutor*

Again, differences emerged in respect of mature GNVQ students doing a social work degree course.

"They seem to have a clear idea of what they actually want. They are quite focused and certainly able to find their way through the maze of the early months at the University. They seem to know what they want ...(and are) ... *able to demonstrate some of the beginning academic skills... They are as able to use the library and prepare assignments as other students... What is particular about them is the placement*

element they've done and the fact that they are able to understand what social workers do and they are able to utilise theory specifically for that. The placement bit seems to give them an understanding. They are quite focused in terms of what they do." *(SW) Admissions/Course Tutor*

7.4 Summary

So, what conclusions can be drawn from my Phase III research and what light can this shed on some of my Key Questions?

(KQ1) To what extent are GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students gaining entry into H.E. and professional training?

Although this question was partly addressed in Chapter 6, it is also relevant in Chapter 7 as the evidence can be triangulated by the H.E. tutors' perspectives.

GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students are gaining entry to H.E. and professional training. There had been difficulties for the first two cohorts as reported in official reports (FEFC, 1994; 1995) but by 1998 this situation was improving and more students were gaining entry to both degree and diploma courses. In particular, increasing numbers of GNVQ students were gaining access to diploma courses in nursing and social work, and some were also being accepted for Degrees in Radiography, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Midwifery, where competition was high for a limited number of places. Although most H.E.I. Course tutors were unable to give detailed numbers of GNVQ students in relation

to other entrants, one University had produced a report on this over a five year period, which showed considerable growth from 1996.

Figure 7.2 Percentage of GNVQ students in relation to other entrants 1996 - 2000

Year	%
1996	9%
1997	9%
1998	20%
1999	36%
2000	25%

Source: John Moore's University Liverpool 2002

(SQ1) How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care for H.E. - on its own, or in combination with GCE A-Levels or other 'additionality'?

Evidence from interviews with twenty-eight H.E. Tutors indicated that GNVQs had achieved a high level of acceptability amongst course tutors for entrance to a wide range of degree and diploma courses. Policy statements published by H.E.I.s had clarified the conditions of entry for GNVQ students and had helped to de-mystify the admissions process. However, degree courses generally required additionality in the form of an A-Level, especially where progression was to science-based degrees linked to professional training. Moreover, notwithstanding the 'parity of esteem' debate, it was clear that this was a very reasonable requirement to facilitate GNVQ students' progress on the particular degree course and to minimise student failure and drop-out.

All of the H.E. tutors who were interviewed were willing to accept GNVQ applicants onto degree and diploma courses, although 'additionality' was generally required on the paramedical honours degree programmes. There was an extremely wide range of admission requirements which reflected the different types of degree and diplomas available at H.E.I.s. Course tutors seemed most comfortable with accepting GNVQ students onto advanced diploma courses where only a pass or merit at GNVQ might be required.

Indeed, GNVQs were welcomed by those universities which were seeking to broaden their entry base, but who were aware of the finite pool of students. The course tutors in my sample were not functioning as 'gatekeepers' to their H.E. courses, but appeared to genuinely welcome non-standard entry qualifications. This was as much from a liberal-democratic, egalitarian perspective as a pragmatic one of filling courses.

Moreover, the follow-up interviews with H.E.I. admission Tutors in 2002 indicated that the new A-Level tariff points system being used for H.E. entry criteria to degree and diploma courses, was facilitating progression. Course tutors were having to consider vocational A-Level students alongside traditional A-Level students as the following extract indicates:

> *"Entry criteria for Degree courses is done on an A-Level points tariff or equivalency and the GNVQ (or now the AVCEs) would fit into that equivalency. There would be ... 'No, we wouldn't accept you because you're a GNVQ student'...*

And as for our Advanced Diploma route, we would regard GNVQ as being perfectly acceptable."

"The new post-16 qualifications have blurred the boundaries between the academic and the vocational and unless you are working with the tariff points everyday - you don't quite understand this. I think that whereas a lot of course tutors might have been quite blinkered and said (in the past) that students had to get such and such points which could only come from A-Levels - now they're working with tariff points and they are going to take students who have got vocational A-Levels". *(AmB) Admissions Tutor*

Thus by introducing the tariff system, Government policy was achieving its objective of securing more progression for GNVQ (AVCE) students to H.E. courses and professional training. Progression to H.E. was also being facilitated by local 'Compact' arrangements between H.E.I.s and F.E. colleges, as well as pressures from demographic and market trends, but the tariff system seemed to be having the greatest effect.

This brings us to another Key Question.

(KQ3) Did H.E. tutors identify any particular strengths and weaknesses in GNVQ students on undergraduate courses?

Where GNVQ students had progressed to H.E. programmes it was clear from H.E. tutors' perspectives that they were having greatest difficulties with certain academic aspects of the courses, notably essay-writing skills,

analysis and synthesis and adapting to large lecture situations. Students also struggled with science-based subjects as their GNVQ course had only provided shallow coverage. This particularly applied to degrees in Nursing, Midwifery, O.T., and Radiography.

According to H.E. tutors in my sample, GNVQ students' main strengths were in group work and oral presentations, interpersonal and communication skills and their ability to readily adapt to clinical practice.

KQ3 (SQ1) How well did GNVQs prepare students for independent learning within an H.E. environment?

Feedback from H.E. Tutors on this issue was mixed. In some cases GNVQ students' study skills were perceived as weak along with essay-writing and their ability to critically analyse and synthesise material and cope with examinations. Mature GNVQ students seemed to perform better on these dimensions.

However, GNVQ students coped best where the teaching and learning styles in the H.E.I. involved enquiry-based learning, group work and assignments rather than large lectures with frequent unseen examinations. These perceptions from H.E. tutors, 'triangulated' well with those of GNVQ students themselves (already discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis).

KQ3 (SQ2) Was there any need for "accommodation" in the teaching and learning styles in H.E. undergraduate programmes in respect of GNVQ students, or was there a good 'fit'?

Evidence from H.E. tutors (and indeed from the students themselves) indicates that there were some major weaknesses in GNVQ students' knowledge and skills, which affected their ability to adapt to the academic requirements of H.E. programmes. In some cases, GNVQ students did manage to bridge these gaps, but with a 36% GNVQ non-completion rate recorded at one university (Abramson, 1998), clearly others did not. Unfortunately it is not possible to examine non-completion rates in H.E. nationally, since no national agency, including the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) records non-completion by main entry qualification.

In response to this problem, the University of Central Lancashire introduced a "Bridging Project" to enhance GNVQ student retention rates and to improve first year academic achievement. The project focused on identifying the reasons for low retention. Some interesting factors emerged.

> *"Several standard responses, such as homesickness, isolation and financial worries, were given but two more fundamental factors emerged. The first was the lack of those key skills necessary for learning within higher education. The second, and related, issue centred on the traumatic transition from the nurturing environment of GNVQ into the culture of independent learning within H.E."*

According to the university's retention task group there was ...

> *"a high correlation between Stage One non-completion and the level of student preparedness for teaching and learning in higher education. Put crudely, a GNVQ student formerly with 30+ hours class contact and taught in a highly prescribed manner will find the transition to autonomous learning based on six hours class contact a difficult one to make without support and guidance ... "* *(Abramson, 2001, p.35)*

In an attempt to address these issues, the "Bridging Project" offered GNVQ students three levels of support. Firstly, a pre-course summer school with mentor support. Secondly, an Elective on "Effective Learning" during the first year of the H.E. programme and finally a "mentoring module" for Year 2 students on Honours Degrees. According to Abramson, these strategies proved effective in reducing GNVQ first year non-completion (Abramson, ibid. p. 37).

It may be that all H.E.I.s will have to introduce similar bridging projects to reduce the non-completion problem.

Thus to conclude, GNVQs *appeared* to have achieved some *"exchange value"* in H.E. and it was evident that they were being accepted as an entry qualification for a wide range of courses and professional training. Nevertheless, there were concerns among H.E. tutors about GNVQs' perceived adequacy as a preparation for H.E. courses. There was also an issue about its *"use value"* within H.E. (Williams, 2000). This was reflected in my in-depth interviews with H.E. tutors, articles in the T.E.S. and evidence of first year H.E. non-completion by GNVQ students. (Abramson and Jones, 2001; Williams, 2000; Nash, 1995).

So how can this be explained? The perceived deficiencies in GNVQs derive from the teaching and learning styles which in turn, are rooted in the competency-progressivism debate, already discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Although purporting to be progressive and empowering for the students, a number of researchers argued that GNVQs inhibited learner autonomy and were accompanied by new constraints, and that it was responsibility for their own learning, not power that was conferred on the students. (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 1995; Bates et. al., 1998; Bloomer, 1998; Knight et. al., 1998;). Moreover the competency-based learning and assessment within GNVQs, tended to reduce complex knowledge to simple facts and information which was 'collected' in students' portfolios without much cognitive thought. The GNVQ teaching and learning model encouraged an instrumental approach to learning rather than encouraging the student to develop critical and reflective thought so vital in H.E.

> *"They learn to work independently within prescribed frameworks: they do not learn to apply their own or others' critiques to those frameworks, still less to choose from among frameworks."* *(Williams, 2000 p. 352)*

These skills are fundamental to H.E. courses. The competence-based, assessment-led GNVQ teaching and learning style has not prepared students adequately for the demands of H.E.

Thus to conclude, there are still tensions between the academic-vocational divide. Degree courses still require intellectual rigour, and independent, critical thinking. To be successful, students need to be adept at essay-writing and possess skills of analysis and synthesis as well as referencing.

However the findings indicate that GNVQ students are generally weaker in these areas when they enter H.E. and that they tend to fall into the lower half of the ability band of the cohort during the 3 year programme. It remains to be seen whether H.E. will have to modify the content and teaching and learning styles of degree courses or top up vocational A-Level students with the requisite knowledge and skills on arrival to H.E.

CHAPTER 8

Progression, Parity of Esteem and Policy Objectives

Chapter 8

Progression, Parity of Esteem and Policy Objectives

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has looked at a piece of education policy history between 1992 - 2000, which involved the introduction of some new national vocational qualifications (GNVQs) into the post-16 sector, and the extent to which they bridged the 'academic-vocational' divide and enabled progression to higher education and training. The study has raised issues about how education policies are both made and implemented, and whether the process essentially follows a 'top-down' theoretical model of change or a 'bottom-up' one.

The initial focus was on the macro-political context of the policy, and the rationale for its development that revolved around national concerns about the economy, productivity and the role of education and training. As the picture unfolded, the study gradually moved to a more micro-political context and level of analysis, and focused on how the policy was experienced by students and teachers at the 'grass roots' level. This data was obtained through three phases of fieldwork at different points in time. Firstly, it focused on the perceptions and aspirations of GNVQ students in four F.E. colleges during the second year of their GNVQ course. Secondly, it examined the experiences of a small sample of these GNVQ students who progressed to H.E., looking back on their experiences after their first year of study in H.E.

Finally, it reviewed the perceptions of some H.E. tutors on the strengths and weaknesses of these GNVQ students. The study moved between the macro and micro levels of analysis that was reflected in the different research methods used, whether these were official statistics or more interpretive methods.

The research employed a unique approach, involving a longitudinal study of a particular cohort of GNVQ students at different points in time and examined the extent to which GNVQ teaching and learning styles 'meshed' with those in higher education. Previous research on GNVQs and progression to H.E. (undertaken predominantly by Government agencies such as NCVQ, FEDA and UCAS), had focused on 'compact' arrangements, enrolment and delivery patterns and GNVQs and non-completion. Other independent research studies on progression had investigated particular GNVQ subject areas and offers made to students by H.E.I.s, but had stopped short of their actual progression to H.E. Only one study had looked at the adequacy of GNVQ as a preparation for higher education from the perspective of H.E. tutors, but did not 'triangulate' it with students' perceptions (Williams, 2000).

So what is the contribution to knowledge of this thesis? In addition to addressing the Key Questions, in particular, the 'parity of esteem' issue, my findings shed some light on undergraduate non-completion and have implications for the Government's policy on widening access to H.E. for non-standard entrants.

After contextualizing the policy issues, this chapter will highlight the key findings of the study and examine some of the Key Questions and the extent to which the fieldwork has shed light on these (Section 8.2). Secondly, it will review the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods and the theoretical perspectives underpinning them (Section 8.3). Thirdly, the chapter will review the philosophical contradictions and underlying tensions embedded in the new vocational policy and why there was so much divergence between the 'policy espousal', 'policy enactment' and 'policy implementation' stages (Section 8.4).

The last section (Section 8.5) considers the extent to which Government policy objectives were achieved and the long-standing debate on 'parity of esteem', and explains why attempts to dissolve the academic-vocational divide have failed.

Finally, in Section 8.6, the chapter closes with comments on the lessons that have been learnt from this study regarding 'policy espousal' and 'policy implementation' and which theoretical model of change best applies to this context. It also extrapolates some lessons for the future.

8.2 Policy Background and Key Findings

8.2.1 Policy issues re-visited

Earlier chapters looked at the education policy context and the introduction of GNVQs from the policy espousal stage to policy implementation and the responses by students, teachers and other stakeholders to the new vocational award. But how successful was this policy? In order to evaluate this we need to clarify the policy benchmark again.

The 1991 Government White Paper *"Education and Training for the 21st. Century"* (DES/DE 1991) proposed that a new, high quality, vocational alternative to GCE A-Levels be developed for post-16 students, in order to address a number of weaknesses in the education system in England and Wales. The policy had a number of objectives. It aimed:-

- to enhance participation rates post-16
- to reduce wastage from GCE A-Level non-completion and failure
- to offer a different type of vocationally relevant qualification
- to have 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels and
- to enable progression to H.E. and professional training

An integral part of this policy was to rationalise the existing qualifications system and tailor educational provision more to the needs of the economy.

Mechanisms were set up, consultations took place and GNVQs were introduced in 1992 as a pilot scheme in 115 schools and colleges. However, no-one knew how well GNVQs would work in practice and not everything went the Government's or the civil servants' way. As Trowler points out:

"Although there is often a clear link between ideology and policy, the relationship between them is very frequently mediated by a number of other less predictable factors".

(Trowler, 2002 p. 95)

Indeed, a variety of external influences at both the macro and micro levels affected the introduction of GNVQs, resulting in a very troubled implementation and some unintended consequences.

Although GNVQs proved popular partly due to Government funding incentives and the fact that other provision was being phased out, concerns were raised by various 'stakeholders' about the competence-based assessment and grading system and problems surrounding student progression to H.E. These concerns seriously undermined the credibility of the new award. Moreover, the mechanistic teaching and learning model led to assessment overload and an instrumental approach to learning by some students, which resulted in high drop-out and non-completion rates, especially in the early stages of mainstream implementation.

Vociferous criticisms by stakeholder, including students, teachers, awarding bodies and academics eventually led to substantial revisions to the GNVQ model and a gradual 'academic drift' towards A-Levels to enhance its validity and reliability as different factions pulled the vocational qualification in different directions. In failing to solve the problems, NCVQ lost political

sway and its merger with SCAA resulted in a more academic approach to assessment and grading in the revised GNVQ model.

So what light can the evidence from my Phase I fieldwork shed on these policy objectives? How did my students perceive GNVQs and what experiences did they have while doing the course?

8.2.2 Key Questions and Findings - Phase I Fieldwork

The Phase I fieldwork enabled three Key Questions to be considered.

(KQ2) How did GNVQ Advanced students feel about their teaching and learning experiences as a preparation for H.E.?

(SQ1) What was the 'value-added' of GNVQs from their perspectives?

(SQ2) Did the students identify any particular limitations of the GNVQ curriculum for progression to H.E.?

The students in my sample *(146)* had chosen GNVQs for a number of reasons. They saw it as an alternative curriculum to GCE A-Levels. It was certainly *very different*. They liked its coursework approach and practical activities that involved research skills and independent learning. They particularly liked its modular structure with an emphasis on continuous assessment and the absence of large examinations. Over 25% of them had chosen GNVQ for its *perceived relevance* for progression to their future

careers. In terms of 'value-added' 98% of these students felt that 'GNVQ teaching and learning activities' would help them with their H.E./professional training course'. They identified the 'value-added' as the 'underpinning knowledge', 'work placements', 'researching', 'developing independence', 'teamwork and communication skills' as the main benefits accruing to them. They particularly valued the GNVQ work placements in developing their client-based skills and for the insights they yielded into clinical practice.

Thus at a marketing level, GNVQs were attracting students and two of the Government's policy objectives were being achieved, namely, enhancing participation rates and the provision of a different type of vocationally relevant qualification.

However, the students in my sample did identify some aspects of the GNVQ curriculum which they really disliked as well as a number of concerns about progression to H.E. They disliked 'action-planning' and perceived the GNVQ assessment system as 'burdensome', 'complex', 'inconsistent' and 'unfair'. They also found note-taking, abstracting key points and essay-writing most difficult and some students felt that this might be a problem for them in H.E. However, their main concern was about the 'exchange value' of GNVQs and the extent to which they would be acceptable for entry to H.E. Of the 105 students in my sample who had applied to H.E., 40% of them had decided to take an additional A-Level to enhance their chances of getting into University. Indeed, some students were already experiencing being treated as second-class citizens when they were applying to H.E. with offers of places

increasingly being tied to 'additionality', usually a GCE A-Level, plus a Distinction in their GNVQ.

Returning to the policy objectives stated in the 1991 White Paper, clearly issues were emerging about 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels which revolved around the perceived adequacy of the GNVQ knowledge base, the validity and reliability of the assessment and grading system and the demands from H.E. for 'additionality'. In addition high drop-out rates and non-completion of some GNVQ students was undermining other Government policy objectives. But what about another policy objective namely, progression the H.E. and professional training?

8.2.3 Key Questions and Findings - Phase II Fieldwork

The Phase II fieldwork enabled four more Key Questions to be reviewed.

4.3.1 Key Question 1

(KQ1) To what extent were GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students gaining entry into H.E. and professional training?

(SQ1) How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care for H.E. - on its own, or in combination with GCE A-Levels or other 'additionality'?

(SQ2) Was this GNVQ more acceptable in some H.E. establishments than others?

(SQ3) If GNVQ Health & Social Care students progressed to H.E., how did they themselves feel they had coped with their H.E. course, namely, with the academic content and the teaching and learning styles there?

Since my Phase II fieldwork essentially involved qualitative research using in-depth interviews with eighteen students from my original sample who had progressed to H.E., the above Key Questions will be addressed from a variety of data sources. This will include: official statistics and Government reports; completion and destination statistics from my original cohort; students' perceptions from my in-depth interviews and other relevant research studies.

Although GNVQ progression to H.E. was initially problematic between 1994-1995 (FEFC 1994; 1995) with GNVQ students representing only 0.13% of the total H.E. intake, by 1996 this figure had risen to 4.6%. Between 1996-2001 the figures had increased to 7.8% of the total number of applicants to H.E. (See Figure 6.2.1 in Chapter 6). Thus in terms of the Government's policy objectives there was evidence of substantial progression to H.E. by *some* GNVQ students. However, this does not *necessarily* mean that GNVQs had achieved 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels. On the contrary, a number of H.E. admissions tutors had voiced concern about the adequacy of the GNVQ underpinning knowledge and students' study skills for higher education, thus raising doubts about the intrinsic value of the vocational qualification. (Nash 1995a) More worrying was the statistical evidence from some H.E.I.s of a high non-completion rate (36%) for GNVQ students from first year H.E.

programmes (Abramson and Jones, 2001). Indeed, some H.E.I.s were offering 'bridging programmes' to facilitate GNVQ student retention.

Regarding my own fieldwork, the four colleges had an overall pass rate of 90%, with 20% of students achieving a Distinction, 47% Merits and 23% with Pass grades. A total of 64% of students in my original sample achieved places in H.E., with one third gaining places on degree courses and nearly one quarter gaining access to diploma courses and 8% to HND programmes. However, a number of students could not be traced at the 'follow-up' stage of my research to the H.E.I.s to which they had ostensibly progressed. This could have been due to early leaving but there was no way of checking this. The H.E.I.s denied all knowledge of these students and this could not be pursued without their co-operation.

So in terms of Government policy objectives, progression to H.E. by GNVQ students was certainly improving, although there were some indications that class factors were operating both at the GNVQ recruitment level and at recruitment to higher education. Of the 146 students in my original sample, nearly two thirds were from skilled manual, semi-skilled and unskilled backgrounds, while only 5% came from the professional/managerial category. Moreover, the majority of students in my sample obtained places at the post-1992 universities rather than pre-1992 universities. This will be re-visited later.

When considering GNVQ students' progression to H.E., Williams (2000) makes a useful distinction between the 'exchange value' of GNVQs and its 'use value'. Based on 27 in-depth interviews with H.E. tutors involving two different GNVQ programmes, Williams concluded that GNVQs had a high 'exchange value' in H.E. She found that it was welcomed by the majority of tutors and there appeared to be no institutional barriers to the new qualification (Williams, 2000). Indeed, this finding was borne out by Phase III of my own research which is reported later in this chapter. However, when considering its 'use' value as a preparation for learning in an H.E. environment Williams found that:

> *"Many tutors expressed serious doubts about the adequacy of GNVQs in preparing students for the experience of H.E. ... All tutors were happy to accept the GNVQ for entry, but many found GNVQ students ill-prepared to cope with the demands of H.E.".*
>
> *(Williams, ibid.)*

Williams had hypothesised that the 'use' value of GNVQ would be greater than its 'exchange' value in that GNVQs' vocational elements would prepare students for H.E., but it might not be accepted by H.E. tutors. However, the opposite was the case. So what was happening here? Williams points out:

> *"Clear institutional differences did emerge here: not between kinds of H.E.I. but between kinds of course, with far more HND tutors than degree tutors being satisfied with the educational experiences with which the GNVQ had provided students... These*

reservations centred around the ways in which the GNVQ had failed to develop critical thinking skills in students".

(Williams, op.cit.)

Again this echoes concerns expressed by Dr. Collins, Director of Admissions at the University of Lancaster and reported in the TES in 1995 (Nash, 1995a). It also raises the issues of the philosophical contradictions and tensions underpinning the GNVQ model and criticisms from other academic researchers (Bates et. al., 1998; Bloomer, 1998; Hodkinson, 1998), which will be reviewed in Section 8.4 of this chapter.

Moving on to the first sub-question attached to Key Question 1:

SQ1. How acceptable was GNVQ Health & Social Care on its own, or in combination with GCE A-Levels or other additionality?

This is a complex question and involves differential circumstances which require clarification. At one level 'additionality' is a perfectly reasonable requirement for some H.E. programmes as a paper published by the FEU/UCAS (1995) acknowledges:

"Although GNVQs are recognised by many H.E.I.s for progression purposes, it is not unusual for some enhancement of, or addition to, the GNVQ to be required, especially for a student to be offered a place on a degree programme. However, this is

consistent with the alignment between Advanced GNVQs and GCE A-Levels ...

Although two GCE A-Levels are usually the minimum requirement for entry to a degree, more than the minimum is usually required to obtain a place on the programme".

(FEU/UCAS, 1995 p. 2)

However, much depends on the *type* of H.E. course as well as the *content* of the H.E. programme as evidence from my Phase II and III fieldwork demonstrated. The FEU/UCAS also point out:

"An H.E.I. might accept the GNVQ alone for HNDs in Science, Engineering and Mathematics, for example, but require the addition of a GCE A-level in Mathematics or a Science for entry to the BSc(Hons) programme in these areas".

(FEU/UCAS, ibid. p.3)

Likewise, Williams draws similar conclusions from her research:

"There was an extremely wide range of admission requirements, partly reflecting different academic standards demanded by different types of institution, but also reflecting differences between courses at different levels." *(Williams, 2000 p. 355)*

Nevertheless, weaknesses in the knowledge base of GNVQs could impede students' progression to H.E. and their subsequent performance on some courses within it. As the FEU/UCAS conclude:

> *"GNVQs are broader than the qualifications they may replace (typically the BTEC National Diploma), and in some cases tutors have suggested that, although the general skills and abilities are those which are necessary for H.E. study, GNVQs are too general for progression onto those H.E. programmes where a specialist knowledge base is needed (for example, those in pure sciences or languages)"...*
>
> *"it may be necessary for students to enhance their GNVQ with another qualification - GCSE, GCE A Levels or other vocational qualifications".* *(FEU/UCAS, ibid. p. 3)*

Indeed, in 1995 'additionality' was expected by H.E. admissions tutors but this carried implications for 'parity of esteem' as the FEU/UCAS point out:

> *"Irrespective of the need for a specified GCE A-Level for progression purposes, there is a tendency at the moment for students whose declared intention is to take a degree to be expected to take a GCE A-Level as well as the GNVQ"...*

"However, this tendency should not become the rule since it could undermine attempts to let the qualification earn parity of esteem as a route to H.E.". *(FEU/UCAS, ibid.)*

Two years later, in the summer of 1997, a research project commissioned by FEDA to investigate factors influencing progression opportunities for GNVQ Advanced Health & Social Care students yielded some more evidence on the question of 'additionality'. The study, involving thirty colleges, found that the highest proportions of offers requiring GNVQ at Distinction grade were for degree courses in Physiotherapy, Midwifery, Speech Therapy, Radiography and O.T. Lower proportions were found in Nursing, Podiatry and Social Work. Most offers for degree places in Nursing and Social Work were based on Merit grades, while among Diploma level courses, one third of Project 2000 Nursing offers also required a Merit. Relatively few offers were made to students on Pass grades, with the exception of the sub-degree course 'Project 2000' in Nursing, which accounted for 51% of offers (Moneta et. al. 1998).

Additionality in the form of an A-Level was usually a requirement of the PAM courses (professions allied to medicine). The highest proportions of offers conditional on A-Level were in Physiotherapy, O.T. and Radiography. In some cases, 'additionality' requirements were based on GNVQ students achieving GNVQ Additional units. This particularly applied to Social Work Degree offers, but also included some O.T., Midwifery, Nursing and Radiography offers - although this varied considerably (Moneta et. al. ibid). Work experience requirements were attached to 21% of O.T. offers, 17% of Midwifery degrees, 14% Nursing degrees and 6% Radiography degrees. With

non-vocational degrees, the majority of offers were conditional upon students achieving Merit grades, though Distinctions were required for some degree courses. Moneta et. al., (1998) concluded that for many courses, both with and without professional qualifications, there was no consistent pattern of entry requirements.

Between 1992-1998 concerns about progression to H.E. was certainly an issue for many GNVQ students. Evidence from my Phase I research indicated that of the 105 students in my sample who had applied to H.E., 40% of them had decided to take an additional A-Level to enhance their chances of getting into University. More recently however, with changes brought about by Curriculum 2000, evidence from H.E. tutors in my Phase III fieldwork (see Chapter 7), indicated that the new A-Level tariff (or 'points system') for H.E. entry was beginning to blur the distinctions between GNVQs and A-Levels and that 'additionality' was becoming irrelevant.

This raises another sub Key Question:-

(SQ2) Was this GNVQ more acceptable in some H.E. establishments than in others?

Evidence on this question is more ambivalent and complex to interpret because of the difficulty in isolating the range of variables. Nearly three quarters of the students in my research study obtained places at post-1992 universities, 16% went to pre-1992 universities and 12% to colleges of H.E. Although the statistics indicate that student progression was predominantly to

the post-1992 universities, it is difficult to conclude whether GNVQs were therefore *less acceptable* in the pre-1992 universities. It could be that GNVQ students tended to apply for vocational degrees and diplomas which were *more likely* to be offered in post-1992 universities. Certainly, my interviews with H.E. tutors did not pick up any level of discrimination against GNVQ students. On the contrary, admissions policies in H.E.I.s were usually set at institutional level and H.E. tutors complied with these and welcomed non-standard entrants as the following comment illustrates:

> *"We would consider them* (GNVQs) *alongside ACCESS students as suitable for our courses. We run Open Days and have local F.E. Colleges attend who are running F.E. Courses - so yes, from that point of view, we do consider them as suitable".*
>
> *(M.B.) Admissions Tutor*

There was some evidence that GNVQ students were filtering themselves out by not applying to the pre-1992 universities as the following extract from Williams' research interviews indicates, although her study focused on GNVQ Hospitality & Catering and GNVQ Retail - rather than Health & Social Care.

> *"We are in principle very supportive of receiving GNVQs on our courses. We would like to increase our uptake, to look at different routes in. We'd like to encourage them. But they apply to us less than to the new universities. We only get a trickle coming through to us. Perhaps our approach doesn't attract*

them. It's traditional here, not modular. In some of the newer universities you get far more options and few compulsory units".
(H.E. Tutor pre-1992 University) *(Williams, 2002 p.356)*

In other cases GNVQ students were offered places at pre-1992 universities, but did not achieve the specified grades.

"Not many came through. Our problem is that we do make offers to them but they don't usually meet the offer".
(H.E. Tutor - pre-1992 University) *(Williams, ibid.)*

Thus it appears that issues revolving around *student choice* were operating at the micro level of 'policy-implementation', rather than any discriminatory admissions policies or practices by H.E.I.s.

This brings us to another Key Question.

(SQ3) If GNVQ Health & Social Care students progressed to H.E. how did they themselves feel that they had coped with their H.E. course, namely, with the academic content and teaching and learning styles there?

The students' own perceptions of their progress triangulated quite well with those of their H.E. tutors. The majority of the students in my follow-up sample felt that they had made good progress by the end of their first year in H.E., but it had been an up-hill struggle for some. GNVQ students were happiest with the practical, client-based aspects of their H.E. programme.

They felt most comfortable with the academic aspects where their GNVQ knowledge overlapped with that on their H.E. course. Generally speaking GNVQ Health & Social Care had given them a useful grounding across a wide range of disciplines, but they found the higher level work and standards required in H.E., challenging. Indeed, some GNVQ students felt under considerable pressure.

The major difficulties reported were developing essay-writing skills, analysis and synthesis, referencing and coming to terms with science-based modules and unseen examinations. Some interesting data emerged on the extent to which the GNVQ teaching and learning styles meshed with those in H.E. Where the teaching and learning styles at the H.E.I. involved mass lectures, was science-based and examination oriented, this combination caused considerable stress for some GNVQ students, even those with GNVQ at Distinction level. This lack of continuity between the two teaching and learning styles may be a fundamental reason for the non-completion rates among GNVQ students during their first year at university. This needs further investigation.

8.2.4 Key Questions and Findings - Phase III Fieldwork

So how did students' perceptions triangulate with those of their H.E. tutors? This raises another Key Question and related sub-question.

KQ3: Did the H.E. tutors identify any particular strengths and weaknesses in GNVQ students on undergraduate courses?

(SQ1) How well did GNVQs prepare students for independent learning within an H.E. environment?

Some H.E. tutors (Phase III research) reported wide variations in the ability range of GNVQ students, with mature students being the strongest academically. Generally speaking GNVQ students were found to be in the lower half of the ability range in the H.E. intake, and they certainly struggled with the academic level of the work. They needed more help with the assignments and tended to score lower marks relative to other non-GNVQ students.

The main problems identified by the H.E. tutors were weaknesses in theoretical and conceptual areas, in particular, how to structure and write essays and coping with three hour examinations. Depth of knowledge was a major hurdle for GNVQ students, particularly with science-based subjects and courses. According to the H.E. tutors, GNVQ students were generally not as well prepared for H.E. as other students and their study skills were lacking. They were less able to analyse a piece of theoretical work and less comfortable working in large groups or in a mass lecture situation, where note-taking proved problematic for them.

However, GNVQ students were not without their strengths which included working in small groups, oral presentations, interpersonal and communication

skills, and practical elements involving client-based skills and clinical practice. Compared with A-Levels students, GNVQ students seemed to perform best in an enquiry-based learning context and small group work , and their motivation and commitment was often perceived as stronger. So what implications does this have for GNVQ student progression to H.E.?

KQ3: (SQ2) Was there any need for "accommodation" in the teaching and learning styles in H.E. undergraduate programmes in respect of GNVQ students, or was there a good 'fit'?

Evidence from H.E. tutors indicated that there were some major weaknesses in GNVQ students' knowledge and skills which affected their ability to adapt to the academic requirements of H.E. programmes. This was particularly noticeable on some H.E. courses than others and in some H.E.I.s than others. GNVQ students adapted best to the teaching and learning styles on HND programmes and in H.E.I.s where the teaching and learning styles involved assignments, continuous assessment and enquiry-based learning. However, GNVQ students struggled most on degree courses where teaching and learning styles focused on more traditional methods of delivery involving the transmission of science-based subject knowledge, large lectures and three hour examinations. Indeed, Abramson and Jones (2001) found a high correlation between GNVQ first year undergraduate non-completion and the level of student preparedness for teaching and learning in H.E.

Clearly, either GNVQ students needed to apply to H.E.I.s and to courses where the teaching and learning styles meshed with those in their GNVQ

programmes, or H.E.I.s needed to modify their teaching and learning styles to cater for the wider range of non-standard entrants, as well as providing 'bridging courses' to help these students to adapt to the academic demands of their new environment. Such accommodation by H.E.I.s was critical to facilitate student retention.

8.3 Review of the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods

The research methodologies used in this study have been selected from two competing theoretical perspectives within the social sciences, each of which are based on different philosophical assumptions about the relationship between social structure and social action. On the one hand, positivist perspectives assume that there is an 'objective' social reality 'out there' and independent of individuals, and as with the 'natural sciences' there are 'laws' waiting to be discovered. Positivists tend to use quantitative research techniques involving large-scale social surveys or official statistics in order to make generalisations about the 'whole'. By contrast, interpretivists argue that there are fundamental differences between the 'social' and the 'natural' worlds and these can only be studied by qualitative techniques involving observation or in-depth research. Hence the task of the social researcher is to understand how the 'actors' in a particular context define and interpret their social world. While positivists have been accused of treating social phenomena non-problematically, interpretivists have been criticised for treating each social situation as unique, and thus taken to its extreme, generalisation for them is impossible.

However, by accepting that social reality is multi-faceted, and by adopting a range of complementary research techniques involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches, a more balanced view can be obtained on the particular social structures and social processes under study. My research has attempted to do this, although it is recognised that there are also constraints and limitations with this combined approach.

My research involved a purposive longitudinal study of 146 GNVQ students from four F.E. colleges. A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was used initially to tap students' perceptions of the new vocational curriculum and their particular career aspirations. Phase I of the research provided some useful baseline data using frequency counts of students' characteristics, their numbers by course, college, social class, race and sex as well as their career choices, applications to H.E., additionality and first hand perceptions of their GNVQ course. Although this method achieved a 100% response rate, the questionnaire contained a number of problems and ambiguities despite its trial in the pilot study, and some of the students' answers were difficult to code at the analysis stage. With hindsight, had more pre-coded questions been used, this would have yielded more standardised data for comparative purposes but at the cost of losing responses in students' own words.

The use of official statistics from UCAS and other sources provided a more macro picture of what was happening regarding progression to higher education courses between 1996 - 2001. However they did not permit a more

detailed level of analysis by GNVQ programme areas and hence may have obscured some important differences between GNVQ and GCE A-Level entrants. There was also an absence of official statistics from HESA (the Higher Education Statistical Agency) on GNVQ student drop-out rates nationally from H.E. programmes, and my study had to rely on research reported from individual H.E.I.s.

The Phase II follow-up stage of the research suffered from some operational constraints for example, sample mortality, since the students from one college could not be pursued and seven students from another college who had ostensibly progressed onto particular H.E. courses, could not be traced. Nevertheless, the research provided some in-depth data on aspects of teaching and learning processes in H.E.I.s experienced by a small sample (18) of GNVQ Health & Social Care students, which could be triangulated with Phase III of the research, namely, the perceptions of their H.E. tutors.

Thus my research has attempted to achieve what Anderson refers to as 'internal validity' in that the results obtained are true for those participating in the study (Anderson, 1995). However, it is recognised that the sample sizes, particularly at Phase II and III of the fieldwork are small, and there may not be sufficient 'external validity' to enable wider generalisations.(Anderson, 1995)

While the uniqueness of these students and tutors and the sample size inevitably preclude widescale generalisations, they nevertheless provide some

tentative insights into what was happening at a 'grass roots' level and the validity and reliability of the findings were enhanced by triangulation with other data and similar research studies. Moreover, the fieldwork shed light on some of the Key Questions and enabled these to be answered.

From a theoretical perspective point of view, although research based on phenomenological perspectives can lead to a position of extreme 'relativism' where the uniqueness of interactions between actors in particular social situations preclude any generalisations, nevertheless, some 'moderatum generalisations' can be made. As May and Williams argue

> *"if X occurs in situation S, it is likely that in a situation resembling S, X may well occur in the future. Thus the researcher is asserting at least the existence of some similarities (however weak) between situations. This assertion seems far more plausible than its denial for if it is the case (as phenomenologists would assert) that we can employ a repertoire of typifications in the lifeworld, then these are forms of everyday moderatum generalisations and precisely the means by which the researcher can know the world of the researched".*
>
> *(May and Williams, 1998 pp. 8-9)*

Moreover, this study has yielded some useful hypotheses for future research about progression from current post-16 teaching and learning environments to different higher education courses and contexts.

8.4 Policy implementation - conflict or consensus?

There is considerable debate amongst management theorists whether organisational change is brought about by a 'top-down' process or a 'bottom -up' one. Is policy espousal and policy implementation a simple, linear process, involving rational decision-making between alternative strategies by policy-makers which are then implemented by personnel further down the organisational hierarchy? Or is it a more complex, dynamic, interactive process involving policy-makers and stakeholders?

Research into 'Organisation Development' has identified some 'necessary' conditions which must be met for the successful implementation of policy (Cerych and Sabatier 1986). (See Chapter 2, Figure 2.1). However, when reviewing the Government's policy on GNVQs, it was clear that a number of these were not met, or they were partly met, but not sustained. Thus although the Government initially created a lot of interest in the new vocational qualification during the consultative process and allocated a large amount of money and incentives for its phased implementation in schools and colleges, the philosophy on which GNVQs were based was fundamentally flawed. However, Government agencies such as NCVQ would not recognise this, and attempted to control the 'official research agenda' (Ecclestone, 1998) and press releases, while phasing out other vocational awards, to ensure that 'the policy innovation had priority over competing demands' (See model by Cerych and Sabatier 1986, Chapter 2, Figure 2.1).

The new curriculum was explicitly promoted by NCVQ as in the 'liberal-progressive tradition', encouraging 'active' and 'participative' learning and enabling student choice and self-actualisation. (Jessup, 1991; Coward, 1994a; Oates and Harkin, 1995). However, a growing body of 'dissenting research' produced by a number of *independent* academic researchers identified some fundamental tensions and contradictions between competing ideologies which were subsumed within the GNVQ model. 'Progressivism', the 'new vocationalism', 'technical rationalism' and 'free marketism' did not lie comfortably together, and the model was not working in practice. Thus despite the rhetoric of 'progressivism', in reality the pedagogy of GNVQs did not empower students and the behaviouristic, competence-based assessment model was unworkable. As Bates et. al. (1998) argued, learner autonomy was highly circumscribed in practice and ambiguous. On the contrary, detailed specifications with tightly specified outcomes, externally set end of unit tests plus requirements for evidence of action-planning and evaluation, resulted in a very high level of prescription. Assessment overload led to high non-completion and drop-out rates among students, thus undermining Government policy objectives. Moreover, the commitment of some stakeholders was not sustained.

Thus in terms of Cerych and Sabatier's model (see Chapter 2, Figure 2.1) although initially the policy-makers had 'clear and stable policy objectives' regarding GNVQs, and 'allocated substantial financial resources' for their implementation while ensuring that the 'policy innovation had priority over competing demands', there were serious ideological flaws in the GNVQ

model. The policy-makers did not ensure 'that the causal theory underpinning the policy reform' was 'correct and adequate' and this undermined the 'stable environment in which the policy was being implemented'. Moreover widespread concern about the exchange value of GNVQs in higher education, and its 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels, undermined the 'expectation of solid outcomes inherent in the policy'. Thus the 'necessary conditions' set out in Cerych and Sabatier's model were not met, and even if they had been, they were not 'sufficient' to ensure the policy implementation without some distortion or modifications by stakeholders (Trowler, 2003).

NCVQ's 'official research programme' ignored the growing body of 'dissenting research' at its peril, and focused on the recommendations from the Capey Report (1996) and technical strategies to improve the design and delivery of GNVQs. But to no avail. The paradigm was overthrown, GNVQs were substantially changed and then became known as the new AVCEs (Advanced Certificates in Vocational Education) with the introduction of Curriculum 2000.

These micro-political processes help to explain why there was so much divergence between 'policy espousal', 'policy enactment' and 'policy implementation'. Although power-holders may theoretically be in control of agenda-setting and policy-making, policy implementation is a complex non-linear process. The actual outcomes will be the result of a micro-political process involving stakeholders and an incremental approach to 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959).

8.5 The quest for 'parity of esteem'

Since the 1884 Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, successive government reports have unceasingly argued that inadequacies in the skills base of the workforce were undermining the U.K.'s competitiveness. Yet as Barnett (2002) points out, for many years policy-makers neglected Britain's deep-rooted training problems in spite of the stark contrasts with the provision in other European countries. This malaise came to a head in the 1980s with the rise in unemployment, particularly youth unemployment and associated problems.

One of the major changes in education policy initiated under the Conservative Government by the Department of Employment/Manpower Services Commission in the 1980s was the 'new vocationalism'. During the 1980s the old view of training for 'jobs for life' was replaced by a view of a new kind of flexible, empowered worker who would be multi-skilled, adaptable, self-motivated and able to work in teams. This was part of the new post-Fordist vision. The 'new vocationalism' aimed to prepare young people for work in general, rather than a 'job for life'. GNVQs became part of this thinking and these developments.

Thus GNVQs arose out of the Conservative Government's desire to improve the skill levels and economic competitiveness of the country, to increase post-16 participation rates and to bridge the academic-vocational divide by providing a high-status vocational qualification that would enable student

progression to H.E. and/or employment. Indeed, 'parity of esteem' was a major policy objective for the Conservatives which would be achieved by a new 3-tier qualifications track and the introduction of GNVQs (Jessup, 1991). However, the new Labour Government elected in 1997 was more concerned with policies aimed at increasing economic competitiveness and reducing social exclusion, rather than promoting 'parity of esteem' which became a lower priority when they came to power.

So what outcomes were achieved in respect of these Government policies?

Since the late 1980s participation in full-time education among 16-18 years has risen rapidly and an increasing proportion of those staying on at schools and colleges have taken up the new vocational courses and some have progressed to H.E. (FEU, 1994; National Commission on Education, 1995). Indeed, following the introduction of GNVQs in 1992, enrolments rose to 83,000 in 1993 and 161,000 in 1994. However, GNVQs have tended to displace other vocational courses and GCSE re-sits, rather than rivalling A-Levels and have not achieved parity of esteem with the latter. Moreover, increasing participation rates have shifted the focus of education policy from 'quantity' to 'quality', as low completion, pass and progression rates among those students staying on at post-16 became a cause for concern. (FEFC, 1994; 1995; OfSTED 1995; National Commission on Education, 1995)

So, to return to the last Key Questions:

KQ4: To what extent did GNVQs gain parity of esteem with A-Levels?

SQ1: Did GNVQs 'bridge the academic-vocational divide' and from whose perspective?

SQ2: To what extent were Government policy objectives regarding GNVQs achieved?

The quest for 'parity of esteem' was not new. It was part of a long-standing debate that can be traced back to the eighteenth century, where high-status academic courses held sway above low status vocational ones. (Finegold et. al., 1990; Raffe, 1992).

Much depends on how 'parity of esteem' is defined and measured. At its simplest level and applied to the GNVQ/A-Level context, it means that the two qualifications are held in equal regard by stakeholders and that they have the same 'exchange value' in higher education or employment. However, although the Government officially clarified the equivalence of GNVQs in relation to A-Levels for entry to H.E., between 1992 - 2000 the two qualifications competed on very unequal terms. GNVQs recruited from the same post-16 ability pool as A-Levels, but they attracted students predominantly from the lower ability range. Moreover, the nature, type, range of curricula and teaching and learning styles were very different. GNVQs involved a new, broad, multi-disciplinary curriculum with practical, student-centred, collaborative learning and were linked to the world of work. By contrast, A-levels, established since 1951, were academic, theoretical and

essay-based. They were highly respected by employers and regarded by Government Ministers as 'the gold standard'. Such 'differences' did not engender equality. As Carol Taylor Fitz-Gibbon points out:

> *"Separate but equal was deemed to be impossible in the famous legal judgement on segregated schooling in the United States"*
> *(Fitz-Gibbon in Edwards et. al., 1997 p. 29)*

Likewise, despite the stated policy aim, the tripartite system of secondary education set up by the 1944 Education Act failed to achieve 'parity of esteem' between the three different types of schools, separated (usually) by different buildings, different curricula and different examinations.

So what conclusions can be drawn about 'parity of esteem' from the perspective of the different stakeholders?

From a students' perspective, GNVQs certainly provided an alternative route to H.E. for *some* students. Thus in terms of entry requirements, GNVQs achieved an 'exchange value' in respect of H.E. and by 2001 significant numbers of GNVQ students were gaining entry to a range of higher education courses. However, much depended on the *type* and *standard* of the H.E. programmes as well as the teaching and learning styles used within them. GNVQ students fared best where they progressed to vocationally-focused diploma and degree courses and where the H.E. teaching and learning styles provided a natural extension to those which they had experienced on their GNVQ programmes. However, GNVQs did not prepare students as well as

GCE A-Levels in essay-writing skills, analysis and synthesis, or note-taking in mass lecture situations and coping with three hour unseen examinations. Thus from a students' perspective GNVQs provide a stepping-stone to higher education, but not a complete bridge. There were some substantial shortfalls in the GNVQ curriculum that GNVQ students needed to make up in order to successfully function on H.E. courses, and indeed, to complete them.

From the H.E. tutors' perspectives, the picture is more mixed. GNVQs appear to have achieved some degree of 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels in terms of their 'exchange value' for admission purposes, but not in terms of what Williams refers to as 'use value' (Williams, 2000). Inadequate subject knowledge and poor study skills were identified by H.E. tutors in her study as key weaknesses in the new vocational courses. This resulted in some H.E.I.s introducing bridging programmes to rectify these deficits in order to facilitate GNVQ students' retention on H.E. programmes.

From the Government's perspective, in spite of all the time and money poured into the development of GNVQs between 1992-2000, 'parity of esteem' with A-Levels was not achieved. GNVQs certainly increased participation rates post-16 encouraged by Government funding mechanisms, and they provided a different type of post-16 curriculum, but these policy goals were undermined by high GNVQ drop-out and non-completion rates, particularly between 1994-1997. Furthermore, vociferous criticisms from stakeholders and dissenting research from independent academics, substantiated by evidence from the inspectorate reports, Capey (1995) and Dearing (1996), resulted in

major revisions to the original GNVQ model and changes in policy direction with Curriculum 2000.

But why was 'parity of esteem' so difficult to achieve between GNVQs and A-Levels? This question is perhaps best answered by another group of stakeholders, namely, the independent academic researchers. Firstly, as Edwards et. al. point out, there were deeply embedded cultural factors which undermined the quest for 'parity of esteem'.

> *"The persistent devaluing of vocational education, although increasingly challenged in policy rhetoric, reflects entrenched assumptions about the kinds of learning appropriate for future leaders and for even their most skilled followers. Different qualifications, or the lack of them at all, have served to allocate young people to different levels in the labour market".*
>
> *(Edwards et. al., 1997 p.1)*

GNVQs were no exception. Taken by less able students who were recruited predominantly from the working classes and who progressed predominantly to post-1992 universities, it was evident that class factors were still operating.

Spours argues that the root of the problem can be traced to a number of weaknesses endemic in the English education system, which have tended to undermine all broad-based vocational qualifications. Firstly, GNVQs were located in a divided qualifications system and their juxtaposition with the A-Level 'gold standard' inevitably resulted in them being perceived as 'second

best'. Secondly, broad vocational qualifications have always been associated with 'low achievers' and despite the huge increases in the number of GNVQ students since the initial pilot scheme in 1992, they were still outnumbered by A-Level students by more than two to one (Spours, 1995b). As Spours points out:

> *Low status is not simply confirmed by low volume of participation but also by low prestige linked to selection and progression. A-Levels (at least the upper grades) are more highly regarded because their selection role has provided a clear route to traditional universities. Vocational qualifications also now provide an alternative route to higher education, in numbers proportionate to A-Levels, but overwhelmingly to the new universities".*

He concludes:

> *"The increased presence of GNVQs alongside A-Levels has intensified rather than reduced the debate about 'parity of esteem' and the relative status of vocational qualifications".*
>
> *(Spours in Hodgson and Spours, 1999 p. 59)*

Thirdly, GNVQs have also suffered (along with other broad vocational qualifications) from a lack of recognition by employers, who tended to use academic qualifications for selecting employees (Spours, 1999; Malthouse, 1998). Thus Spours argues that A-Levels retained a high 'exchange value' in

both education and employment contexts while GNVQs remained 'second best'.

Indeed, Spours and other academics argue that the design of GNVQs was fundamentally undermined by the adoption of the NVQ competence-based methodology. Thus the GNVQ outcomes-based learning approach was heavily criticised by a range of 'stakeholders' for its bureaucratic assessment and grading system and for fragmenting knowledge and understanding. (Smithers, 1993; Hyland, 1994; Wolf, 1995; Young, 1995). Moreover the wide range of approaches to assessment and grading of GNVQs and the confusion amongst teachers about GNVQ specifications and course design, undermined the reliability and validity of the award.

As Gleeson and Hodkinson (1995) argue, GNVQs were a political solution of the former Conservative Government to address the need for new vocational qualifications, while leaving the A-Level 'gold standard' untouched. But as with all previous tripartite frameworks, it was the middle track that was effectively squeezed, as GNVQs had to be all things to all people and were being pulled in two different directions. Indeed, the three-tier qualifications track, instead of achieving the Government's policy objective of rationalising the plethora of qualifications, merely served to proliferate them.

The attempts by Dearing (1996) to paper over the academic-vocational divide by retaining the three broad pathways in the qualifications track, and encourage a 'pick and mix' approach by students across academic and

vocational modules, are not likely to be successful, and may result in even more divisive triple-track routes post-16. As Griffin and Gray point out (2000) the changes introduced by Curriculum 2000, namely, the introduction of an AS (Advanced Subsidiary) award and the new six-module Advanced GNVQ, although offering students more flexibility, leaves the basic triple-track structure unchanged.

Moreover, the 'academic drift' evident in the changes to GNVQs over the 8 year period of this study may have gone too far as the following comments from an article in the Times Educational Supplement in 2002 indicate.

> ***"Students reject vocation A-levels"***
>
> *"Students are quitting the new vocational A-level courses in droves because they find them too academic and inflexible, college managers have warned.*
>
> *Some colleges say the courses are as hard as a Higher National Diploma and many department heads are switching back to the old B.TEC qualifications. The Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) was designed to replace the old advanced GNVQ with a two-year qualification equivalent to the A-level. But many colleges say some exam boards have made it too academic.*

Eileen Carpenter, vocational A-level business co-ordinator for Barking College, said: "AVCEs are as hard as HNDs. Students who would have chosen advanced GNVQ are looking at AS/A2 levels because they've heard they are easier." (Hoare, 2002 p.7)

So has the wheel come full circle with the implementation of yet another policy option and where does this leave the 'parity of esteem' debate?

Some academics argue that the elusive 'parity of esteem' cannot be achieved within an academic/vocational framework. The problems can only be remedied by the introduction of a single unified qualifications system accompanied by reforms of the labour market - a solution put forward by the Institute of Public Policy Research as long ago as 1990 (IPPR, 1990) and the National Commission on Education (Raffe and Surridge, 1995). Thus to conclude, GNVQs certainly provided a 'stepping-stone' for *some* students to higher education, but not a complete 'bridge'.

8.6 Lessons for the future

The above analysis carries a number of implication for future 'policy espousal', 'policy enactment' and 'policy implementation'. Firstly, education policy-making is certainly not a simple, linear, 'top-down' process involving the rational choice of a policy from a range of possible options. It is a complex, dynamic, sometimes non-rational process which is mediated by a number of less predictable factors which derive from the competing interests of different stakeholders and random circumstances, which converge

particularly at the implementation stage. The implementation of the new vocational policy on GNVQs was no exception.

Initial consultations with stakeholders were 'notional' and did not involve independent academic researchers prior to the policy-espousal stage. Instead the Conservative Government adopted the NVQ competence-based assessment model from the training context, relying on the judgement of its most ardent proponents and it was decided to drive the policy through, come what may. However, the policy-makers lacked vision and ignored the historical context of nearly a century of the academic-vocational divide and previous attempts to achieve 'parity of esteem'. They neglected to look at the whole curriculum picture of the 14 -19 age group nor did they anticipate the difficulties that might emerge for stakeholders at the operational level in schools and colleges, in particular, the feasibility of importing the NVQ competence-based assessment model from the part-time training context, to the full-time, general education context.

Moreover the GNVQ 'pilot' was too short and the curriculum went mainstream before the model had been adequately tested and any problems ironed out. The Government went to great lengths to implement the new policy by setting up an agency namely, NCVQ, to oversee the process. However NCVQ also controlled 'the official research programme' by only funding research projects that suited their agenda, and ignored the outcomes of any 'dissenting research' from independent academics. This resulted in

policy-makers and their official agencies fighting a rear-guard action when serious problems and criticisms emerged which they could not suppress.

Furthermore, by not having a vision of all parts of the education system, including students' progression to H.E. and employment, key areas were neglected by the policy-makers or only addressed retrospectively. For example, they did not ensure that the admissions policies at H.E.I.s incorporated GNVQs from the outset and they relied on local 'compact' arrangements with H.E.I.s being set up by teachers and lecturers.

Again, there are important lessons to be learnt at the micro level of policy implementation. With the expansion of higher education and the move towards a 'mass' system with over 33% of 18-21 year olds entering H.E. through a range of academic and vocational routes, the research issue now is retention and completion of these students in higher education. As happened with the post-16 sector, increasing student participation in the higher education sector has shifted the policy focus from 'quantity' to 'quality'. Thus, having achieved places in higher education, can these students stay the course? Can they adjust to the demands of the higher level work required in H.E. or will H.E.I.s need to change their teaching and learning strategies to accommodate to vocational students or provide 'bridging courses' for the new entrants who are struggling with the rigor of the required academic knowledge and skills?

Recent public announcements (March 2004) advocating that H.E.I. admissions tutors should adopt a more flexible approach to admissions and not only take into account prospective students' qualifications, but also their 'personal background and other factors' have serious implications for student retention and achievement. At the end of the day, students need to have the requisite knowledge and skills to survive in a rigorous academic environment. Getting over the threshold of an H.E.I. is only one obstacle: staying and completing the course is another. More research needs to be done into clarifying what teaching and learning styles post-16 are necessary to ensure students' smooth transition to, and success in, higher education.

REFERENCES

References

Abramson, M., and Jones, P., (2001) - "Getting students off to a flying start: improving the retention of advanced GNVQ students entering Higher Education" Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Vol. 3 (2), Aug. 2001 pp. 34-37

Ainley, P., and Batley, B. (1997) - "The Business of Learning: staff and student experiences of Further education in the 1990's" - London, Cassell

Ainley, P., and Corney, M., (1990) - "Training for the Future: the rise and fall of the Manpower Services Commission" - London, Cassell

Anderson, G. (1995) - "Fundamentals of Educational Research" - Basingstoke, Falmer Press

Archer, M. (1995) - "Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach" - Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Ashworth, P., and Saxon, J., (1990) - "On Competence" - Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol. 14(2) pp. 3-25

Avis, J., (1991) - "The strange fate of progressive education" - in: Education Group II, Education Limited pp. 114-139 London, Unwin Hyman

Avis, J., (1996) - "The myth of the post-Fordist society" in: Avis, J., Bloomer, M., Esland, G., Gleeson, D., and Hodkinson, P., (1996) - "Knowledge and Nationhood: Education, Politics and Work" - London, Cassell

Avis, J., (1998) - "(Im)possible dream: post-Fordism, stakeholding and post-compulsory education" - Journal of Education Policy Vol. 13 (2) pp.251-263

Avis, J., Bloomer, M., Esland, G., Gleeson, D., and Hodkinson, P., (1996) - "Knowledge and Nationhood: Education, Politics and Work" - London, Cassell

Audit Commission/OFSTED (1993) - "Unfinished Business: Full-time Educational Courses for 16-19 Year Olds" - London, HMSO

Barnett, C., (2002) - "The Verdict of Peace" - London, Pan

Bates, I. (1995) - "The Competence Movement: conceptualising recent research" - Studies in Science Education Vol. 25 pp. 39-68

Bates, I., (1997) - "Problematizing 'empowerment' in Education and Work: an exploration of the GNVQ" - Leeds, School of Education, University of Leeds

Bates, I., (1998a) - "Resisting 'empowerment' and realising power: an exploration of aspects of the GNVQ" - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 11 (2), pp. 187-204

Bates, I., (1998b) - "The 'empowerment dimension in the GNVQ: a critical exploration of discourse, pedagogic apparatus and school implementation" - in : Evaluation and Research in Education Vol. 12 (1) pp. 7-22

Bates, I., Bloomer, M., Hodkinson, P., and Yeomans, D. (1998) - "Progressivism and the GNVQ: context, ideology and practice" - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 11(2), pp. 109-125

Baty, P. (1997) - "GNVQs fail to deliver for higher hopefuls" - The Times Higher Educational Supplement, 6th June

Berger, P. and Luckmann, T., (1961) - "The Social Construction of Reality" - London, Allen Lane

Bernstein, B. (1971) - "On the classification and framing of educational knowledge" - in: Young, M. (Ed.) (1971) Knowledge and Control: new directions for the sociology of education pp.47-69 London, Collier-Macmillan

Bhaskar, R., (1989) - "Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy" - London, Verso

Bloomer, M., (1996a) - "Education for studentship"- in Avis, J., Bloomer, M., Esland,G., Gleeson, D., and Hodkinson, P., (1996) - "Knowledge and Nationhood" - London, Cassell

Bloomer, M., (1996b) - "Learners, learning and GNVQs" a paper presented to British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Lancaster, 11-14th September

Bloomer, M., (1997) - "Curriculum Making in Post-16 Education: the social condition of studentship"- London, Routledge

Bloomer, M., and Haynes, G. (1997) - "Vocational Education in Devon Schools and Colleges: a development study" - Exeter, Exeter University

Bloomer, M., and Hodkinson, P., (1997) - "Moving into F.E.: the Voice of the Learner" - London, FEDA

Bloomer, M. (1998) - " 'They tell you what to do and then let you get on with it': the illusion of progressivism in the GNVQ' " - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 11(2), pp. 167-187

Blyton, P., and Turnbull, P., (Eds.) (1992) - "Re-assessing Human Resource Management" - London, Sage

Boswell, T., (1995) - "Future perfect: Boswell's verdict on the GNVQ" - Business Education To-day March/April, pp. 8-9

Bourdieu, P. (1990) - "In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology" - trans. M. Adamson, Cambridge, Polity

Burke, J. (Ed.) (1995) - "Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQs and other qualifications" - London, Falmer

Burke, J. (1995b) - "Theoretical issues in relation to Jessup's outcomes model" - in: Burke, J. (Ed.) (1995) - "Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQs and other qualifications" - London, Falmer

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G., (1979) - "Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis" - London, Heinemann Educational Books

Capey, J. (1995) - "GNVQ Assessment Review" - The Capey Report, London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

Capey, J. (1996) - "Review of GNVQ Assessment" - The Capey Report, London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

Carvel, J., (1997) - "Tougher testing for vocational courses" - The Guardian 26th August

Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1981) - "Unpopular Education: schooling and social democracy in England since 1944" - London, Croom Helm

Chorlton, W., (1994) - "GNVQ: is it for you?" - CRAC Student Guide, Careers Research Advisory Centre: Cambridge, Hobsons p. 200

Clare, J., - "Vocational studies fail to meet needs of the job market" - The Daily Telegraph, 6th June

Clark, L., (2000) - "Challenge to A-Levels" - Daily Mail, 4th October

Cohen, L., and Manion, L., (1996) - "Research Methods in Education" - London, Routledge

Confederation of British Industry (1989) - "Towards a Skills Revolution, Report of the Vocational Education and Training Task Force" - London, Confederation of British Industry

Confederation of British Industry (1993) - "Routes for Success - Careership, a strategy for all 16-19 year old learning" - London, Confederation of British Industry

Command Paper (1943), - "Educational Reconstruction",- Cmnd. 6458

Coward, R., (1994a) - "GNVQs: a new pathway to H.E." - Newscheck Vol. 4 (8) June 1994 p. 5

Coward, R., (1994b) - "Higher Education extends a cautious welcome to Advanced GNVQ" - Newscheck, Vol. 5 (2) pp. 3-4

Coward, R. (1995a) - "All change for the GNVQ" - Business Education Today March/April p. 3

Coward, R. (1995b) - "Big business wakes up to GNVQs" - Newscheck Vol. 5 (7) May p. 5

Coward, R., (1996) - "GNVQ students make the grade for H.E. entry" - Newscheck Vol. 6 (7), May 1996 pp. 5-6

Crowne, S., (1997) - "Problems more newsworthy than progress" - Times Educational Supplement, 27 June

Crowther Report (1959) - "15 to 18: Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education - England, (Vol. 1)" - London, HMSO

Curtis, J., (1995) - "Advanced GNVQ in Hospitality and Catering" - Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol. 19 (1), Spring, pp. 11-18

Daniel, J., (1995) - Foreword in: Burke, J. (Ed) Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum - London, Falmer

Dawe, A. (1970) - "The two sociologies" - British Journal of Sociology Vol. 21 (2) pp. 207-218

Dearing, R. (1996) - "Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds: full report" - London, SCAA

Denzin, N. (1983) - "Interpretive Interactionism" in: Morgan, G. (Ed.) - "Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research" Beverley Hills, CA, Sage

Department for Education/Employment Department/Welsh Office (1991) - "Education and Training for the 21st Century" - London, HMSO

Department for Education/Employment (1996) - Press Release, 17th April

Department for Education/Employment (1997a) - "Learning and Working Together for the Future: a consultation document" - London, HMSO

Department for Education/Employment (1997b) - "Qualifying for Success: a consultation paper on the future of post-16 qualifications" - London, DfEE

Department for Education/Employment (1998a) - "Departmental Report" - April, London, HMSO

Department for Education/Employment (1998b) - "Learning and Working Together for the Future: a strategic framework to 2002" - November, London, HMSO

Department of Education and Science/Employment Department (1986) - "Working Together: Education and Training"- London, HMSO

Department of Education and Science (1988) - "Advancing A-Levels: Report of the Committee chaired by Professor Higginson" - London, HMSO

Department of Employment/Department of Education and Science (1985) - "Education and Training for Young People" - London, HMSO

Ecclestone, K., (1998) - "Euston Road and the ivory towers: the impact of the GNVQ research industry" - Journal of Education Policy Vol. 13 (6), pp. 679-697

Ecclestone, K., (1999) - "Care or Control: defining learner's needs for lifelong learning" - British Journal of Educational Studies Vol. 48 (4), pp. 332-347

Ecclestone, K., (2000a) - "Autonomy and assessment in post-compulsory education in the U.K." Journal of Education and Work Vol.13(2), pp.141-163

Ecclestone, K., (2000b) - " Bewitched, bothered and bewildered: a policy analysis of the GNVQ assessment regime"- Journal of Education Policy Vol. 15 (5) pp. 539 -558

Edwards, R. and Usher, R., (1996) - "Post-modernism and Education"- London, Routledge

Edwards, T., Fitzgibbon, C., Hardman, F., Haywood, R., and Meacher, N. (1997) - "Separate but Equal? A-Levels and GNVQs" - London, Routledge

Ellis, P. (1995) - "Standards and the outcomes approach"- in: Burke, J. (Ed.) (1995) - "Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQs and other qualifications" - London, Falmer

Etzioni, A. (1967) - "Mixed Scanning: a Third Approach to Decision-making" - Public Administration Review Vol. 27 (5) pp. 385-392

Finegold, D., Keep, E., Miliband, D., Raffe, D., Spours, K., and Young, M. (1990) - "A British 'Baccalaureat': Ending the Division between Education and Training" - IPPR Education and Training Paper No. 1, London, Institute of Public Policy Research

Finegold, D., and Soskice, D. (1991) - "The Failure of Training in Britain: analysis and prescription" - in Esland, G. (ed.) "Education and Training and Employment, Volume 1: Educated Labour - the Changing basis of Industrial Demand", Wokingham, Addison-Wesley

Finn, D., (1984) - "The Manpower Services Commission and the Youth Training Scheme: a permanent bridge to work, in: Dale, R. (Ed.) Education, Training and Employment: towards a new vocationalism? pp. 111-125 Oxford, Pergamon

Finn, D., (1986) - " YTS: the jewel in the MSC's crown? - in: Benn, C. and Fairley, J. (Eds.) Challenging the MSC London, Pluto Press

Finn, D. (1987) - "Training Without Jobs" - London, Macmillan

Fitz-Gibbon, C., (1997) - "Listening to Students and the 50% Framework" - in Edwards, T., Fitzgibbon, C., Hardman, F., Haywood, R., and Meacher, N. (1997) - "Separate but Equal? A-Levels and GNVQs" - London, Routledge

Foskett, N., (1995) - "Marketing, Management and Schools: A Study of a Developing Marketing Culture in Secondary Schools" - Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Southampton

Freire, P., (1972) - "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" - London, Sheed and Wood

Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) (1995) - "The evolution of GNVQs: Enrolment and Delivery Patterns and their Policy Implications: Second Interim Report" - London, Further Education Development Agency, Institute of Education and Nuffield Foundation

Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) (1997) - "GNVQs 1993-97: a national survey report: the final report of a joint project - the evolution of GNVQs: enrolment and delivery patterns and their policy implications" - London, Further Education Development Agency, Institute of Education and Nuffield Foundation

Further Education Funding Council Inspectorate (FEFC) (1994) - "GNVQs in the Further Education Sector in England National Survey Report"- Coventry, FEFC

Further Education Funding Council Inspectorate (FEFC) (1995) - "GNVQs in the Further Education Sector in England National Survey Report"- Coventry, FEFC

Further Education Unit (FEU) (1994) - "GNVQs 1993-94: a national survey report: an interim report of a joint project - the evolution of GNVQs: enrolment and delivery patterns and their policy implications" - London, Further Education Development Agency, Institute of Education and Nuffield Foundation

Further Education Unit/Universities and Colleges Admissions Service - (FEU/UCAS) (Feb. 1995) - "General National Vocational Qualifications and Progression to Higher Education" - London, FEU/UCAS

Gadd, K., (1998) - "Advanced Science for Employment" - Past Sixteen Science Issues Vol. 26 pp. 4-6 October

Garfinkel, H. (1967) - "Studies in Ethnomethodology" - Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall

Gleeson, D. and Hodkinson, P. (1995) - "Ideology and curriculum policy: GNVQ and mass compulsory education in England and Wales" - British Journal of Education and Work Vol. 8 (3), pp. 5-19

Goffman, E. (1971) - "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" - Harmondsworth, Penguin

Goode,W., and Hatt, P., (1963) - "Methods in Social Research" - London, McGraw-Hill

Guest, D., (1987) - "Human resource management and industrial relations" - Journal of Management Studies Vol. 24 (5)

Halsall, R., and Cockett, M., (1996) - "Education and Training 14-19: Chaos or Coherence?" - London, David Fulton

Harrop, J., (1992) - "GNVQs: proposals for the new qualification: A Consultation Paper" - London, NCVQ

Harrop, J., (June 1992) - "Response to the Consultation on GNVQs" - London, The NCVQ Monitor, Report 16, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

Harrop, J. (Autumn 1994) - "Quality Enhancements of GNVQs" - The NVQ Monitor, London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

Haywood, R. (1997) - "Links between learning styles, teaching methods and course requirements in GNVQ and A-Level, in: Edwards, T., Fitzgibbon, C., Hardman, F., Haywood, R., and Meacher, N. (1997) - "Separate but Equal? A-Levels and GNVQs" - London, Routledge

Hickox, M., (1995) - "Situating vocationalism" - British Journal of Sociology of Education Vol. 16(2) pp. 153-163

Higgins, T. and Megson, C., (1995) - "GNVQs are good for you: it's official" - Education Vol. 186 (21) 24th November 1995, p. 16

Higham, J., Sharp, P., and Yeomans, D., (1996) - "The Emerging 16-19 Curriculum: policy and provision" - London, David Fulton

Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) (1997) - "Undergraduate non-completion in higher education in England, Report 97/29" - London, HEFC

Hoare, S. (2002) - "Students reject vocation A-levels" - Times Educational Supplement, 26th April

Hodgson, A., and Spours, K., (1997) - "Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications"- London, Kogan Page

Hodkinson, P., (1994) - "Empowerment as an entitlement in the post-16 curriculum" - Journal of Curriculum Studies Vol. 26 (5) pp. 391-508

Hodkinson, P., and Mattinson, K., (1994) - "A bridge too far? The problems facing GNVQ" - Curriculum Journal Vol. 5 (3), pp. 323-336

Hodkinson, P., (1998) - "Choosing GNVQ" - Journal of Education and Work, Vol. 11, pp. 151-165

Hughill, B., (1995) - "Principal goes on leave as college plunges into the red" - The Observer 19th March

Hyland, T., (1994) - "Competence, Education and NVQs: dissenting perspectives" - London, Cassell

Hyland, T., (1998) - "Of Cabbages and Key Skills: exploding the mythology of core transferable skills in post-school education" - Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol. 22 (2) pp. 163 - 172

Illich, I., (1971) - "De-schooling Society" - London, Calder and Boyars

Jessup, G., (1991) - "Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training" - London, Falmer

Jessup, G., (1993) - "The Reform of Qualifications within a Divided System" in: Richardson, W., Woolhouse, J., and Finegold, D. (Eds.) "The Reform of Post-16 Education and Training in England and Wales" - London, Longmans
Jessup, G., (April 1994) - "GNVQ: An Alternative Curriculum Model" - London, NCVQ

Jessup, G., (1995a) - "Characteristics of the GNVQ model" - Newscheck Vol. 5 (3) Summer 1995 pp. 8-11

Jessup, G. (1995b) - "Outcome-based qualifications and the implications for learning, in Burke, J. (Ed.) (1995) - "Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQs and other qualifications" - London, Falmer Press

Knight, P., Helsby, G., and Saunders, M. - "Independence and prescription in learning: researching the paradox of Advanced GNVQs" - British Journal of Educational Studies Vol. 46 (1) pp. 54-67

Knott, R., and James, K. (1994) - "Examining the GNVQ assessment model or the 'old woman who swallowed a fly' " - British Journal of Curriculum and Assessment Vol. 5 (1) Autumn 1994, pp. 12 -21

Kogan, M., (1975) - "Educational Policy-making" - London, Allen and Unwin

Kogan, M. (1978) - "The Politics of Educational Change" - Manchester, Manchester University Press

Kogan, M., (1979) - "Different Frameworks for Education Policy-Making and Analysis" - Educational Analysis Vol. 1 (2) pp. 5-14

Kogan, M., Bauer, M., Bleiklie, I., and Henkel, M. (2000) - "Transforming Higher Education" - London, Jessica Kingsley

Kuhn, T. (1962, 1974) - "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" - Chicago, University of Chicago Press

Layder, D. (1997) - "Modern Social Theory: Key Debates and New Directions"- London, UCL Press

Legge, K. (1995) - "Human Resource Management: Rhetoric and Realities" - London, Macmillan

Lindblom, C.E. (1959) - "The Science of 'Muddling Through' "- Public Administration Vol. 19 pp. 79-99

Littlefield, D., (1994) - "Getting to grips with GNVQ" - Personnel Management Vol. 26 (10) October pp. 89-90

McCullough,G.,(1989) -"The Secondary Technical School" - London, Falmer

McKenzie, G., Powell, J., and Usher, R., (1997) - "Understanding Social Research: Perspectives on Methodology and Practice" - London, Falmer Press

McNeill, P., (1994) - "GNVQ: some implications for H.E." - Journal of Education Policy Vol. 9 (4) July-August, pp. 381-388

Mabey, C., and Salaman, G., (1995) - "Strategic Human Resource Management" - Oxford, Blackwell

Madge, J., (1965) - "The Tools of Social Science" - London, Longman

Malthouse, T.-J. (1998) - "Vocational Training: Institute of Directors Business Comment" - London, Institute of Directors

Manpower Services Commission (MSC) (1975) - "Vocational Preparation for Young People" - Sheffield, MSC

Manpower Services Commission (MSC) (1977a) - "Training for Skills" - Sheffield, MSC

Manpower Services Commission (MSC) (1997b) - "Young People and Work"- Sheffield, MSC

Manpower Services Commission (MSC) (1981) - "A New Training Initiative: a consultation document" - Sheffield, MSC

Manpower Services Commission/Department of Education and Science (MSC/DES) (1986) - "Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales" - London, HMSO

Marchington, M., (1992) - "Managing the Team: A guide to Successful Employee Involvement" - Oxford, Blackwell

Marks, J. (1992) - "No advance on pure gold" - Times Educational Supplement 18th September

May, T., and Williams, M., (1998) - "Knowing the Social World" - Buckingham, Open University Press

Milgram, S. (1963) - "Behavioural study of obedience" - Journal of Abnormal Psychology Vol. 67 pp. 371 -378

Miller, K. (1995) - "Tyneside Progression 2000: Moving on up - Why not? A Study of GNVQs and progression to Higher Education" - Project Report, jointly produced by: University of Newcastle upon Tyne, University of Northumbria, Newcastle LEA, Newcastle College, and Tyneside TEC

Mills, P., (1994) - "GNVQs: research into their acceptability as an entry to Higher Education Business Courses" - unpublished M.Sc., University of Plymouth

Ministry of Education (1943) - "Education Reconstruction"- Command Paper 6458

Ministry of Education (1955) - "Further Education: General Files: Technical Education: (Draft White Paper on Technical Education 1956-57)

Ministry of Education (1956) - "Technical Education" (White Paper), Cmnd. 9703, (Feb.), London, HMSO

Ministry of Education (1959) - "15-18: Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education -England (Vol. 1)", - London, HMSO

Ministry of Education (1963) - "Committee on Higher Education (Chairman Lord Robbins) 1961-1963 Report", - September 23rd 1963, Cmnd. 2154

Moneta, K., Charles, K., and Nankivell, B., - "Factors Influencing Progression Opportunities for Students taking the General National

Vocational Qualification (Advanced) in Health & Social Care" - Unpublished Project commissioned by FEDA, 1998

Morris, A. (1998) - "Non-completion of GNVQs: a FEDA study for the DfEE" - London, Further Education Development Agency

Moser, C. and Kalton, G., (1977) - "Survey Methods in Social Investigation" - London, Heinemann Educational Books

Nash, I., (1994a) - "GNVQ fall victim to its own success" - Times Educational Supplement 11th March

Nash, I, (1994b) - "Vocational A-Level Drop Out Inquiry" - Times Educational Supplement, 9th September

Nash, I. (1995a) - "University tutors slate GNVQs" - Times Educational Supplement, 13th January

Nash, I. (1995b) - "A New Breed Settles into Academic Life" - Times Educational Supplement, 17th February p.14

National Commission on Education (1993) - "Learning to Succeed: A Radical Look at Education Today and a Strategy for the Future" - London, Heinemann

National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (1991) - "General National Vocational Qualifications - Proposals for the New Qualifications: A Consultation Paper" - London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (1994) - "Grading Update" - London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) (1995) - "GNVQ Briefing: information on the form, development and implementation of GNVQs" - London, National Council for Vocational Qualifications

National Council for Vocational Qualifications, Business and Technology Education Council, City & Guilds of London Institute, Royal Society of Arts

Examinations Board, (NCVQ, BTEC, CGLI, and RSA) (1995) - "GNVQ Quality Framework" - London, NCVQ

O'Connor, M. (1995) - "Queuing up for GNVQs" - Times Educational Supplement, 25th January

O'Leary, J., (1994) - "Professor dismisses vocational A-Level results as unreliable" - The Times 25th August

Oates, T., and Harkin, J., (1995) - "From design to delivery: the implementation of NCVQ core skills units" in Burke, J. (Ed.) (1995) - "Outcomes, Learning and the Curriculum: Implications for NVQs, GNVQs and other qualifications" - London, Falmer

Oates, T., (1997) - "Assessment and Achievement", in Hodgson, A., and Spours, K., (1997) - "Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications"- London, Kogan Page

Oates, T., and Hillier, J. (1998) - "Parity of esteem: a surface effect or a deep cause of division?" - Research Issues in Post-Compulsory Education - London

OFSTED (1992) - "GNVQ in Schools: The Introduction of General National Vocational Qualifications, 1992 London, HMSO

OFSTED (1994) - "GNVQs in Schools 1993-94" - London, HMSO

OFSTED (1996) - "Assessment of General National Vocational Qualifications in Schools 1995/96" - London, HMSO

Popper, K., (1965) - "The Logic of Scientific Discovery" - New York, Harper and Row

Pratlet, B., (1994) - "Yes, Ministers". Times Educational Supplement 4th March p. 21

Raffe, D. (1992) - "Participation of 16-18 Year Olds in Education and Training" - NCE Briefing Paper No. 3, National Commission on Education

Raffe, D., and Surridge, P., (1995) - "More of the Same? Participation of 16-18 Year Olds in Education" - NCE Briefing Paper No. 6, National Commission on Education

Rainbow, R., (1993) - "New Models of 16-19 Provision: Case Histories and Emerging Frameworks" - in: Richardson, W., Woolhouse, J., and Finegold, D., (Eds.) "The Reform of Post-16 Education and Training in England and Wales" - Harlow: Longman pp. 87-100

Ranson, S. (1996) - "The future of education research: learning at the centre" - British Educational Research Journal Vol. 22 (5) pp. 523-535

Rein, M. (1983) - "From Policy to Practice" - London. Macmillan

Robinson, P. (1996) - "Rhetoric and Reality: Britain's New Vocational Qualifications" - London, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics

Royal Commission (1968) - "Report of the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employer Associations 1965-1968" - London, HMSO

Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) (1994) - "GCE A and AS Code of Practice" - London

Schutz, A. (1967) - "The Phenomenology of the Social World" - Chicago, Northwestern Press

Searle, J. (1996) - "The Construction of Social Reality" - New York, Free Press

Sharp, P. (1998) - "The beginnings of GNVQs: an analysis of key determining events and factors" - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 11 (3) pp. 293 -311

Shipman, M. (1988) - "The Limitations of Social Research" - Harlow, Longman

Shirtliff, E., (1996) - "Progression to Higher Education From Advanced GNVQ Business: A Case Study"- Occasional Publication No. 5, University of Leeds, Centre for Policy Studies in Education

Silver, H. (1990) - "Education, Change and the Policy Process" - Lewes, The Falmer Press

Skilbeck, M., (1976) - "Three Educational Ideologies" in The Open University E203 Curriculum Design and Development: Ideologies and Values" Milton Keynes, Open University Press

Smithers, A., (1991) - "The Vocational Route into Higher Education" - Manchester, School of Education, University of Manchester

Smithers, A., (1993) - "All Our Futures: Britain's' Education Revolution. A Dispatches Report on Education" - London: Channel 4 Television

Smithers, A., (1995a) - " 16 -19 Education/A-Level Examination Paradox" - Curriculum Journal Vol. 5 (3) Autumn pp. 355-363

Smithers, A., (1995b) - "Unclear route for the rest" - Times Higher Educational Supplement No. 1191 1st September p. 13

Spours, K. (1991) - "The Politics of Progression: problems and strategies in the 14-19 curriculum" in Chitty, C. (Ed.) Post-16 Education: studies in access and achievement pp. 72-86 London, Kogan Page

Spours, K., (1995a) - "Post-Compulsory Education and Training: Statistical Trends, Learning for the Future Project" - Working Paper No. 7, Post-16 Education Centre, University Institute of Education, Centre for Education and Industry, University of Warwick

Spours, K., (1995b) - "The Strengths and Weaknesses of GNVQs: Principles of Design" Working Paper No. 3, Learning for the Future Project, London, Universities of London and Warwick

Spours, K., and Young, M., (1996) - "Dearing and Beyond: Steps and stages to a unified 14-19 qualifications system?" - British Journal of Education and Work Vol. 9 (3), Dec. pp. 5-18

Spours, K. (1997) - "Future of Vocational Qualifications: An Argument for Further Reform" - Lecture, Univ. London Institute of Education 4th February

Stacey, M., (1970) - "Methods of Social Research" - Oxford, Pergamon Press

Stobart, G., (1996) - "The rough guide to GNVQs" - paper presented at the 1996 Conference of the British Educational Research Association September, University of Lancaster

Swailes, S., Entwhistle, P., and Campkin, P., (1998) - "The performance of GNVQ entrants on undergraduate business courses" - Journal of Further and Higher Education Vol. 22 (2) June, pp.211 - 218

Targett, S., and Tysome, T. (1994) - "Chief confuses GNVQ signal" - The Times Higher Educational Supplement 25th February

Taubman, D., (1994) - "The GNVQ Debate" - Forum Vol. 36 (3) pp. 77-80
Tysome, T., and Targett, S., (1995) - "GNVQs Welcomed" - The Times Higher Educational Supplement 30th June

Trowler, P., (2003) - "Education Policy"- London, Routledge, Second Edition

Tysome, T., (1995a) - "Vocational yardstick too crude for equal opportunities" - Times Higher Educational Supplement 17th March p. 4

Tysome, T., (1995b) - "GNVQs Welcomed" - Times Higher Educational Supplement 30th June

Tysome, T. (1995c) - "Troubled Times for GNVQ, Aged Three and a Quarter" - F.E. Now, Issue 19, September 1995

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS/GATE) (1994) - "GNVQs and entry routes to H.E." - Cheltenham, UCAS

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (1995) - "Advanced GNVQ acceptances for UCAS and ADAR: Higher Education Programmes for 1995 Entry"- Cheltenham, UCAS

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (1996) - "In their own words: students talk about GNVQs and Higher Education" - Cheltenham, UCAS

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (1997) - "GNVQs and Higher Education 1997: Opportunities for GNVQ applicants" - Cheltenham, UCAS

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) (2001) - "Facts and Figures"- www.ucas.ac.uk

University of Salford (1998) - "A Guide to GNVQ Progression Routes into Higher Education" - University of Salford booklet, Access Development/FE/HE Consortium

Williams, S., (1999) - "Policy tensions in vocational education and training for young people: the origins of General National Vocational Qualifications" - Journal of Education Policy Vol. 14 (2) pp. 151-166

Williams, S., (2000) - "The Paradox of Assessment: the effectiveness of the GNVQ as a preparation for higher education" - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 13 (3) pp. 349 -365

Williams, S. and Raggatt, P., (1999) - "Governments, markets and vocational qualifications: an anatomy of policy" - London, Falmer Press

Williams, S. and Raggatt, P., (1998) - "Contextualising Public Policy in Vocational Education and Training: the origins of competence-based qualifications policy in the UK" - Journal of Education and Work Vol. 11(3) pp. 275-293

Wolf, A., (1994) - "GNVQ Assessment Report" - Sheffield Employment Department

Wolf, A. (1995) - "Awards that Pay Lip Service to Flexibility" - Times Educational Supplement, 3rd February

Wolf, A.(1995) - "Competence based assessment" - Milton Keynes, OU Press

Wolf, A., (1997a) - "Evolution of GNVQs: Enrolment and Delivery Patterns and their policy Implications" - London: Nuffield Foundation/Further Education Development Agency

Wolf, A., (1997b) - "Promoting the development of key competencies post-Dearing" - Paper presented at British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of York, 11-14th September

Wolf, A., (1997c) - "An unqualified failure: personal view" - Financial Times, 9th June p.16

Yeomans, D. (1998) - "Constructing vocational education: from TVEI to GNVQ" - Journal of Education and Work - Vol. 11 (2) pp. 127 -149

Young, M., (1993) - "A Curriculum for the 21st Century? Towards a New Basis for Overcoming Academic/Vocational divisions" - British Journal of Educational Studies Vol. 41 (3) pp. 203-222

Young, M., (1995) - "Post-Compulsory Education for a Learning Society" - Australian and New Zealand Journal for Vocational Education and Training, Vol. 3 (1) pp. 96 - 115

Young, M., and Watson, J. (Eds.) (1992) - "Beyond the White Paper: The Case for a Unified System at 16+ " - Centre Report No. 8 London, Post-16 Centre, University of London Institute of Education

Young, M., (1998) - "The Curriculum of the Future: from the 'new sociology of education' to a critical theory of learning" - London, Falmer Press

APPENDIX 1

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR GNVQ STUDENTS *(PHASE I FIELDWORK)*

Name of College ....

GNVQ Course & Year ....Tutor Group ....

Your Name .... Date of birth ....Sex ....

Which of the following best describes your ethnic group?

(Please circle one)

black African	Indian	Chinese
black Caribbean	Bangladeshi	white
black - other	Pakistani	other

Father/Mother's occupation ....

Occupation (if you are a Mature Student) ....

Previous secondary school (name & town) ....
....

Qualifications already obtained:-
....
....
....
....
....

Chosen career (if known) ....

1. Why did you enrol on your GNVQ Advanced Level course?
....
....
....
....
....

2. Have you taken a GNVQ course at Intermediate Level?
   YES/NO ***(Please circle one and give grade if applicable)***

3. How does your present GNVQ course differ from previous courses or qualifications which you have taken?
....
....
....

4.a) Are you taking any OPTIONAL or ADDITIONAL GNVQ UNITS?
YES/NO ***(Please circle one)***

b) **If YES,** please list them below ***and say why you have chosen them.***
If NO, please go to Q.5

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

5. a) Are you taking any GCE "A" Levels or other qualifications?
YES/NO ***(Please circle one)***

b) **If YES,** please list them below ***and say why you have chosen them.***
If NO, please go to Q.6

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

6. Have you applied for a place on a University or professional training course this year? **YES/NO** ***(Please circle one)***

If YES, please go to Q.7
If NO, will you apply next year or in the future? (Please say why you have deferred your application) and THEN go to Q.10

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

7. **If YES,** please list the following :-
Course(s) applied for **Establishment** **Required grades** (if known)

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

8. Why have you applied ***for these particular courses ?***

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

9. Why have you applied ***to these particular institutions?***

……
……
……
……
……
……

10. Do you feel that the Teaching and Learning activities on your present GNVQ course will help you ***with your future Higher Education / professional training course?***

YES/NO ***(Please circle one)***

b) **If YES,** how?

……
……
……
……
……
……
……

c) **If NO,** explain why not.

……
……
……
……
……
……

11. a) Do you feel that the Teaching and Learning activities on your present GNVQ course will help you *with your future career?*

YES/NO ***(Please circle one)***

b) **If YES,** how?

……
……
……
……
……
……

c) **If NO,** explain why not.

……
……
……
……
……
……

12. a) Have you undertaken any work experience as part of your GNVQ course?

YES/NO ***(Please circle one)*** **If NO, go to Q. 15**

b) **If YES,** is this done in blocks or on specific days throughout the course?

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

13. a) How many different work placements have you done during the 2-year course?

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

b) What **type** of placement were they? (eg. hospital; school etc.)

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

14. In terms of assisting you to move into H.E./professional training, how valuable do you feel that your work experience has been?

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

15. a) Which of the following teaching and learning styles do you think that you will experience within your H.E./professional training course?
b) Which aspects has your GNVQ course helped ***most?***
c) Which aspects has your GNVQ course helped ***least?***

Formal teaching in large lectures (50 + students)
Formal teaching in smaller classes (15-25 students)
Small group work/seminars (6-10 students)
Tutorials (1:1)
Independent learning by your own reading/research
Essay writing
Report writing
Practical project work
Clinical ward rounds (in hospitals etc.)
OTHER (Please specify)

Thank you for your help

APPENDIX 2

APPENDIX 2

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR GNVQ STUDENTS NOW IN H.E.
(PHASE II FIELDWORK)

Name of student..Date of Interview...................

Date of birth .... Sex .... Ethnic group ....

Home address

....

Tel.No...

Former F.E. College ....

GNVQ grade achieved in August 1997...

Current H.E. course & location.....................................

H.E. Tutor Group....................Date stared ....Duration of course.............

Number of students on this course/year...

Qualification(s) you hope to achieve ....

Chosen career (if known) ....

1.a) Was your present H.E. course/institution the one for which you originally applied in the Autumn/Spring term of 1996-97?

YES/NO

1.b) If no, please explain the reason for this change?

....

....

....

2.a) Did you attend an interview for your present H.E. course?

YES/NO

2.b) If YES, who interviewed you and to what extent was your interviewer familiar with GNVQ?

....

....

3. What progress do you feel that you are making on your current H.E. course?

4. How do you feel you are getting on in comparison with other students on the course?

5. Have your fellow students done a GNVQ course or have they other qualifications?

6. Are there any aspects of your current course which you feel particularly confident with? **Why?**

7. Are there any aspects of the course which you are having difficulties with? **Why?**

8. How does your present H.E. course differ from your previous GNVQ course?

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

9. Do you feel that your GNVQ Advanced course prepared you for your present H.E. course? **If YES,** ***how?***

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

If NO, ***explain why not?***

10.a) Did you undertake any work experience as part of your GNVQ course?
YES/NO **(If NO, go to Q.11)**

b) **If YES,** do you feel that this has helped you with your present H.E. course? ***How?***

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

c) **If NO,** explain why not.

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

11. a) Which of the following teaching and learning styles are you experiencing on your H.E./professional training course?
b) Which aspects has your GNVQ course helped with ***most?***
c) Which aspects has your GNVQ course helped with ***least?***

Formal teaching in large lectures (50 + students)
Formal teaching in smaller classes (15-25 students)
Small group work/seminars (6-10 students)
Tutorials (1:1)
Independent learning by your own reading/research
Essay writing
Report writing
Practical project work
Clinical ward rounds (in hospitals etc.)
OTHER (Please specify)

Thank you for your help

APPENDIX
3

APPENDIX 3

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ADMISSIONS TUTORS/COURSE TUTORS IN H.E.

(PHASE III FIELDWORK)

NAME:- .... H.E.I.:- ....

FACULTY/DEPARTMENT:- ....

ROLE:- .... DATE:- ....

1. How long have you been an *Admissions Tutor/Course Tutor here? (**Delete)*

....

2. How familiar are you with the structure of GNVQs? *(Probe)*

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

3. What is your view of GNVQs? How do you perceive them?

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

4. How do you rate them in relation to other qualifications eg. GCE 'A' Levels, B.TEC National Diplomas, ACCESS courses etc.?

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

5. How are GNVQs viewed by your colleagues within the Faculty/Department?

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

6. How are GNVQs viewed by the University/CHE/HEI generally ?

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

7. Does the University/CHE/HEI have a policy on GNVQs as *entry qualifications* to degree courses/professional training?

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

8. How many GNVQ students do you have on your course? (Please clarify numbers for 1st/2nd/3rd years, if possible)

....

9. How are they getting on with their current Course?

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

10. Do you notice any difference between *them* and students with other entry qualifications? If so, *what?*

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

11. Are there any particular aspects of the Degree course/professional training which your current GNVQ students are particularly confident or adept with? *Why?*

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

12. Are there any particular aspects of the Degree Course/professional training which they are having difficulties with? *Why?*

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

Any other comments:-