

**EXPECTATIONS AND REALISATIONS:**

**EXPERIENCES OF MATURE STUDENTS  
RETURNING TO STUDY IN AN  
INSTITUTION OF PUBLIC SECTOR  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## CONTENTS

### EXPECTATIONS AND REALISATIONS: EXPERIENCES OF MATURE STUDENTS RETURNING TO STUDY IN AN INSTITUTION OF PUBLIC SECTOR HIGHER EDUCATION

#### INTRODUCTION: MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Page 12

Have Changes in Ideology Been Made to Meet Increase of Mature Students in Public Sector Higher Education?

25

#### CHAPTER ONE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC SECTOR HIGHER EDUCATION, NATIONALLY, LOCALLY AND AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

29

The Introduction of Polytechnics into the System of Higher Education

31

The Growth of an Individual Polytechnic

34

Provision for Mature Students in a North-West Polytechnic

41

The Place of the Individual Student in the Polytechnic

45

#### CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

57

How are Mature Students Defined?

57

Mature Students at this Polytechnic

59

The Research Within the Qualitative Paradigm

75

#### CHAPTER THREE: INTO, AND THROUGH THE POLYTECHNIC: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ADULTS LEARNING

89

Into the Polytechnic: Adults in Transition

89

Passing Through the Polytechnic

124

Individuals in the Process of Change

138

Is Self-Direction a Valid Basis for a Separate Theory of Adult Education?

151

#### CHAPTER FOUR: EXPECTATIONS AND REALISATIONS; INTO AND THROUGH THE POLYTECHNIC

160

Before the Course Began - Reasons for Returning to Study After a Break in Education

166

Social Divisions as a Barrier to Returning to Study	169
Age as a Barrier Against Returning to Study ✓	175
Barriers to Entry from the Educational Institutions Themselves ✓	176
Barriers to Access - Financial and Administrative Constraints ✓	180
Where do the Expectations of What it will be like at The Polytechnic Come From?	185
Expectations of the Relationships With Staff at The Polytechnic	194
Expectations of the Other Students	195
Entry into The Polytechnic - The Period and Process of Enrolment	196
Through the Institution: The First Term	203
① * The Realities of Returning to Study - The Initial Problems ✓	205
Combining Study With Life Outside The Polytechnic	209
Developing a Coping Strategy	213
The Return of Coursework - A Yardstick by Which to Measure Performance Within the New Environment	221
The Early Experiences of the Reality of the Teaching Learning Situation	224
Testing the Reality Against Recent Educational Experiences - the Problem of Adjustment	232
Different Subjects - Different Realities	238
The Role of the Staff as Experienced by the Student	248
What is a "Good Tutor?"	255
Staff Availability ✓	257
The Staff as Assessors of Coursework	259
Who Controls the Knowledge?	263
Who Controls the Choice of Coursework?	266
The Need for Feedback	271



Overall Comments on the Reality of Returning to Study	276
CONCLUSION: MATURE STUDENTS - EXPLANATIONS OR RATIONALISATIONS?	288
The Role of Interactive Research in Changing Provision for Adults in Public Sector Higher Education	292
The Reality of the Return to Study	303
Implication for Policy in the Polytechnic	314

## APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Unpublished DES Statistics	Page 1
Appendix 2 Provision for Mature Student Access to Lancashire Polytechnic	14
Appendix 3 Individual Biographies	21
Alan: Diploma in Social Studies: Two Year CQSW Course	
Clive: BSc Psychology: Three Year Degree Course	
Janet: Applied Social Studies: Four Year Degree Course	
Kate: Applied Social Studies: Four Year Degree Course	
Philip: One Year Postgraduate Diploma	
Appendix 4 The Behaviour Event Interview	92



## TABLES AND DIAGRAMS

Table 1  
Open University U.K.

*Page*

Table 2  
Course Distribution of Original Sample

Table 3  
Applicants in Original Sample not Taking up a Place at this Polytechnic

Table 4  
Details by Course of Applicants who did not Respond to Invitation to Take Part in Research Project

Table 5  
Sex and Marital Status of Students in the Chosen Group

Table 6  
A profile of the Sample of Mature Students

Table 7  
Research Interview Schedule

Table 8  
Sociodemographic Factors of Sample of 22 Adults in Original Sample

Table 9  
Initial Reasons for Returning to Study Given by the Group

## DIAGRAMS

Diagram One  
HE First Year Mature Home Students - GB: Sex and Mode

Diagram Two  
HE First Year Mature Home Students - GB: By Mode and Type of Institution

Diagram Three  
First Year Mature and Home Students - GB: Polytechnics and Colleges: Full-time and Part-time

Diagram Four  
First Year Mature Home Students - GB: University: Full-time and Part-time

Diagram Five

First Year Mature Home Students - GB: By Mode and Level of Study

Diagram Six

Some Relationships Between the two Major Reasons for Learning and Adult's Self Concept

Diagram Seven

Houle's Typology.

Diagram Eight

Reason Given at First Interview for Returning on Houle's Typology

Diagram Nine

Reason Perceived by me After Third Interview by Houle's Typology

Diagram Ten

Relationship Between Demographic Indicators and Changes in Life Circumstances

### ILLUSTRATIONS

Student Distribution at Lancashire Polytechnic	Pages
Full-Time - by age and faculty	1985/6
Part-Time - by age and faculty	1985/6
Full-Time - by sex and faculty	1985/6
Part-Time - by sex and faculty	1985/6
Full-Time - by age and faculty	1986/7
Part-Time - by age and faculty	1986/7
Full-Time - by sex and faculty	1986/7
Part-Time - by sex and faculty	1986/7

Statistics compiled by Clive Gorst.

Computer Graphics by Geoff Stratford.

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As for the Polytechnic I hope I am able to repay some of its encouragement and support by continuing to help and provide a supportive environment for mature students as they return to study here.



### DECLARATION

While registered as a candidate for the degree for which submission is made the author has not been a registered candidate for another award of the CNAA or of a University during the research programme.

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**EXPECTATIONS AND REALISATIONS: EXPERIENCES OF MATURE STUDENTS RETURNING TO STUDY IN AN INSTITUTION OF PUBLIC SECTOR HIGHER EDUCATION.**

**ANN PATRICIA HANSON**

**ABSTRACT**

This interactionist study follows a group of adults, who, after a break in their formal education, return to study in an institution of public sector higher education. It is based on a series of interviews, before and during the first year of their courses to examine their subjective interpretations of the reality of the return to study in comparison with what they expected it would be like.

The increasing numbers of adults returning to higher education through a variety of access courses would seem to make this an opportune time to examine such experiences. However, this research raises questions about why this should be the case and examines answers at the level of the institution and the individuals themselves. It addresses the claims that the reasons for the increase are based on ideological assumptions in line with social justice but the reality which meets this group questions whether in fact provision and practice is in line with philosophy and purpose.

By allowing a group of mature students to speak for themselves it questions the assumptions of those who would advocate a separate theory of adult education. Such humanistic beliefs may be within the perception of the educators but be beyond the reality or requirements of men and women who must fit their studies into already busy lives and who may thus have an instrumental approach to education. To suggest it should be otherwise is ethnocentric.

This study seeks to examine whether or not one particular polytechnic takes cognisance of the needs of adults to meet the aims it claims to hold at an ideological level. At the same time, however, it asks about the relevance of humanistic approaches considering the conflicting demands of accountability within the changing status of public sector higher education corporations.



'Maybe that's it - the whole business  
of expectation and reality.  
Imagination wilts into fact ....'

Marge Piercy  
Braided Lives

. 1982 G.Bt. Allen Lane

'There are tremendous areas of growth in me as a person. I've been challenged, I've had to grow up. I've had to understand a lot more about myself and of other people and I'm very pleased about that.

... I think it's evident that I'm enjoying my course and there are hiccups here and there but there are difficulties to overcome and everybody who I've met has commented on how enthusiastic and how much I seem to be enjoying it and I think I am.

People often say that did I wish I'd done it ten years ago and what have you, but my answer to that is: No I'm not, because I was not ready. I think I probably could have done it but I don't think I would have enjoyed it or got as much out of it or developed as much as I have. I wasn't ready ten years ago. I knew when I was ready and as such it's right for me now.'

Alan;

Third interview: Diploma in Social Studies

## INTRODUCTION

### **MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

This study examines some of the pertinent issues which surround the increasing provision being made for adult learners in higher education as we approach the 1990s. It focuses on one particular group of individuals over the age of 21 years old before and during their first year of study in one particular institution of public sector higher education.

The definition of who is a mature student is itself addressed by this study which uses the subjective perceptions of the students themselves to evaluate the reality against their expectations of a return to study.

Above all it then uses these individual experiences to evaluate what became a fundamental question from the research of whether the focus on increasing the number of mature students was on provision and practice rather than on philosophy and purpose.

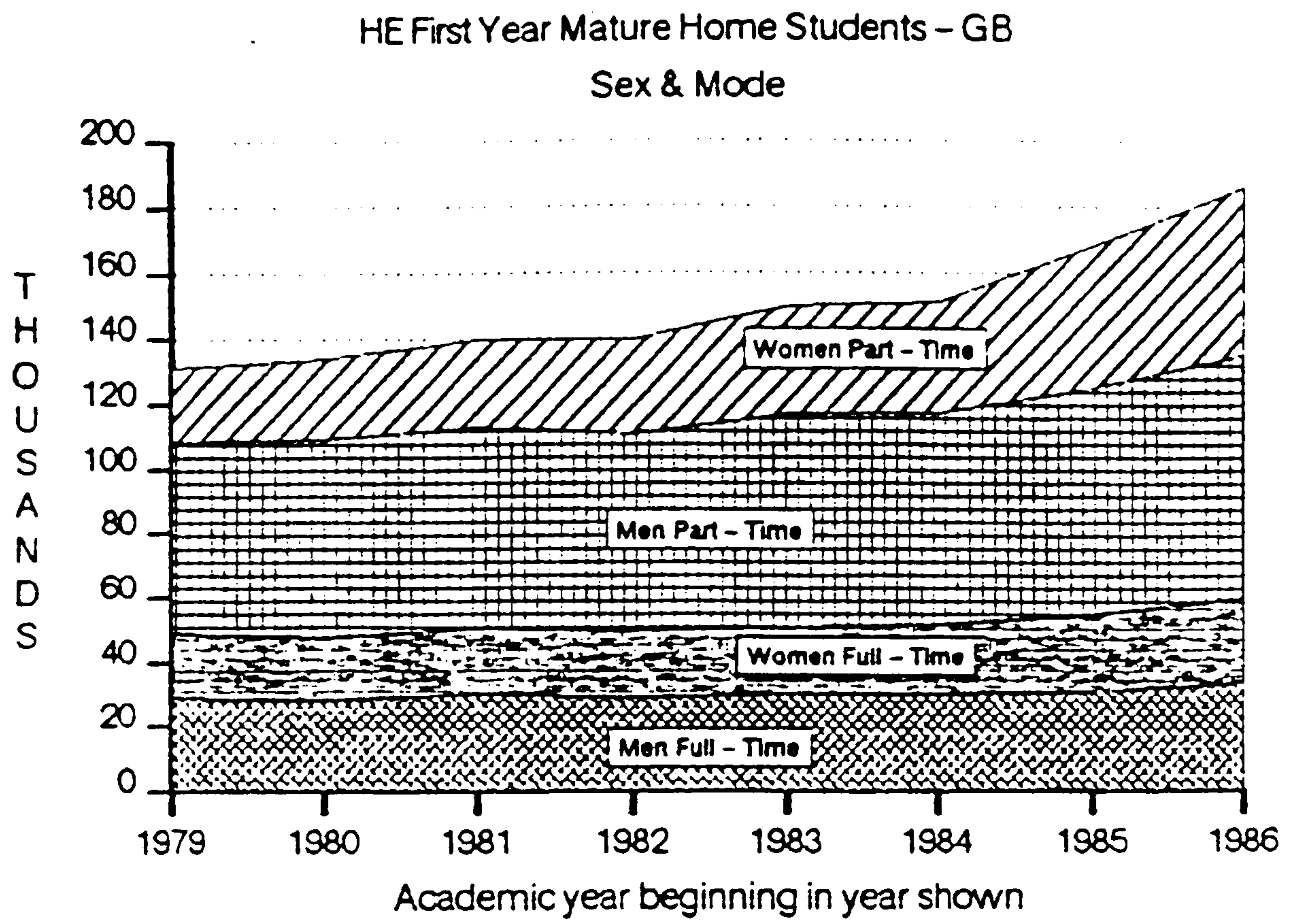


DIAGRAM ONE

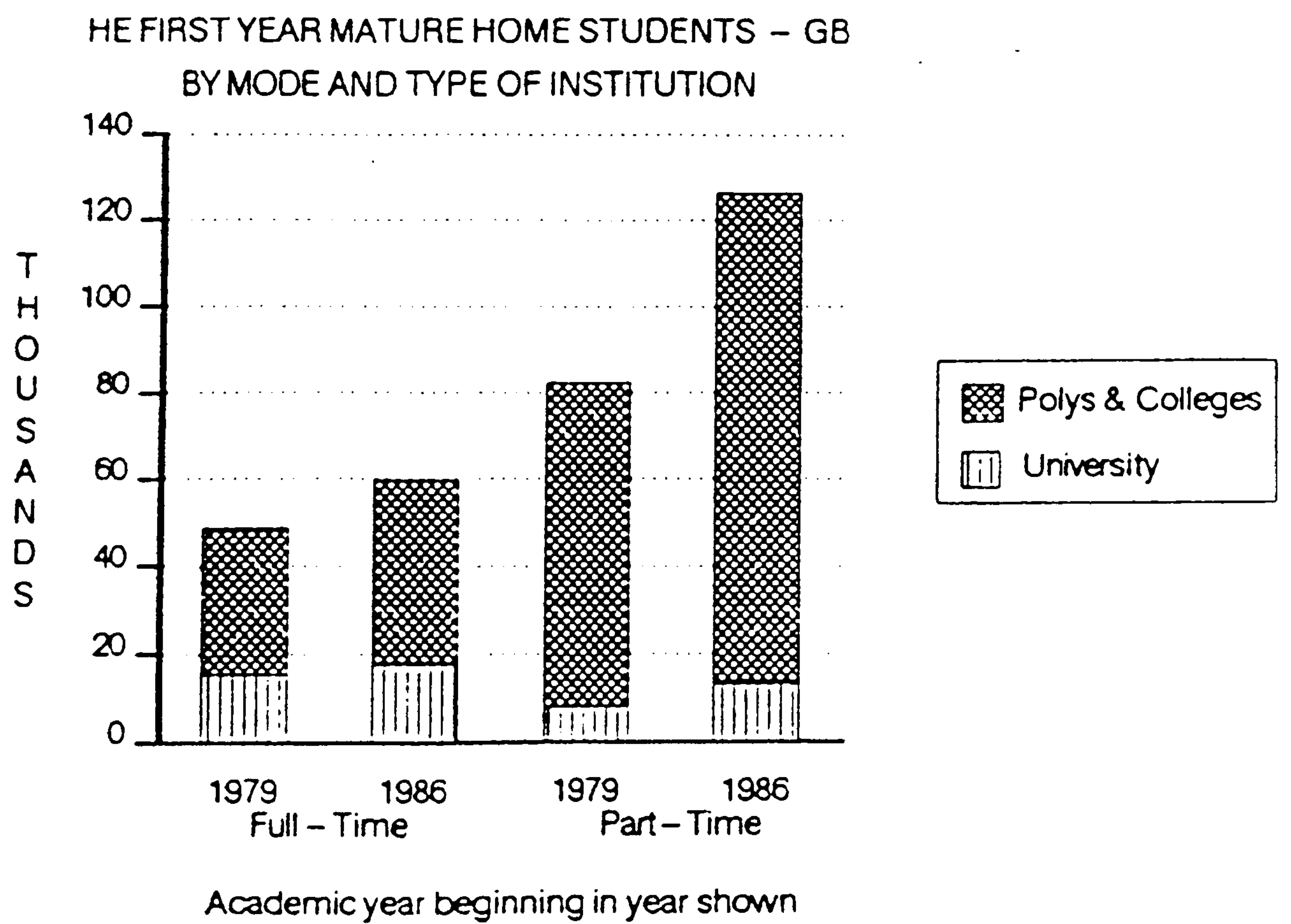


DIAGRAM TWO

Source: Unpublished DES Statistics  
Statistics Branch: Elizabeth House  
Mature Students in Higher  
Education 1975 - 1986



Whilst the government White Paper on Higher Education: "Meeting the Challenge" indicates the overall increase in participation in higher education since 1979 has been almost three times the increase during the whole of the 1970s, DES statistics (see Appendix 1) show the number of mature entrants has grown by 42% between 1979-1986: from 131,100 to 186,400 (that is full-time and part-time students over 21 on initial entry to higher education courses).

A summary of the data presented in Appendix 1 shows that of the total number of mature students those following full-time courses account for a third of the total and part-time students two thirds.

The numbers of full-time students rose to 60,100 in 1986 and part-time students rose to 126,300 in 1986, increases of 23 percent and 54 percent respectively since 1979.

The substantial growth in mature student numbers, particularly in the part-time mode is accounted for mainly by the increase in the proportion of women returners which rose steadily between 1979 and 1986. An increase from 41% in 1979 to 45% in 1986 for full-time students and from 27% in 1979 to 40% in 1986 for part-time students. In 1986, 70% of male mature students were studying part-time compared to 66% of female students: the percentage is similar amongst young students.

20% of mature students were studying for a first degree in 1986, (67% were studying on sub-degree level courses). Amongst these first degree mature students, only 12% of part-timers have traditional entry

qualifications for higher education with the proportion rising for full-timers to 32% for those aged over 25 and 52% for those aged 21-24.

Excluding postgraduates 58% of full-time students in 1986 and 69% of part-time mature students are aged 25 or over.

The types of courses chosen to be studied by age mode and sex are shown in Appendix 1 but smaller proportions of mature students are studying science based courses than Humanities and Social Sciences. In both universities, polytechnics and colleges more women than men study arts, with broadly equal numbers studying social sciences but very few women study engineering. Diagrams 3 and 4 show marked difference in ages in both sectors, students studying education accounted for less than 5% of those aged 21-24 but almost 30% of those 25 year or over - this does include figures for Inservice teacher training courses though.

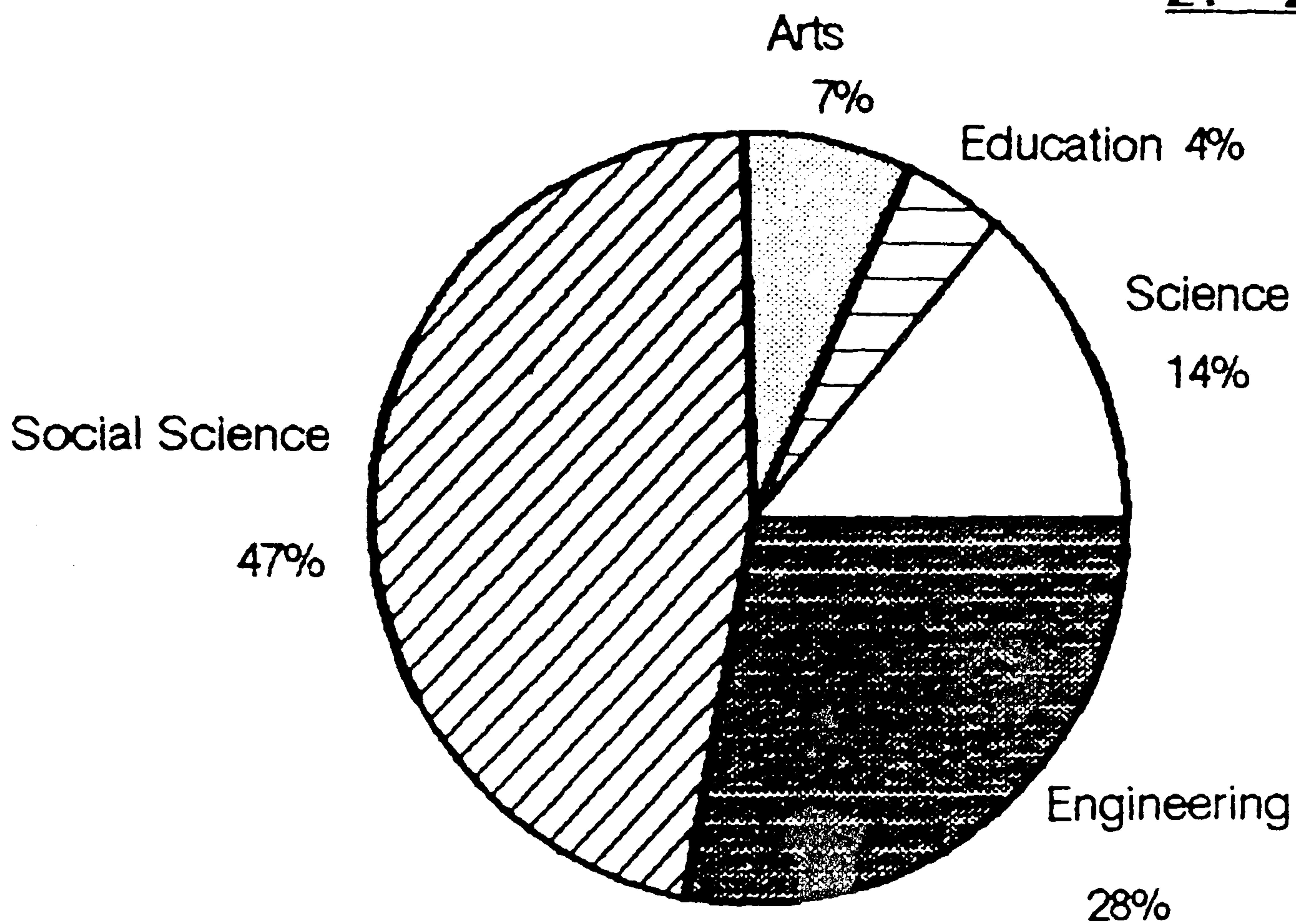
In universities the distribution of subjects taken by students on full-time courses is similar to that for part-time students. However, in polytechnics and colleges full-time students study arts more and social sciences less than part-time students. The different subjects offered by universities and polytechnics and colleges will influence the study areas in the charts illustrated.



FIRST YEAR MATURE HOME STUDENTS – GB  
POLYTECHNICS & COLLEGES

Full – Time & Part – Time

21 – 24 year olds



25 + year olds

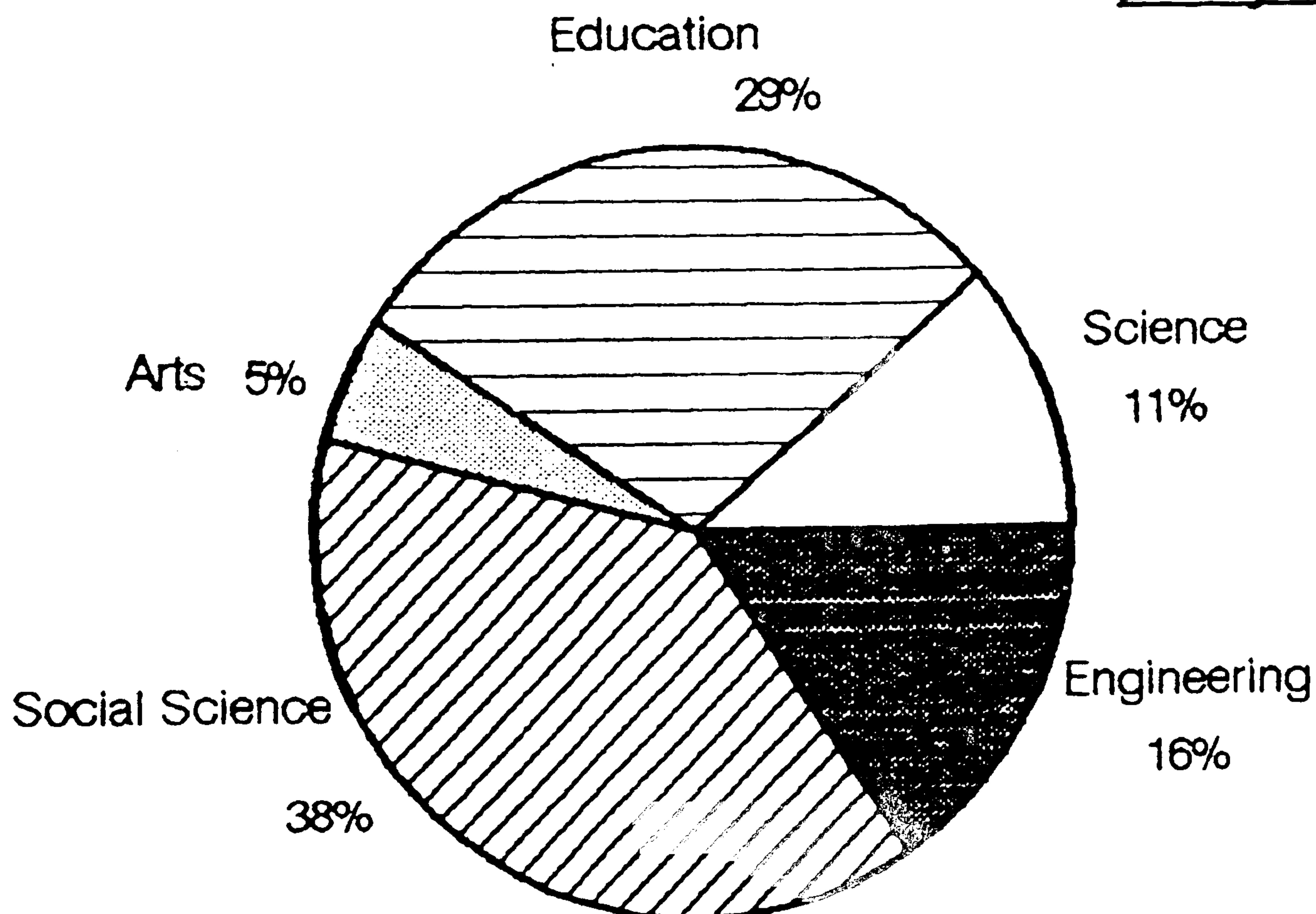


DIAGRAM THREE

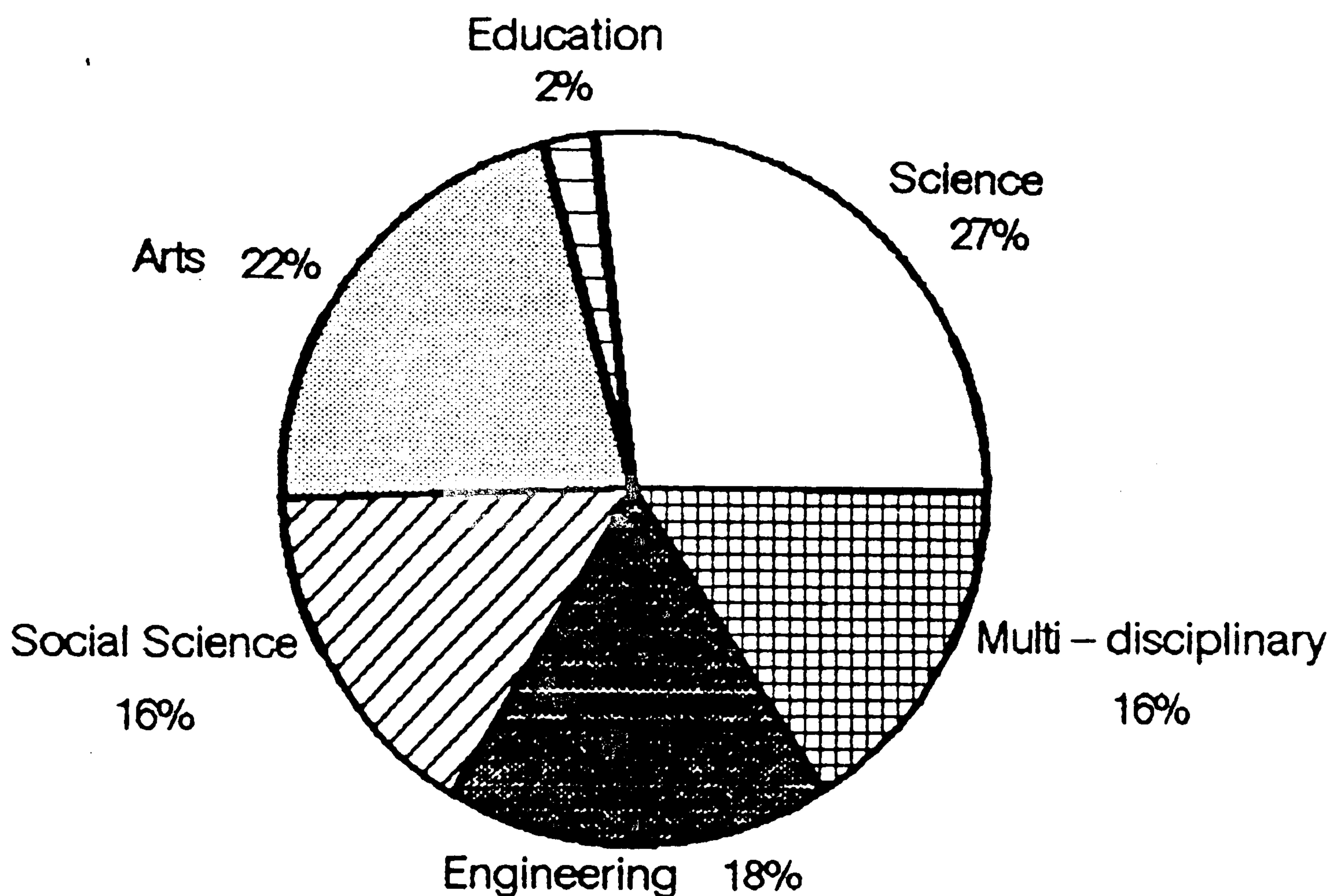
Source: Unpublished DES Statistics  
Statistics Branch: Elizabeth House  
Mature Students in Higher Education  
1975 – 1986



FIRST YEAR MATURE HOME STUDENTS – GB  
UNIVERSITY

Full – Time & Part – Time

21 – 24 year olds



25 + year olds

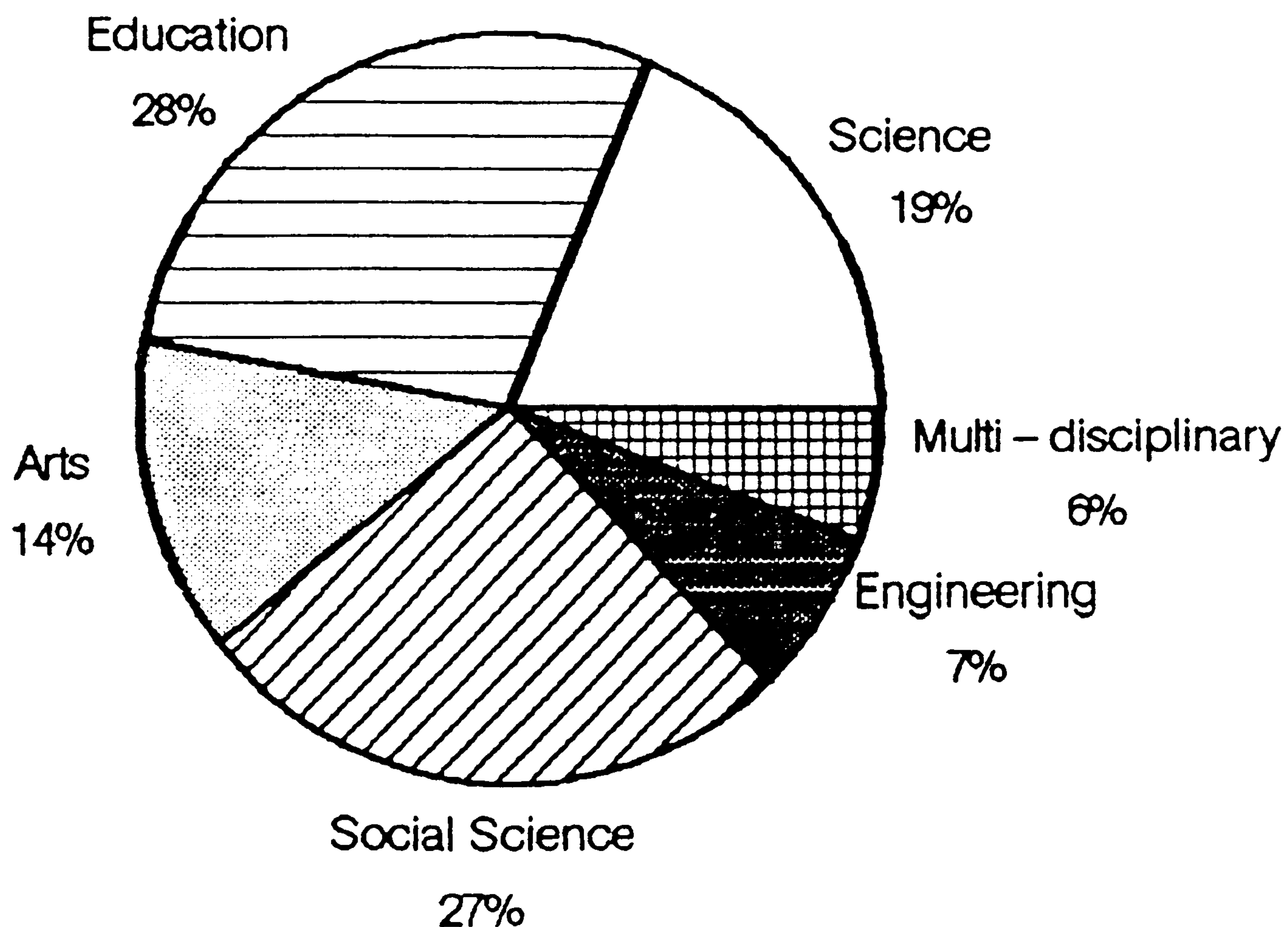


DIAGRAM FOUR

Source: Unpublished DES Statistics  
Statistics Branch: Elizabeth House  
Mature Students in Higher Education  
1975 – 1986

It would be short sighted to justify this study on the basis of an increase in numbers of mature students alone and not to ask question about the reasons for the increase and the performance of the mature student once they have entered the higher education system. There is no way to avoid the link between the current emphasis on access for mature students to return to education with demographic changes which have reduced the numbers of conventional applicants. It is not only education but other areas which have been traditionally supplied by school leavers such as nursing and clerical occupations which have had to change their recruiting habits. The instrumentality of these areas maybe more overt whilst in higher education there would appear to be claims for the provision of a democratic right for everyone to fulfil their own potential rather than an admission about surplus capacity and a perpetuation of an existing system for those employed in it.

Dr. Mike Fitzgerald speaking at the conference for the Association of Part-time Higher Education in April 1988 where he launched the idea of an Open Polytechnic saw the demographic challenges of the time for institutions of higher and further education but felt that these challenges should be the impetus to fulfil the real challenge of



"the fundamental human right of all to be able to recognise their potential, and the role and responsibility of higher education to help them achieve it. If higher education has a mission, facilitating the realisation of human potential must be it. The present uncertainties and upheavals provide us with an opportunity to restate that mission, and to strive to reorient ourselves so that we will be better placed than hither to struggle to achieve it".

Mike Fitzgerald. 1988.

This emphasis on recruiting mature students is not new. Roderick (1981) in his study at Sheffield outlines the place of the mature student in the development in higher education since the 1960s when, for example a campaign was launched to recruit older entrants into teacher training to compensate for the limited pool of 18 year olds. Unfortunately the theory was not matched in practice as closure of teacher training colleges led to a reduction in training for teachers in any age group.

However, in the late 1970s, due to a declining birth rate which continues today, the Department of Education and Science decided to look at ways of increasing the mature student population, although not to simply fill places but because of the qualities of such students per se.

Crosland encouraged authorities to admit more older students because:-

"The value of older students to a college community has been long apparent.... The colleges themselves have been struck by the quality of many of the mature students who have come forward. These have shown the greatest keenness and resource, and the Secretary of State would like to pay tribute to the way in which they (and their families) have surmounted the many problems of domestic organization, of travel, and of combining evening study with the running of a home which the training course has involved for many of them".

Anthony Crosland  
Secretary of State  
DES letter 19th July 1967.

This continued rediscovery of the qualities of mature students was continued in the Department of Education and Science discussion document of 1978 "Higher Education into the 1990s" which proposed models to offset decline in numbers in higher education. It was Model E which stressed the case for increased participation for adults in education not only for the fulfilling of their own potential but also as a tool for industry, and for retraining and this did not go unnoticed by bodies like the T.U.C. as well as the institutions of higher education themselves.



At this stage the emphasis appeared to be on the performance of those mature students already in the system. A paper jointly produced by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the T.U.C., entitled "Mature Students: a brief guide to university entrance" claimed that:-

"Mature students are welcomed in universities, their high motivation and experience makes a most important contribution to the life of the university community and to the courses they follow".

Most of the evidence would point to the fact that mature students do tend to perform well once they have overcome the initial barriers to entry (Elsey 1978, Lancaster University 1975, and Bournier 1987), although as Hopper and Osborn (1975) pointed out they may need special help and guidance to attain those standards. There are problems in interpreting some of the performance results especially when compared with entry qualification. Howell (1962) in his study of 9,550 mature students found also that there were differences for individual subject areas especially when the performance of mature students on arts and social science subjects were compared with science and technology. Bournier (1987) substantiated these earlier findings showing a positive association between age and degree results was apparent in each of the subject groups except health related subjects and engineering and technology. For all subjects the degree results generally increased with age until the age of about 40 and then declined back towards the level of younger students. As far as age at graduation was concerned Bournier showed 46% were 21-23 at graduation; 46% were 23-30 and 8% were over 30 years old at the time of graduation

However, in spite of the reservations about the interpretation of

results Bournier was able to agree that "degree results for older students are, on average, better than those of younger students", It is not known if this is due to motivation or life experiences but it enables them to gain a great deal of benefit from higher education and because of that institutions need not worry about admitting mature students. The universities might have been slow in creating schemes such as those in the JMB area, which often produced extra barriers to entry (Smithers and Griffin 1986), however, the Open University showed that without doubt adults with no formal educational qualifications could complete degree courses and the demand for places nationally still exceeds supply , (see following table), reflecting the need for still more provision for older students to be able to study at degree level.

#### **Table 1**

Open University: U.K.:

In 1987/88 number of requests of information and application forms	130,249
Number of new applicants	40,196
Number of re-applicants	19,140
Number of offers made	41,082
Number of new undergraduates	25,041

Whatever the reason for it - institutional pull or demand push the numbers of mature students in higher education are increasing.

However, in the early days of Robbins and the monopoly position of the universities the provision of places for such students had to be provided within the existing framework of 18 year old applicants. The emphasis today on "value added" and "ability to benefit" has called for changes in admissions policies and it is the public sector which has led the way. However, it is not clear whether the changes are



because of more egalitarian aims such as individual achievement, because of the high motivation and subsequent achievement of mature students or because of the need to provide higher education institutions with clientele. Whatever the reason the manifestation of the increase in mature entrants in the public sector have brought changes to allow them to cope with a different type of entrant, often with non-standard entry qualifications and with different practical needs to conventional 18 year old students. In order to increase student numbers there have been the growth and development of Access schemes, Open College Federations, Local College franchising schemes, credit accumulation; Accreditation of Prior learning portfolios, Associate student schemes; retraining schemes; New Opportunities for Women courses; Women into Science and Technology courses and many more all aimed at the older applicant, who in turn have not been slow to take up the places. Because of this the Government, in the White Paper "Meeting the Challenge", committed itself to providing 50,000 extra places for non-standard entrants into higher education by the mid 1990s.

If the size and value of this cohort of students in public sector higher education legitimises a study such as this it does raise questions. Have all the schemes above made ideological changes to meet their changing clientele or are they acting in haste to fill the declining places in their institutions and generate income in an increasingly competitive market?

Is the focus on provision and practice and not on philosophy and purpose? Most certainly there is evidence of demand. Outside an



institutional context Allen Tough has shown the scale and tenacity of self-instigated, self-directed learning projects to meet individual needs, as the Open University application figures show demand far exceeds supply, and increases in part-time study on sub degree courses reflects the need for education.

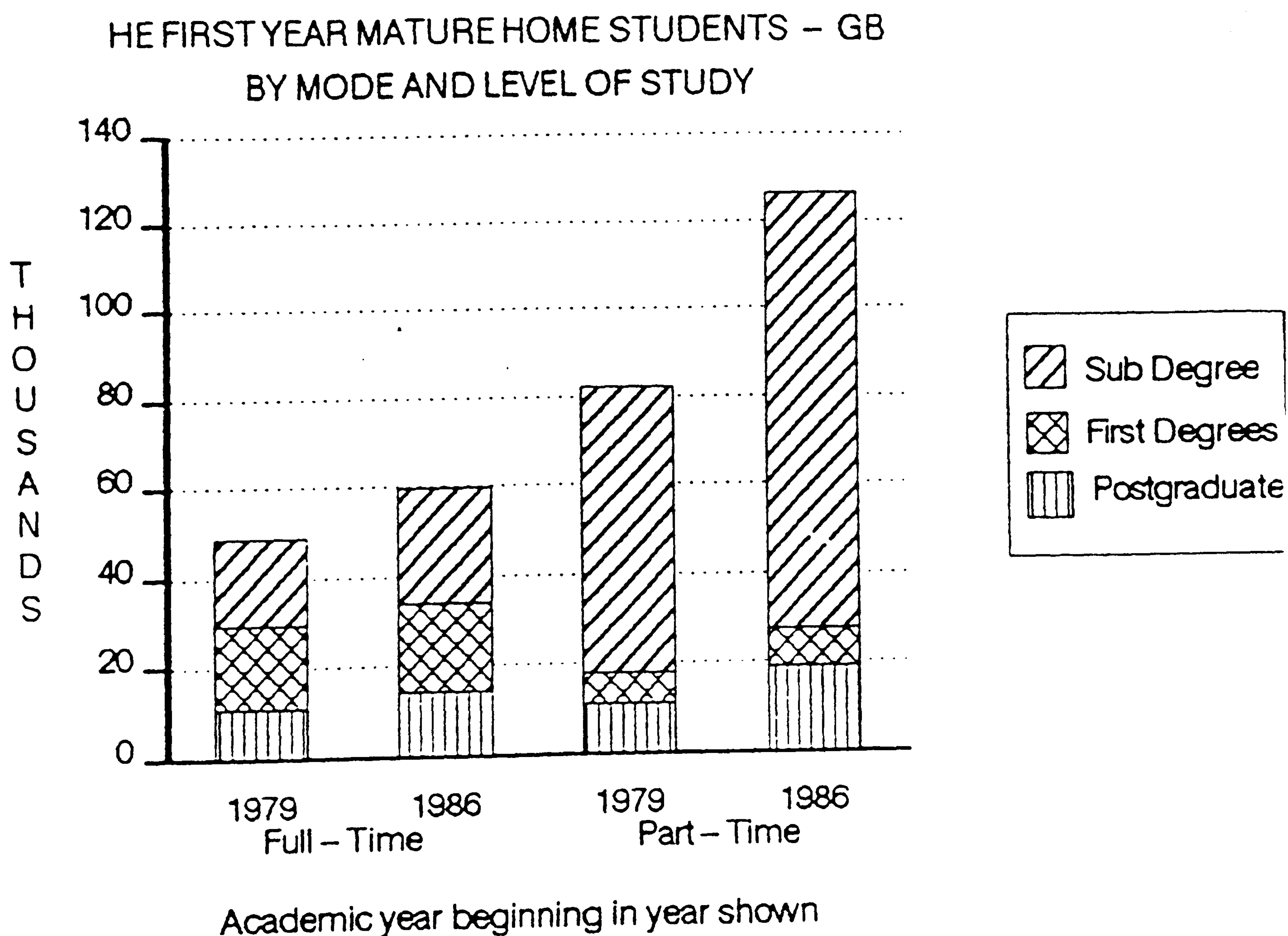


DIAGRAM FIVE

Source: Unpublished DES Statistics  
Statistics Branch: Elizabeth House  
Mature Students in Higher  
Education 1975 - 1986

## **Have Changes In Ideology Been Made To Meet Increase Of Mature Students In Public Sector Higher Education?**

This is the crucial question. Whilst there have been more places made available with easier access, has anything been done on a practical or curricular level to provide for this new intake of students? What happens once they gain access to the course of higher education itself? Once they are in the institution do they simply become a pool of individual learners, all "doing their own thing" but within the institutional context? Has any thought been given to the content of the courses these mature students will follow, or do they slot in to soak up knowledge which has been legitimated by the institution and its validators for year after year?

Eggleston (1977) was looking at the context of schools when he talked about the curriculum as a social and political issue, but his comments are of no less significance in the higher educational context..

"...the curriculum is (also) viewed as a central factor in the establishment and maintenance of the power and authority structures of the society (and the school). In consequence sociologists have become interested not only in curriculum content, method and evaluation, but also in the origins and support of the implicit and explicit values that are embodied in the curriculum. They are interested in how the curriculum is legitimated, in why decisions, both overt and covert, are made as they are and in the social factors that determine the choice of subjects and their content and method".

But if there is any justification for the choice of curriculum for "changing children to adults" in the early stages of education by 'the establishment' and maintenance of power, what is its role in a polytechnic providing courses for those, who in other aspects of their lives when they are not students, are adults? If there is no

negotiated curriculum is it a case of asking mature students to suspend their adulthood at the door of the classroom, not to learn what they might want to learn but what is socially or culturally acceptable?

Maslow (1954) and Knowles (1970, 1984) within their humanistic approach to teaching and learning focus on practical issues which allow for the development of the individual self. Maslow by concentrating on the achievement of a state of self actualisation or Knowles proposing the subconscious need for adults to become self-directed learners may miss the point. So too might those who follow Freire's (1972) belief in the need for education to raise individual awareness. For what may happen is that the adult does enter higher education with a belief built up in an access course that 'things will be different than they used to be at school', to find out that they are not. The increased awareness only serves to show them who has control over what is available to learn. In this context any possibility of exercising autonomous self-direction in learning becomes severely restricted. (The concept of self-direction will be returned to later in this study but it is worth pointing out at this stage that some aspect of self-direction is expected to be displayed in an adult act of learning. That is not to say, however, that all individuals who may be chronologically adults will act in a self-directed manner in all learning situations and at times this has been evident and treated as problematic in this study.)

Mee (1980) was aware of these problems when he recommended that an ideal adult education system would take full account of the adult



status of its participants. True Knowles (1984) advocates the importance of each individual adult participant in the learning experience, but by avoiding the issue of the curriculum content of learning and focusing on the "structure and strategies of provision" (Griffin 1983) he does little to solve the real problem.

"Existing organizations tend to frustrate adult needs for autonomy, challenge and the opportunity to learn, variety, etc. An ideal learning system would be a learning system capable of continuing transformation.

Mee (1980)

Griffin (1983) takes this issue further when he says that

"There is, as it were, a curriculum vacuum consequent upon a highly abstract model of both a 'learning system' and an adult learner, and no sense of what the system or the adult learns as a social cultural and political construct"

Griffin (1983)

Although the institutions may be called upon to produce schemes for access and write mission statements to justify claims within the social, cultural and political arena there is no evidence that these distinguish between aims and ideology. There is no clear indication of the level at which such mission statements are to operate beyond the belief in thinking increasing mature student numbers is a 'good thing'. It is possible to widen access, to increase mature student numbers and ignore the social, cultural and political distribution of knowledge and skills, in fact this may be the clue to the real reason for the increase in mature student numbers - the market forces outweigh the philanthropic ideologies of individual fulfilment! The evidence of middle class uptake, of paternalistic choice of subject areas for study, the degree ceremonies, the importance of the degree result are all legitimising aspects of the social control of the

learning environment. Is it really offering the individual the ability to benefit in his or her own terms or just widening access to what is already there, to produce more of the same?

Access policy has increased provision - it has opened the doors but it also narrows the passages for the individuals who enter. If there is no curriculum reform to stress autonomy, individuality and equality, if there are no philosophical conceptions of the aims of the 'education' on offer is the adult student being offered anything different from that which he received at school or which conventional students in higher education have always 'received'?

This study attempts to examine some of these pertinent issues, to see whether or not the experiences of a group of mature students in one particular institution within the public sector of higher education met their expectations of returning to study.

It will begin with a brief introduction to the growth of the polytechnics nationally, then the growth and development of the individual institution and its provision for individual mature students.

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC SECTOR HIGHER EDUCATION, NATIONALLY, LOCALLY AND AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

When individuals enter this Polytechnic they do so with an already complex pattern of expectations built up of a lifetime of experiences. These have come from home, peer groups, schools and other places of learning and from the world of work and leisure. This collection of expectations is no less complex for 18 year olds than for mature students except that in the latter case they have different variables which may continue as important parts of their lives as their course of study unfolds.

As they enter the institution students do so with variable individual backgrounds which then confront the established expectations of those already there be they teaching or non teaching staff and other students. Whatever the expectations of the approaching student they meet with an established ethos which is in itself internally created and also externally created by the expectations of validating bodies, professional bodies employers and indeed how society sees the institution within the whole concept of higher or indeed education. So there are interchanges, processes involved in creating institutions, nationally and locally which impinge on the individuals in an institution as well as the processes involved for the individual negotiating their own membership. The use of the word processes is chosen deliberately to indicate the on-going nature of the events and it is this aspect of it and how it relates to mature students returning to study in Public Sector higher education I intend to



examine at a national, local and individual level.

## The Introduction Of Polytechnics Into The System Of Higher Education

Proposed in the White Paper of 1966 (A Plan for Polytechnics and other Colleges) was a new type of higher education institution to offer a new type of higher education to a new type of student and with a new type of teacher/staff to do this. The proposal was for 28 Polytechnics at the outset with two more after further deliberations created from the amalgamations of existing polytechnics in the London area for example and large colleges in other areas - but, as is often the case - the *raison-d'être* of these new institutions and what were good intentions at radical reform were lost in the perceived status of them and this does not seem resolved now 22 years later (CPD 13/10/87 - Polytechnic Directors discuss status and possible change of name of Polytechnics to Universities.)

The status perception - whether real or imagined, and the university and public sector divide was the backcloth against which the new polytechnics were designated so that when the term 'binary system' was wrongly attributed to Tony Crosland after his speech at Woolwich in 1966 it became necessary for him to clarify just what role he saw these new institutions fulfilling. The name "Polytechnic" itself was something of a problem, Robinson (1968) talks about "the British image of a polytechnic is that of an educational soup kitchen for the poor" (p34) whilst Timmins (1979) tells us that "The Polytechnic was a science museum and fun-fair in Regent Street London" but there was more inherent in the name than that, it was to provide the vocational side of higher education whilst the universities continued to turn out

"educated men (and fewer women!).

Crosland did not create the 'binary' divide it existed long before him - if Robbins chose to overlook it that was a grave omission. Robbins himself had pointed out the plurality of the existing provision but the Higher Education sector was elitist, it was seeped with tradition and did not meet the current needs - Robbins himself was content to let the Further Education sector do that so there was little wonder it had expanded rather than create a new one.

But Crosland went further he saw that there would be different students with different needs and in his speech at Lancaster University, on 20th January 1967, he spelt out his plan for these polytechnics. He saw the need for non degree higher level courses, he wanted to expand places for part-time students who were already in employment and he did not see the university system being able to meet these needs. Thirdly he saw a new category of full-time students who would come from a further education background and would 'gain and give much' to this new academic community.



"What we see as the role of the Polytechnics is something distinctive from the universities, and more comprehensive in the way I indicated earlier. When we say that the Polytechnics will be primarily teaching institutions, of course we do not wish to deny the staff opportunities for research to serve the needs of local industry or to enlarge their knowledge and understanding of their own disciplines. Again, to say that the degrees awarded by CNAA will be comparable in standard to university degrees is not to say - very much the opposite - that in content and treatment their courses should be slavish copy of university courses. I hope they certainly will not be that. In terms of the type of degree and the balance between teaching and research, as well as the comprehensive character of the student intake, we see the polytechnics as fulfilling a distinctive role from the universities".

Crosland 20th January 1967. Lancaster

## **The Growth of an Individual Polytechnic**

Since Crosland made that speech there have indeed been changes and considerable growth in the public sector of higher education. It is now more than twice the size that the university sector was in the early 1960s. Added to that each of the 30 Polytechnics are now comparable in size with a very large university of twenty years ago and are seen as institutions in their own right rather than apprentice universities. But the question needs to be asked as to how far Crosland's plan for different, more socially aware and egalitarian institutions have been met and whether or not they met the criteria of higher education?

But what of the reality of the situation of polytechnics and of this institution in particular? The polytechnics were firmly planted in the Further Education tradition dating back to the Mechanics Institutes of the 1820s, themselves an extension of earlier more middle-class literary and philosophical societies, of working men's libraries and mutual improvement societies, mainly to provide for those who had only had an elementary education. They were a product of the industrial revolution and emergent working class movement. These early institutions were aimed at self improvement with a variety of motives to combine an instrumental view of knowledge and learning for its own sake. Indeed this Polytechnic began this way when it was founded in 1828 as "The Preston Institution for the Diffusion of Knowledge" and its aim to provide a technical education, locally financed, particularly for the local urban working-class part-time student was the core concept of the polytechnics and part of their

distinctiveness from the universities.

Important issues with respect to the claims of such institutions meeting the needs of different students and in different ways need to be picked out and examined within the context of the growth of this particular institution of public sector higher education. Evidence from research by such as Burgess 1979; Donaldson 1975; Burgess and Pratt 1974 would seem to indicate that Polytechnics have not maintained their original purpose; that 'academic' drift has taken place and they have tried to emulate universities. The way in which this institution developed may underline these claims further. Pratt and Burgess in 1970 prophesied that no amount of egalitarian rhetoric is enough without financial backing.

"In the absence of specific efforts to prevent it, we should expect the Polytechnics to begin shedding their part-time and thus working-class students, to turn their backs on their technical college traditions and to become mere copies of universities".

Pratt and Burgess (1970)

It was true that the roots of the new polytechnics were in the public sector to give foundations for the differences for them as institutions of higher education but their funding particularly with full-time equivalents, self financing courses, ways of achieving promotions of staff by advanced further education work courses nurtured the move towards an academic emulation of the universities. Other factors such as the fact that student grants were only mandatory for full-time (degree) courses penalised non advanced further education and part-time students and therefore fostered the move away from "comprehensiveness". The picture in this Northwest polytechnic,



whilst obviously mirroring these universal problems, reflected its own peculiar ones which may have precipitated the loss of Crosland's differences and be the reason now for the current Director to be trying with difficulty to redress the balance but in the face of changing an existing status quo with its sum of vested interests.

(What is interesting is that the Director at the time that this institution was designated a Polytechnic in 1973 is the leading protagonist in the present debate to gain the Polytechnics university status and much of the signs of academic drift immediately post designation can be seen as part of that plan to emulate a university.)

Before the White Paper of 1966 designating polytechnics the Harris Institute had been rapidly growing as a force of further education particularly in the field of expanding technical education and this was consolidated in 1956 under the White Paper, "Technical Education" by its designation as the Harris College. The importance of this for its, then unknown, development as a polytechnic was twofold. One was the decision to provide extra financial help from Preston and Lancashire Education Committee to increase its student intake by 50% on advanced technical courses and 100% on part-time day release, and the second was because the site was chosen as a building project by the D.E.S. to accommodate the increase. These buildings, planned with the consultation with senior staff, were completed by 1963/64 intake giving compact and "intelligently planned groups of buildings" and they gave the basis for increased expansion.

During this time of new building the courses within the college were changing to meet demand in society. Courses like those in textiles

were giving way to a new department of languages and social studies and an expansion in that area led to the appointment of a different type of academic staff to teach on new diploma courses, on external London BSc Sociology courses and on the modern language courses.

At this time the push was towards gaining advanced level work so that the Harris College could secure regional or advanced status - the move was towards full-time and sandwich courses and for part-time day release to replace evening work.

In the mid- 1950s, more than 60% of the total number of students attended in the evening, whereas, a decade later, the figure had fallen to less than 40%. Again, the 79 full-time and sandwich course students who attended in 1954/55 had risen to 565 by 1963/64".

Timmins (1979).

Other indicators of the academic push were evident. Full-time and part-time degree courses in science were introduced; a masters course in analytical chemistry validated by the University of Lancaster was mounted; funds (£2,000) were allocated for staff research and a move was made to provide facilities for students and staff which would engender a corporate identity.

Despite the evidence of expansion and growth in academic credibility this was not to be amongst the first list of 28 polytechnics created and this had implications which no doubt moved it further away from the theme of comprehensivisation. After the heady days of the post Robbins expansion cut backs began to hit the higher education sector.

This was felt at Preston by a moratorium on new building, a reduction in the provision for teacher training which initially had been useful with the acquisition of new staff from the amalgamated colleges at Poulton and Chorley. Also there was a cut back in staffing in the university sector which led those who may have wished to be employed there to seek jobs in the public sector. Appointments that needed to be made in the growing area of languages and social studies had of necessity to be taken from university graduates so that they entered this 'new form of institution' straight from the elitist university sector. At this time in the push for polytechnic status due to the value of advanced level work they were encouraged to nurture these ideals rather than any student centred approach of the further education regime. The setting up of a new Further Education college in Preston specifically for non-advanced level work perpetuated the dichotomy. Even though constraints on the system were gradually released and Polytechnic status was granted in 1973, higher education has still not returned to days of expansion so that many of the staff appointed in the early days when degree level work was developing and academic qualifications were more important are still in post. Many of the traditions which they brought with them are still evident, the Polytechnic created its first professors in 1978, (one of them being an internal appointment to Dean of Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities for recognition of achievement in that growth area), the creation of Faculties with Deans and less explicitly a "paternalistic" approach to the provision of education along the lines of "we as academics know what you as students need to learn". It would seem as if the need for polytechnic status - coming late and not without a fight - allowed it to lose sight of the stated differences in



inception of such institutions. The current Director, a leading protagonist in the setting up of Polytechnics in the early 1960s has felt the need to take hold of the reins and pull it back on the "right" track but at a time when the political ideology of the party in power and controlling the funding is at odds with any move towards social justice. In fact the Polytechnic may already be trapped for

"What was a necessary means for development in the past could well become the only ends for the future"

A.G. Goddard 1980.

What may be overlooked in the so called egalitarian claims for the introduction of the polytechnics is not that they too were financially expedient, Robinson (1968) makes a virtue of that, but that political decisions are made at that level affecting higher education without any recourse to an over riding philosophy let alone a realistic one. Indeed Ron Barnett (1985) would claim that "we lack an educational theory of higher education" and this would substantiate my earlier views about the real reason for the increase of mature students to higher education at this moment in time.

This situation is a paradox of higher education itself. For in any society higher education is concerned with the development and transmission of elaborate linguistic structures, or theoretical frameworks. But there is very little systematic reflection upon higher education itself. Higher education is, therefore, a set of theoretical practices without a theory of those practices".

Barnett (1985)

So White Papers are produced in abundance to meet particular needs at

particular times, not without a great deal of research and understanding for the technical issues involved in those particular aspects of higher education but without any clear overview of higher education itself. Robbins examination of Higher Education even with Model E without the remit of part-time advanced level work or Crosland's designation of new institutions on more egalitarian grounds without seeing the history of the individual institutions which were to create them or the ideologies of the staff who were to run them allows a short fall between expectation and realisations.

## **Provision for Mature Students in a North-West Polytechnic**

Within the context of increasing the number of places taken up for mature students at this Polytechnic several schemes have been developed to improve access. Some are targeted at specific groups in an aim to redress previous perceived inequalities e.g. The Racial Equality Unit, Access course for ethnic minorities and the New Opportunities for Women Courses; others are aimed at specific subject areas e.g. HITECC Diploma in Technology whilst others have a broad Polytechnic base e.g. Associate Student Scheme and the Combined Studies Pre-degree Programme. Some of the schemes guarantee Access in so far as places are automatically granted to those who are successful on the course, and on other schemes students who take the courses and wish to proceed are interviewed and in the case of the Pre degree for example would have the coursework and the recommendation of current Polytechnic staff as referees.

Alongside the special schemes for mature students the Polytechnic operates a direct application procedure whereby local residents who are limited to the one site for a degree course do not need to go through the central PCAS system of applying to several institutions. Direct applicants, often mature, non-standard applicants are usually interviewed and their applications considered in line with the specific criteria for each course and the spirit of the Admissions Policy of the Polytechnic.



## Lancashire Polytechnic - Admissions Policy:

"The Polytechnic seeks to provide a complete educational experience for its students leading to successful academic achievement within a socially and culturally active environment, selection policy is geared towards those applicants who will derive most benefit from their positive participation as a member of the community of this Polytechnic.

Within this policy, this Polytechnic encourages applications from anyone who sees the ethos of this particular polytechnic as particularly suitable for his/her needs, and recognises a special responsibility towards:

Those who for domestic, cultural, physical or other reasons need to come to this Polytechnic.

Those who are seeking to re-enter the education system after a period away from study.

Those with alternative experience in lieu of the normal entry requirements".

The whole area of direct application and admission with non-standard entry qualifications is problematic not only for this Polytechnic but for all institutions of Higher Education. Because of the often subjective nature of the decisions made by admissions tutors, granted often based on years of experience at making such decisions, more so

called objective schemes have been examined and currently this Polytechnic is involved in many schemes at the frontier of these development. These include Assessment of Prior Learning Portfolios, The Student Potential Programme (DES and UDACE), (see chapter on Methodology); Credit Accumulation and Advanced Standing schemes which link this institution with others and with qualifications gained in industry and commerce for example. Despite all this there is still some concern about the sometimes ad hoc nature of non standard admissions to courses at the Polytechnic so that a Working Party on Admissions which met through 1987 - 1988 made recommendations to improve the current admissions system in line with the mission statement to the Academic Board in June 1988.

Appendix 2 outlines some of the special provision for non-standard, usually mature, entrants to this Polytechnic. It gives a brief overview and acts as a useful reference for terms used by the students later in the text such as Predegree course, LINCS (Lancashire Integrated Colleges Scheme), Open College of the North West and NOW (New Opportunity for Women) courses.

Once within the Polytechnic the 'special treatment' for mature students ceases and this is an area which my sample did notice in the transition from say Pre degree to full-time degree course and which will be considered later. The courses have course leaders, there are personal academic counsellors and all students are able to use all the Polytechnic facilities such as the Student Counselling Service and the medical centre. Although there is a student representative on the

National Mature Students Union there is no active participation in the Polytechnic as far as I could ascertain and the Continuing Education Service does not have the capacity to 'counsel' mature students once in the system.

It is issues such as these which emerge from the experiences of students in my sample as they study at this Polytechnic.



## **The Place of the Individual Student in the Polytechnic**

One of the assumptions of an unwritten theory of higher education which is present in the national and local provisions outlined in the previous sections is of the value, worth or benefit of higher education to those individuals who avail themselves of it. Robbins without hesitation saw that there should be more places for those who wished to benefit and the latest White Paper: Meeting the Challenge reaffirmed it in para 2.9.

"The Government remains committed to the modified form of the Robbins Principle set out in Cmnd 9524. Places should be available for all who have the necessary intellectual competence, motivation and maturity to benefit from higher education and who wish to do so  
....."

The Admissions policy of the Polytechnic as presented earlier endorses the sentiment.

Although Eric Robinson laid stress on the instrumentality of this institution (Crosland speech 1987) in allowing the students to live fuller lives at the Polytechnic there is, without, doubt a lack of hard evidence to measure what has happened during an individual passage through the institution which would measure the amount of "benefit". This concept is by no means new and is very much tied up with the early ideas of a university education as proposed by Newman in 1852 as creating a total person, an educated man but it implies a

notion of the intrinsic good of higher education "a process of individual development, through the acquisition of objective knowledge in a process of rational and open-ended discussion". (Barnett 1985). This assumes that through this process the individual will cease to see their world through taken for granted assumptions but will see that it is different through new assumptions and that other (even unrealised) assumptions always exist. However this assumption is based on other assumptions (axioms) so that before we can ask the question what the students will do having been shown that what they previously placed faith in can no longer be taken for granted we are saying that there is no such thing as objective knowledge and that anyway the institution which they enter will not be free from bias and control.

But these assumptions are problematical both in the context of any discussion of a theory of higher education and as they are relevant in this research, for individuals experiencing the reality of the education in this particular institution. Claims for the social justice of the polytechnics or the 'promotion of the development of the full potential of the individuals participating in its education activities' in the mission statement of an individual institution should be issued with a caveat - in so far as the history and ideology of the modern society will allow. It is for certain that the concept of the objectivity of knowledge or the social independence of the institution cannot be guaranteed. These students are faced with timetables, curriculum structures and essay deadlines, CNAA rules and regulations and a paternalistic, middle class ideology of the institution as it appears to them.

However, it should be said that this crisis of legitimacy, these ethnocentric claims that an institution might make as to the 'benefit' of its courses, the instrumentalism proposed for the polytechnic education by its official promoters are not the same crises which face the student about to start a course.

However by the middle of the first term there is evidence in this research of a restructuring of expectations within the constraints of these "false" assumptions and in some cases by the third year the previously held expectations of the value (and purpose) of higher education are shaken if not lost. These are issues which will be developed in Chapter Four.

This is then, the reality of focusing on the structure and strategies of provision and ignoring the ideological underpinnings of the widening of access.

Such realisations are a practical manifestation of the theoretical problems outlined by Griffin (1983), Mee, (1980), Eggleston (1977) et al in the introduction and are reinforced by the work of Bernstein (1971), Young (1971), Keddie (1971), Westwood et al who place knowledge side by side with control in education. What is especially relevant here though is the way mature students are given the understanding that there will be a change from their previous educational experiences, that they will find a place for their adult perceptions within a flexible process of self-directed learning. This is particularly true for those who have been in Open College, night



school or pre degree type courses. Then with the procedure of enrolment they find they need to suspend their adulthood and conform to the constraints of the course, the internal and external ideology of the staff, the validating bodies and the Polytechnic as a whole - there is now a mismatch of expectations generated by different types of experiences which the individual does not have the capacity to resolve. It would be naive to suggest that this is only at the practical level of time tables, essay deadlines, classroom layouts and teaching/learning relationships (deliberately chosen that way round). These external restraints would be easy to change, as Robinson (1968) in the early days of Polytechnics suggested the students themselves would soon do - instead they are part of much more rigid ideologies about the function of education, part of the tacit taken for granted understandings, part of the dominant middle class higher education culture which limits access to all but a few who can understand the code.

Kidd (1973) claimed "it has often been said that the purpose of adult education or of any kind of education , is to make of the subject a continuing 'inner-directed', self-operating learner".

Garden (1963) views the aim of instruction as being 'to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his own education'. This would be the phenomenological view of Maxine Green (1971) with respect to the curriculum as 'a possibility for the learner as an existing person mainly concerned with making sense of his own world "and it is the basis of the work of such humanitarian and non-authoritarian idealists such as Rogers (1969), Knowles(1980,1984) and Tough (1968) within a

learning-teaching situation. They see the teacher as facilitator (Rogers) working within an <sup>A</sup>ndragogical model (Knowles) and possessing five clusters of characteristics (Tough) that promote a warm, spontaneous and open relationship between learner and teacher.

This, however, is not the reality. What counts as knowledge is socially determined and curricula are structures of socially prescribed knowledge, external to the person who knows, predetermined for him and to be mastered by him within the context of his particular course, institution or educational environment. This socially determined knowledge is of course as constraining on the teachers as on the taught but the former are more often part of the ideology as a continuation of, school, to university, to polytechnic, whereas the student comes to it from a different set of assumptions and ideologies. Seen in this light there is less to question in the middle class nature of those mature students who do return to study. What is also problematical is that the ideology of the education of adults, implicit in documents such as the mission statement and admissions policy of this (and other polytechnics) includes a promise that 'things' will be different. As Keddie (1980) points out, the emphasis of the contemporary adult educator's ideology has shifted 'so that now it is more a matter of taking a better kind of education to those whose previous education has been misconceived. Thus, the value of student-centred learning in adult education is counter posed to the subject-centred learning of secondary schooling and the concept of individual need is counter posed to the accusation of the irrelevance of the school curriculum'. This may be the aim of non-vocational evening or leisure adult education but is it the reality of adults

returning to a full-time teaching - learning situation in public sector higher education? Freire (1968), Bourdieu (1971), Maxine Green (1971) et al would point to the dehumanising and mystifying effect of formal knowledge and the way in which it has been used as a means of perpetuating the dominant culture and so as an instrument for social control. To open the doors of an institution to those who can benefit but then to determine the ways in which that is possible within a paternalistic, we know what is right for you ideology hardly allows self-directed open learning.

So, far from arriving at an institution which offers a break from the alienating process of their early schooling, not necessarily primary schooling as I shall develop later, adults return to physical conditions, curricula, courses, teachers, external constraints which are only the same as school practices, where there is little, if any attempt to examine what does or does not count as knowledge and where the pressure of conforming to the practices of the institution - work load etc - give little time for such considerations anyway. Essay deadlines, seminar papers, class of final degree may become the overriding instrumental considerations. Coming to terms with those areas, losing any other expectations that "things will be different" allows an 'easier' passage through the institution. So, as will be shown in a later chapter what counts as knowledge has been determined, according to Alfred Schutz (1972) as an ideal - typical construction of which subjects, disciplines and syllabi have meaning for those educators with those intersubjective understandings of them but which are external to those adults returning to study whatever their preparation and motivation. What has to be learned can only be



understood in terms of sets of meanings 'about the subject itself' and this creates a barrier for the student which has to be removed before that knowledge becomes accessible

These assumptions of what counts as knowledge in any of the subject areas chosen by students returning to study cannot however be taken for granted neither can the context within which they are 'taught'. To simply define an institution as "a polytechnic" and to differentiate it by that definition alone from another institution of higher education, "a university" misses the point not only of the 'classification and framing of knowledge' but of access to it and the legitimization of some form of knowledge as superior or of a higher value. (Young (1971)). A mission statement which talks about "ability to benefit" without an examination of the framework of knowledge transmitted or the 'open' and 'closed' nature of the knowledge areas themselves is making no real progress towards any egalitarian principles.

Michael Young (1971) made no excuse for linking the expansion of knowledge and the access to it paralleled with its increasing differentiation to discussions of social stratification.

"Empirically we could no doubt demonstrate that increasing differentiation is a necessary condition for some groups to be in a position to legitimize "their knowledge" as superior or of high value. This high value is institutionalized by the creation of formal educational establishments 'to transmit' it to specially selected members of the society. Thus highly valued knowledge becomes enshrined in the academy or school and provides a standard against which all else that is known is compared".

Young (1971)

Such a consideration is not only valid for the debate surrounding the creation of the polytechnics as different institutions of higher education from the universities but is also relevant within the institution concerning what knowledge is made available for study. Within the curriculum which is made available to the individual student a typology emerges with clear lines of what Bernstein (1971) calls educational knowledge controls. The framework focuses on the principles of organization and selection of knowledge which is offered to the student. This has implications for any attempt for student choices or learning projects which move away from predetermined areas of approved subject material for it poses a threat to the power structure of the curriculum 'order' within that institution. These are issues overlooked in the work of Knowles for example but which are problematic for the individual mature students as my research will show. The students found by experience that there is a hierarchy of subjects and a legitimization of certain 'pathways' of subjects to choose moving through the institution to restrict individual choice and which increases the control of the institution. There may be systems introduced which appear to increase choice for the student for example with credit accumulation but the choices are offered within a 'closed' knowledge system. Bernstein (1971) is referring to the

context of the curriculum when he describes open and closed relationships which have implications for the way in which a student constructs his and her own degree programme but there are also limitations due to the classification of knowledge - the nature of the relationships between the contents and how they are differentiated. When the boundaries between contents are clearly defined and the subjects are isolated the contents are said to be "closed" and this leads to a collection type of curriculum within which it is necessary to build up knowledge in a predetermined way to meet certain criteria. There are reduced options for the individual. When there is less isolation between content in an 'open' relationship a more integrated type of curriculum results and there is increased freedom of choice for the individuals.

There is evidence of the manifestation of such elements of control on the individuals in my sample which will become apparent later. These are felt within the institution because of the restriction on choice in some areas such as the need for mathematics to be taken with science subjects, often particular problems for mature returners - women especially, and also they are felt at the level of admission. This may not only refer to the classification but also to the framing of knowledge that is the context within which the knowledge is transmitted and received. This does not refer to the methods of transmission, although those too may be problematic for students, but rather what may and what may not be transmitted. This again has implications at the individual level for the assumptions of humanistic educationalists such as Rogers, Kidd and Knowles for it shifts the



emphasis to the institutional context and begs questions within a pedagogy/andragogy debate which has dependency as a criterion. These issues are central to the individual as she or he enters an institution of public sector higher education which offers 'ability to benefit' as an aim of its mission statement and are areas which will be developed later.

True there are examples within the institution when students may make challenges to that control of an individual or a group level to try to change aspects of the curriculum or organization. Concessions may seem to emanate from staff/student liaison committees but ultimately is there any real change in control of the knowledge base of the institution? Are there changes to the curriculum, deadlines, exam boards, essay title areas, type of presentation and content areas? The course leaders may claim the control is external by CNAAB by professional bodies who act as validators but ultimately is there any real negotiation for the individual student. To a large extent does the student give legitimization to the process by conforming in the long run, by 'playing the game' and allowing a consensus to be reached?

Westwood (1980) quotes Gramsci saying hegemonic control is a process which is not always unchallenged. It constantly faces challenges from different sections of society but these protests are often challenged through the mechanisms of hegemonic control. By legitimising any protest through collective representation any real challenge by the student is side stepped. This applies not only to students but also

to staff. One example during the period of this research project involved the whole issue of access in this Polytechnic. A working party was set up which met time and again, gathered a considerable amount of information from staff inside and outside the institution, working in their own time, to produce a reform in favour of more open access. The paper was presented within the bureaucratic structure of the consultation process of the Polytechnic and fell at the first round. No further action has been taken to date and the Working Party presented its findings in June 1987. Many of the major reforms recommended, particularly towards part-time courses and modularisation, mixed mode delivery and credit accumulation are being "rediscovered" to meet the needs of falling rolls and corporate status. These are now seen as expedient issues by those who determine policy.

Although Westwood (1980) is talking specifically about Adult Education which is not the same as the education of adults returning to study in an institution of public sector higher education she does raise similar and relevant issues for this research which need to be treated as problematic. When mature students come to study in this institution they find themselves in the predetermined curriculum of the Polytechnic which could be considered as a reflection of the paternalistic/elitist ideology of higher education and this is only a part of the total learning environment which faces them. This learning environment involves what happens in the classroom, what happens in the coffee rooms as well as the academic contents of the courses themselves. It may be that those familiar with the workings of the institution and its role in public sector higher education can

separate the two but to those who are outsiders, strangers to the environment, they may be indivisible. They are part of the one 'real' experience of being a mature student returning to study.

This research asks a group of mature students about that experience and presents their perceptions of the reality of returning to study in an institution of public sector higher education.



## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY

#### How are Mature Students Defined?

Working definitions of mature students are by no means consistent in a national context and this has implications for how statistics are collected and compiled in a local context like this institution. For the purpose of this research I began by taking the term 'mature student' to mean someone aged 21 or over at entry onto a course at the Polytechnic. (This is in accordance with the C.N.A.A. definition but compares with Johnson and Bailey (1984): Sheffield Polytechnic). The D.E.S. use the term for someone of 23+ years, but as they compile statistics in 5 year blocks this effectively becomes 25 years. Smithers and Griffin (1986) talk about an examination run by the universities of Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham since 1920 for "persons of mature years" which in fact was over 23 years old. In 1961 the age limit was lowered to 21. (In the period of the Smithers' study 1975-1980 - the modal age of applicants was 25-34 years.) The Scottish universities and the University of Wales adopt 23 as the age at which a student is deemed to be mature (and so able to take advantage of non-standard entry procedures but in other English Universities apart from those described by Smithers (JMB) the age range is from 19-26 and even Smithers makes the point that the real decision about whether or not an applicant matriculates is left with individual admissions tutors. The Open University until recently had a minimum age of 21 and although in theory the age is now 18 its

introduction was bitterly opposed by many who felt that distance teaching methods were not well suited to this age group. The definition attempting use of chronological age is further complicated by local authority rulings on grants facilities when the age of 26/27 is taken as a sign of maturity for independent status awards.

Confusing the issue further are those descriptions of mature students such as A.C.A.C.E. which talk about anyone having a break in their education and then returning to a course of study - in which case an 18 year old who left school at 16 and returned at 17 or 18 would be classified as mature.

The whole area of definition of mature students has the added dimension of the subjective criteria of the students themselves as well as those who may wish to classify them. This subjective interpretation of self and status will be developed further in Chapter Four, but as an initial attempt to represent the population and choose a sample for research, chronological factors were used to define mature students at this Polytechnic. The subsequent limitations of this decision have been taken into account.

## **Mature Students at this Polytechnic.**

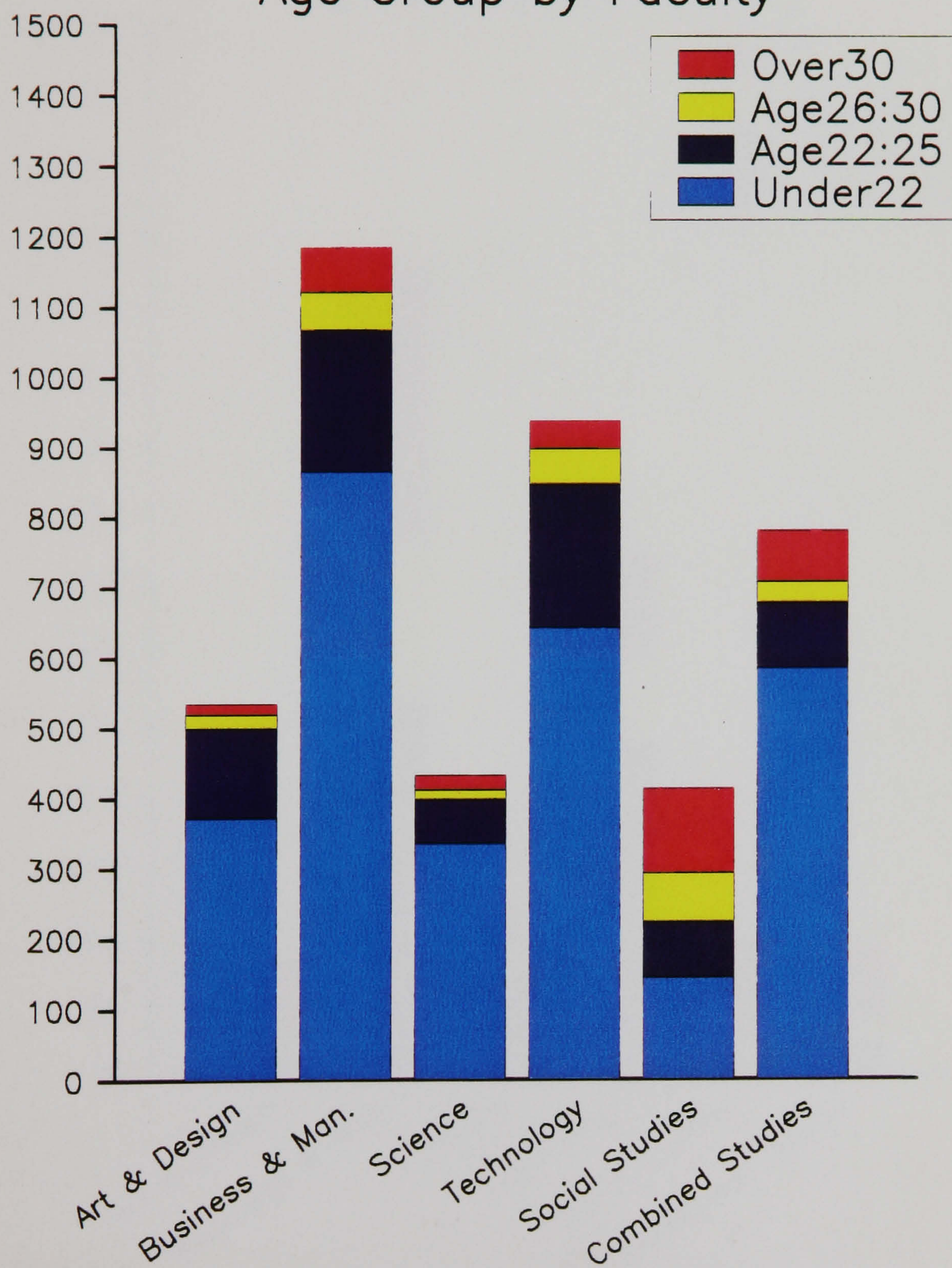
The following illustrations show the student population on all courses full and part-time who had been finally registered during years 1985/86 and 1986/87 and were used as an indication of age distribution after dividing up into under 21; 22-25; 26-30 and 31 and over categories.

Analysis by faculties for all student; full-time; part-time courses are shown on the illustrations. Distribution by sex of students was also indicated.

Additional age groups were used above the age of 31 but numbers became small as the age increased.

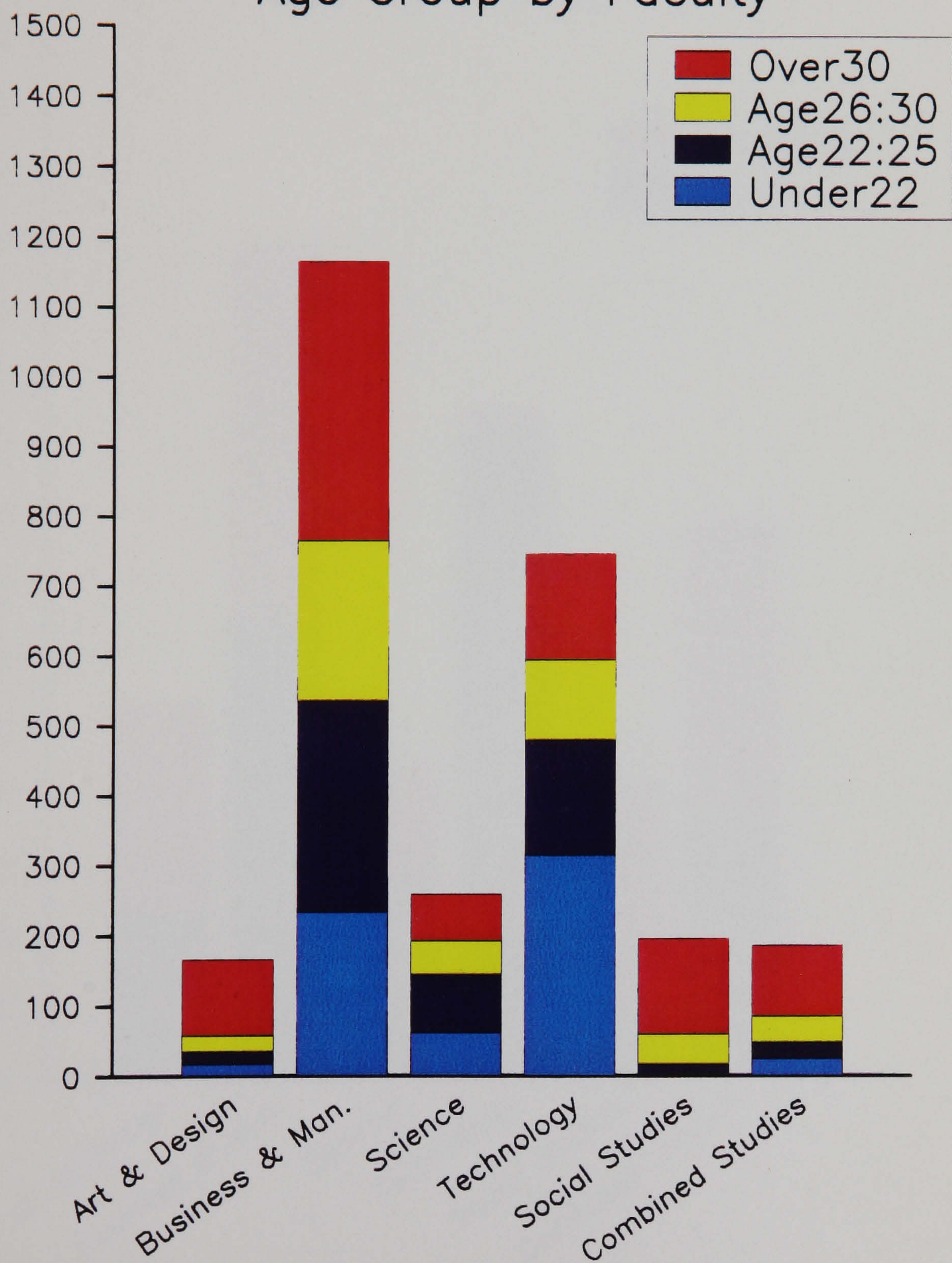


Full-Time Students (1985/86)  
Age Group by Faculty



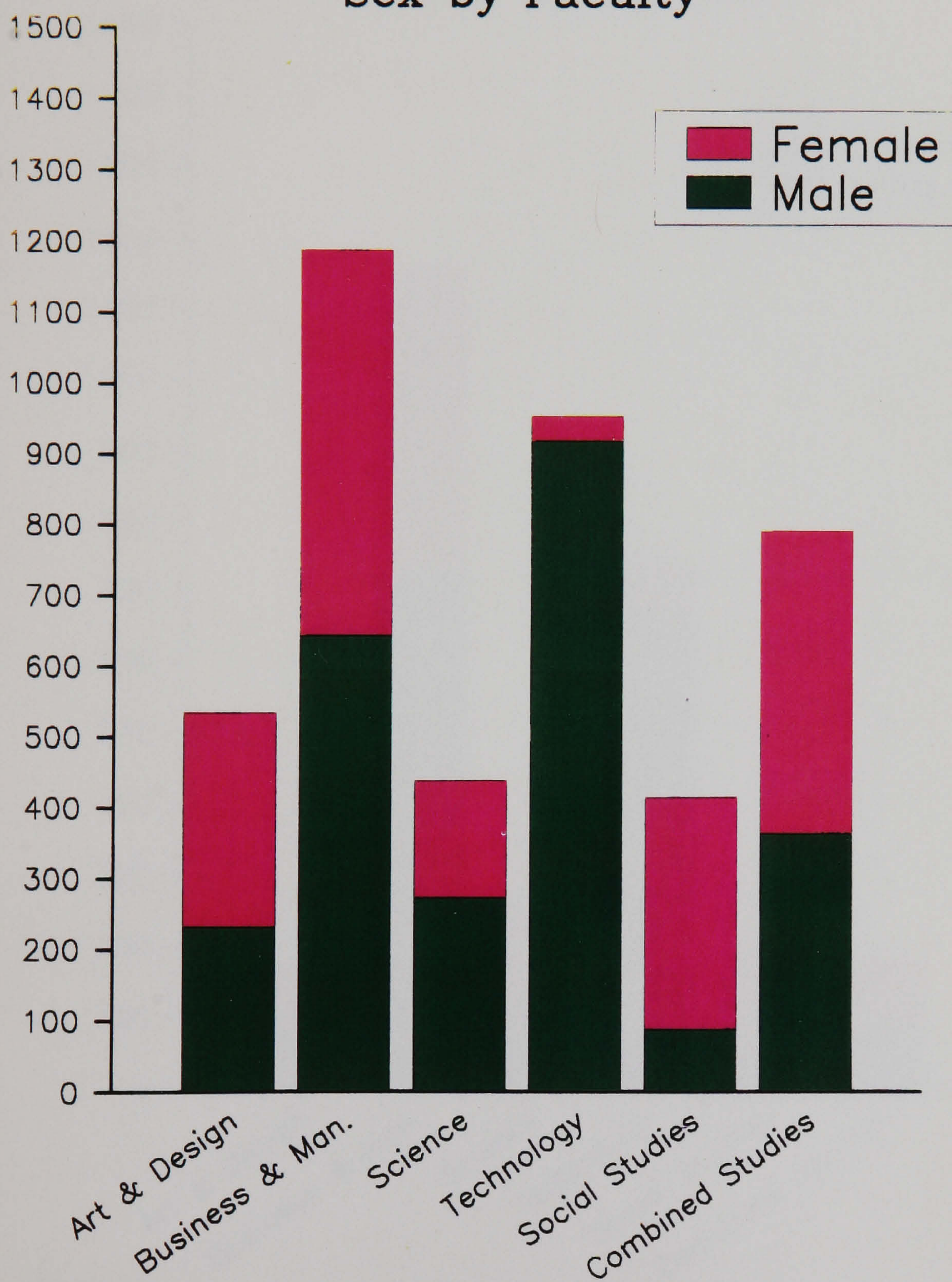


Part-Time Students (1985/86)  
Age Group by Faculty



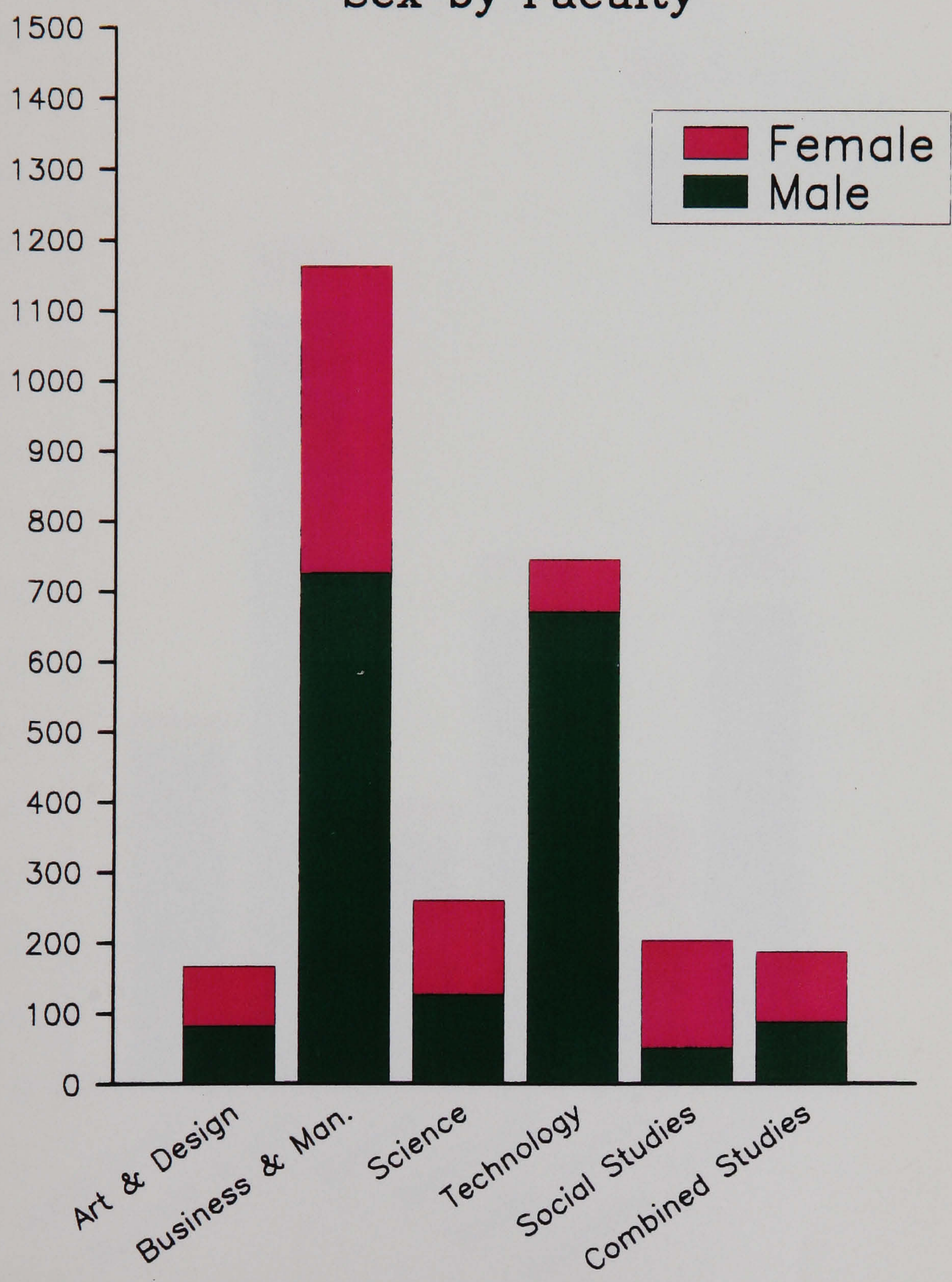


# Full-Time Students (1985/86) Sex by Faculty



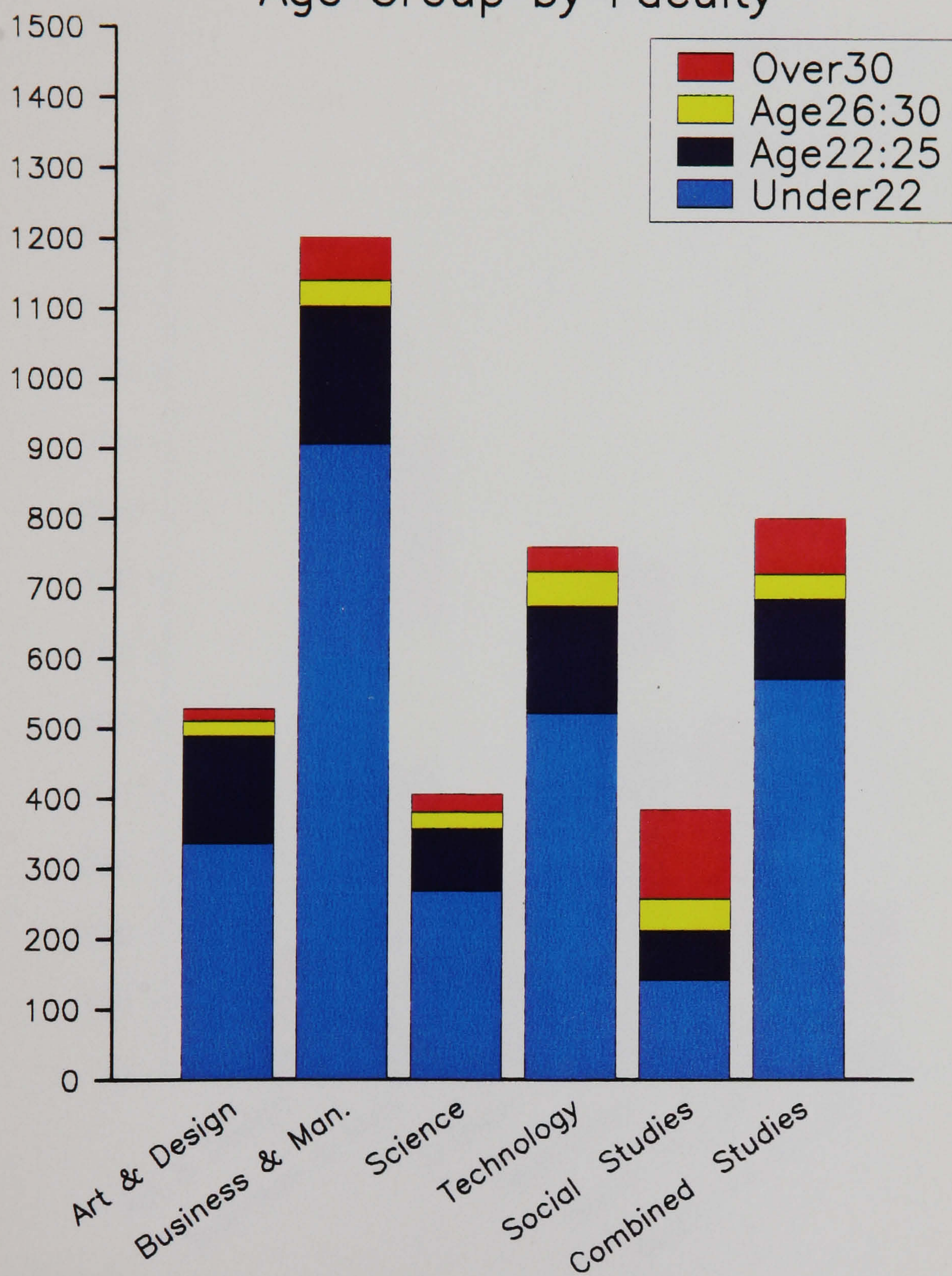


Part-Time Students (1985/86)  
Sex by Faculty



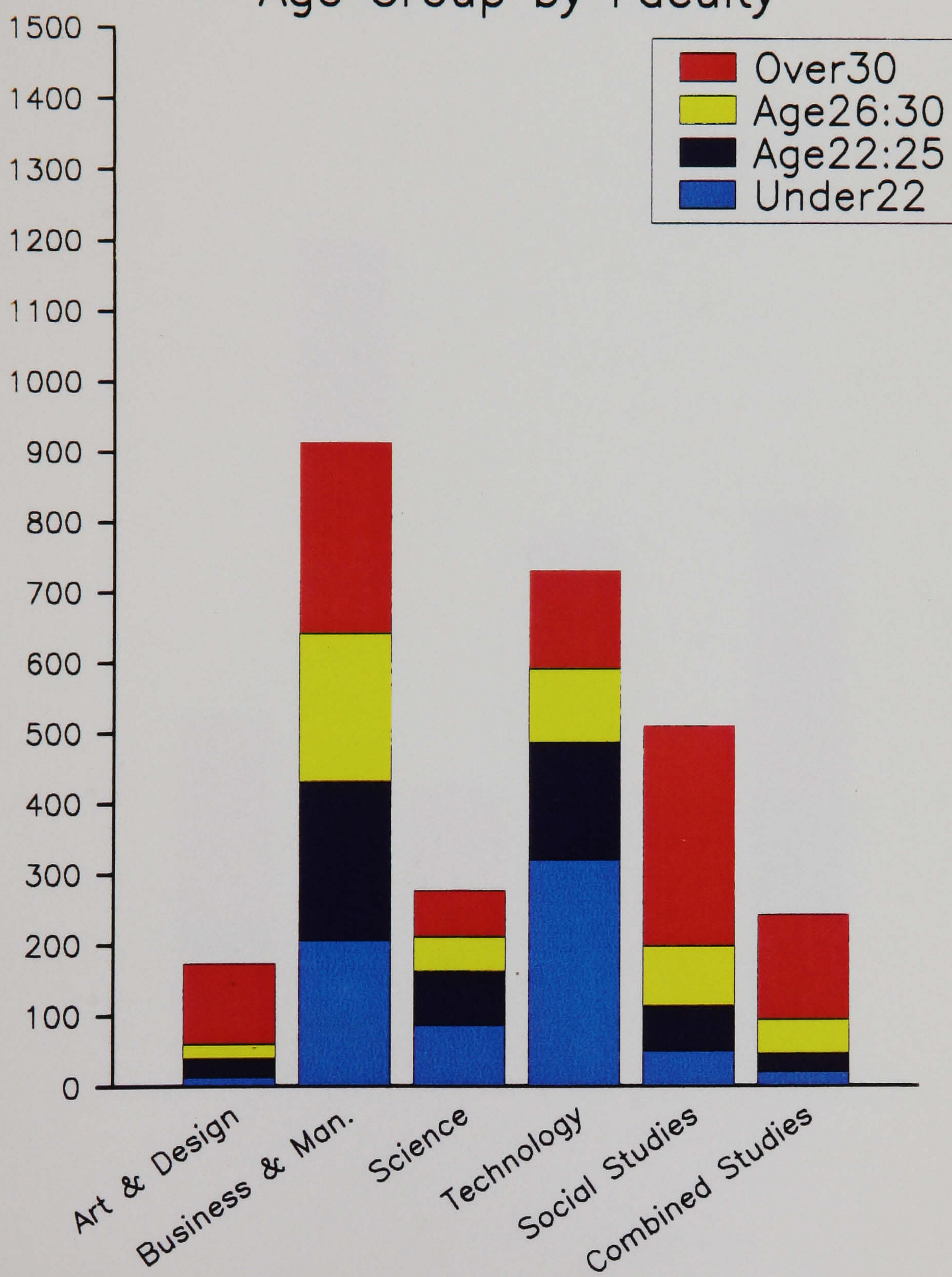


Full-Time Students (1986/87)  
Age Group by Faculty



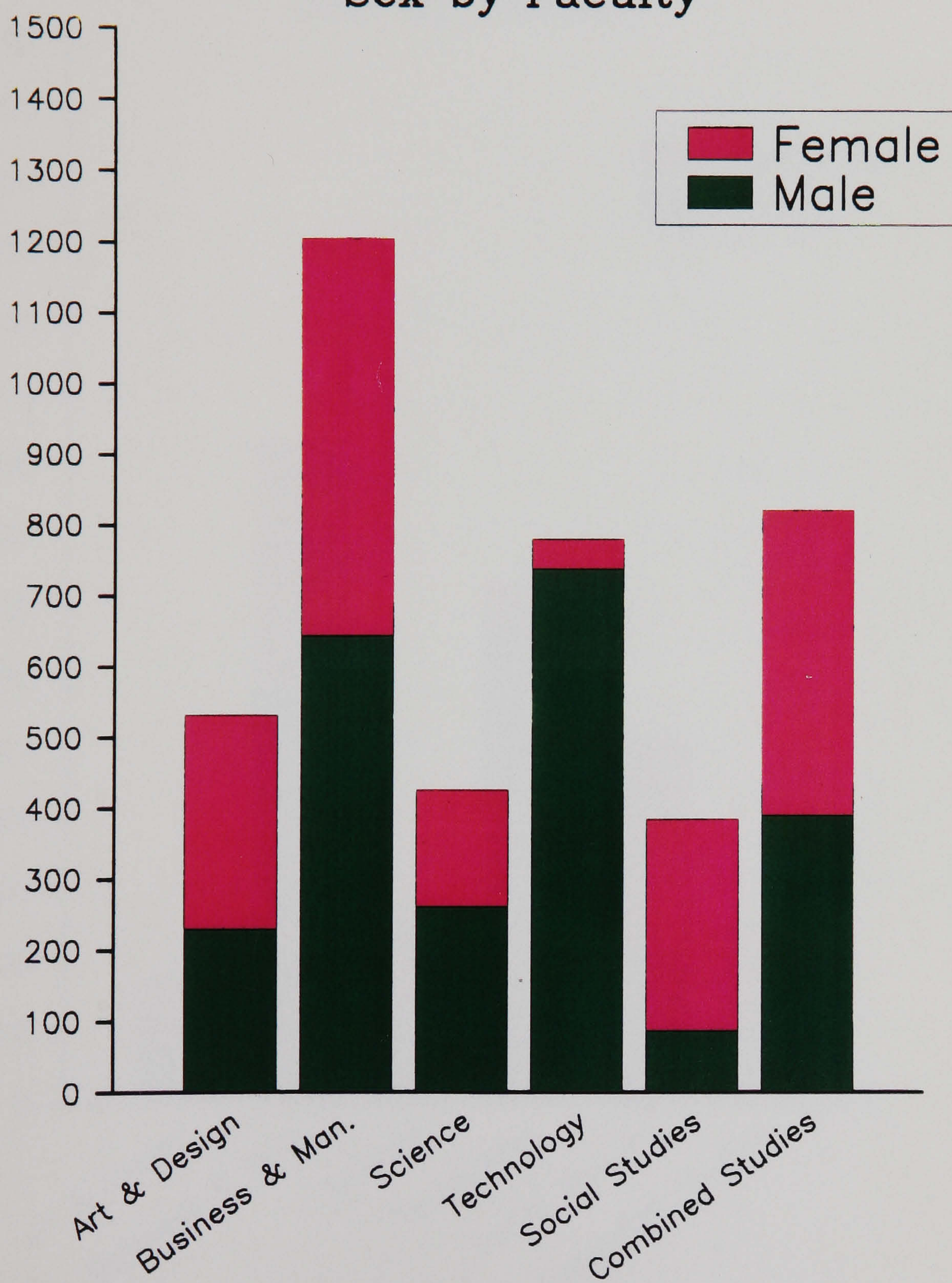


Part-Time Students (1986/87)  
Age Group by Faculty



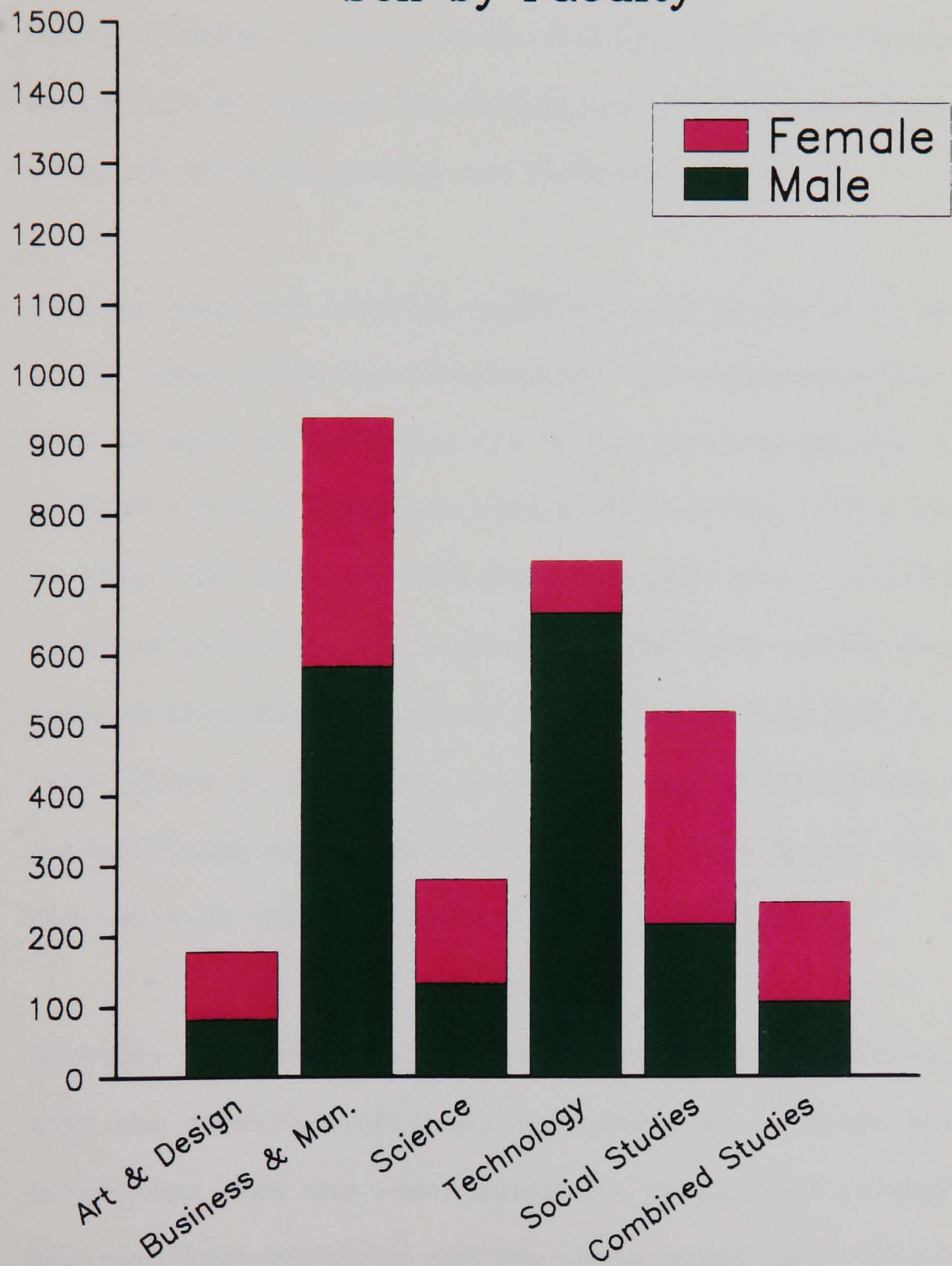


# Full-Time Students (1986/87) Sex by Faculty





Part-Time Students (1986/87)  
Sex by Faculty





The divisions by age group were selected on the basis of what I felt to be significant - 21 and under being used to create a category equivalent to the 'conventional' student - entering the Polytechnic straight from school and graduating three years later. The histogram 'snapshot' picture of all students means those registered in one year and so includes second and subsequent year students (this was not without significance when I tried to analyse entry qualifications).

So I decided firstly to take all students over 21 offered a place in October 1986/87 on any of the courses across the Polytechnic. These would then be sampled in proportion to their age representation as a group of students within the different faculties.

However when the computer print-out was produced it contained a list of 661 names of potential students with addresses all over Europe and Asia as well as all round the United Kingdom so that a random sample of such a group would not have been practical for a pre-course visit. At this time also two decisions had been made. A pilot study with a group of part-time and a group of full-time mature students was showing that these were two 'different' groups and it was decided to concentrate on full-time students. The dichotomy was not treated as insignificant but rather worthy of a study on its own account outside the remit of this research.

Secondly from the pilot study it was becoming increasingly apparent that the somewhat arbitrary definition of a mature student was interwoven with the individuals own perception of whether or not they fit into that category and how their subsequent behaviour influenced



and was influenced by the way other people, staff and students reacted to them. One 33 year old swore me to secrecy about his age because he wanted to be part of the 'conventional undergraduate culture'. He had been recently divorced and his wife had moved away with the children so that this, added to his youthful appearance meant that he had few responsibilities or reasons not to be seen as one of 'the group'. His social life revolved round Polytechnic activities and that was how he saw himself as - 'a student'. Another woman was 22 and married, with no family, but still she did not identify with 'the students'. She spent her time with the rest of the much older students in her group and had a totally separate social life revolving around her husband and friends away from the Polytechnic.

Because of these and other similar responses I decided to opt for a definition of 'mature students' more on the lines of the A.C.A.C.E. definition and to limit my sample to over 25 age group. Clearly this would not have made any difference to the first person I mentioned above but it did increase the likelihood of the applicant having had a break in their education and so fitting the return into their existing lives with families, friends, occupational background etc.

Added to this it was necessary for practical or financial reasons to limit my sample to within a reasonable travelling distance if I was to be able to see the group before they began their course, which more than likely would have meant in their homes. So I went through the initial list of 661 names, for those of 25 years old and over and within approximately 50 mile radius. This gave me a list of 90 people distributed on courses in the Polytechnic.

From that initial 90 these were further reduced to try and ensure each course offered that year was represented in final number. A man and a woman were chosen although this was not always possible particularly in technology but that was significant of the sex distribution in the polytechnic. On one course in technology there was only one mature student, he was 21 years old and the initial interview highlighted the comments I made earlier - he did not see himself as a mature student and after the first interview was not willing to see me again. I tried to balance the sample by numbers of places offered to mature students but this did not work totally because of transfer from the Combined Studies undergraduate programme in particular but this was balanced out to some extent by a change on to Combined Studies from elsewhere. There were also then three people on Applied Social Studies degree in the final sample but it does take a high proportion of mature students in the Polytechnic and there is useful comparative data from three different mature students.

This is a useful illustration of the point mentioned earlier concerning the problems of defining "a mature student" and underlines the need for a social rather than a chronological basis for any such status although this would make any attempt at creating a homogeneous group almost impossible. This however is one of the important findings of this research and strong support for a claim that adult students are not a homogeneous group and need individual support because of their (different) biographies (Whether this is a difference between conventional aged students is open to question.)



This left an actual working group of 45 applicants over 25 years of age, at least one from each full-time course currently offered by the polytechnic who lived within a local radius of the institution and who had been given a firm offer of a place.

**Table 2**

**Course Distribution of Original Sample**

	Male	Female	No in Final Sample
BA Fine Arts	2		1
Fdn.Art & Des.	2	1	2
BA Graphic Des.	1		1
BA (Hons) Accountancy	1	2	2
Foundation Accountancy	1		1
CIPFA Grad. Conv.	2	1	2
Assoc. Cert. Accts. Prof.	1		1
ICMA Prof. Exam 2	1		1
Poly Bilingual Sec.		1	1
BA (Hons) Bus. St.	1	3	2
LLB (Hons)		3	1
Dip. Mangt. St.	2	1	2
CNAA Bsc Bus. Info.Tec.		1	1
BA Bus.St.	1		1
BA (Hons) BSc (Hons) Psy.	1		1
BTEC HD App. Biol.		1	1
BTEC HND Elec.& Elect.Eng.	2		1
BTEC HND Bldg. St	1		1
BSc Hons & BSc Elec. Eng.	3		1
BEC TEC HND Comp. Stds.	1	2	2
HND Mech & Prod. Eng.	3		1
BEng (Hons) B.Eng. Mech Eng	1		1
BA (Hons) App.Soc. Stud.	5	10	4
Poly Dip App. Soc.St.	1	7	3
Poly Dip Soc. Work	3	3	2
Health Visitors Cert		6	2
Nat Cert. Dist Nurse SRN		1	1
BSc/BA Comb. St.	2	8	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>45</b>

Of the 45 sent out 41 replied and of those 24 were intending to take up the offer of a place and were willing to take part in the research. Two of those subsequently were unable to find appropriate times and places so that I finally interviewed 22 applicants/offerees before they began their courses. (I did try to contact the other two once the year had begun but was not successful - in one of the cases



meeting quite hostile questioning from the Head of School about the intentions of the project before she gave me a new address so I was not surprised when there was no response to my letter).

Follow up letters did go out to those who had not replied by mid August but despite that there was no response at all from four of the sample chosen.

Two of the sample who were taking up places were not willing to be interviewed. One of them I came to know quite well and she told me her reason was that she had felt that confidences had been betrayed on a previous research project she had been involved with (not at this polytechnic) and she did not want to repeat the experience.

That left 15 of the sample who replied saying that they had decided not to take up the offer of the place. I was able to contact and/or visit some of them to ask the reasons for their decline and although originally it was hoped to include this information in some detail here it would seem that there is the opportunity for further study as to the way mature students approach the Polytechnic for advice and do not follow it further; or decline places offered. Moves are currently being made to follow this up.

Table 3

Applicants in original sample not taking up a place at this Polytechnic

Type of contact	Student	Course	Reason for decline of offer
1	3	Fdn. Art	Going to another institution
1	5	BA Accounting	Not willing to be contacted
1	6	BA Accounting	Not a mature student. PT mode
1	7	Fdn. Acctncy.	Going abroad to work
1	11	ICMA Prof. Exam	Not willing to be contacted
1	16	Dip. Mgt. Std.	Another inst. plus prof. training
2	18	BSc B.I.T.	More preparation/ predegree/ personal reasons
1	19	BA Bus Stds.	Cont. not first year student
2	23	Elec. Eng.	Another inst. more relevant course
2	24	Elec. Eng.	Wrong quals. felt being misled on racial grounds
2	26	Computer Std.	No grant: Had three grants/fellowships already
	29	Computer Std.	Letter returned: not at that address
	31	BA App.Sc.Std.	Not willing to be interviewed
	34	Poly Dip. App. Soc. Stud.	Not willing to be interviewed
1	39	Hlth. Vis. Cert	Secondment refused: Hospital Authority
	42	Combined Std.	Not willing to be interviewed
2	43	Combined Std.	Did not like atmosphere at interview. Seemed too many young people. Will stay with O.U. (now applied and accepted on Applied Social Studies Course)

- 1 Telephone contact  
2 Visit and interview



Table 4

Details by course of applicants who did not respond to invitation to take part in research project.

Student	Course Offered
10	Accounting
13	Business Studies
27	Eng. Science
33	Polytechnic Diploma in Applied Social Studies

There was no pretence at getting a quantitatively representative sample as far as numbers of students or accurate representation on courses was concerned. The aim was a 'fair' distribution of mature students across the Polytechnic with a willingness to take part in a longitudinal survey for quite lengthy interviews and also constraints of my time, distance and cost of travel, the demands on students time.

This produced a sample of 24 applicants who had been offered places. I was able to arrange to talk to 22 of them at length before the course began - usually at their own homes but the venue was left up to them to decide as it was important to establish a working relationship from the start if I was not to cause problems for follow up interviews. If there was difficulty of timing or of my visiting the house, (one applicant knew his wife was hostile to his studying and that it would make the situation worse if I came to his home; two wanted to see me at their place of work), I saw them at the Polytechnic. I am aware that the surroundings may have influenced what they said during our conversations.

**Table 5**

**Sex and marital status of students in the chosen group.**

<u>Men</u>		<u>Women</u>	
Single male:	5	Single female:	0
Married male no family:	2	Married female no family:	1
Married male family:	4	Married female family:	8
Divorced male no children at home:	1	Divorced female no children at home:	1
Divorced male children at home:	1	Divorced female children at home	1
Total:	13		11



Table 6

## A Profile of the Sample of Mature Students

Student number in sample	Course	Previous Study	Reason for return	Perceived "trigger" for return
* 1. Steve	B.A. Fine Art	Foundation Art	Career/Interest	Recent divorce: Business change frees finance
2. Nancy	Foundation Art	Degree/prof. quals	Interest	Age: husbands retirement
4. John	B.A. Graphic design	Foundation Art	Career	Needed job change
* 8. Barbara	C.I.P.F.A. Graduate conversion	Degree Geog.	Career	Son at school
* 9. Colin	Accountancy	HND F.E.	Career	Continuous study
12.	Bilingual Secretary	NOT CONTACTED FOR INTERVIEW		
14. Alison	B.A. Bus. studies	HND: This Poly.	Career	Remarried: age of children, husbands support
+ 15. Mavis	LLB	Degree (Econ)/DMS	Voluntary work/Interest	Stroke: early retirement
17. Philip	D.M.S.	Degree: A.T.S.	Career?	Not able to find employment
20. Clive	B.A. Psychology	Open College: A+B	Interest	Heart attack: early retirement
21.	B.TEC. App. Biology	NOT CONTACTED FOR INTERVIEW		
22. Ken	Buildin: HND	None	Career	Heart attack: unemployed
* 25. Brian	B.A. Combined Studies	'A' level: Predegree	Career	Unemployed: m. cycle accident
28. Andrew	Eng. Science	HND (?) Poly	Career	
30. Kate	B.A. App. Soc. Studies	'A' levels: Predegree	Career/Interest	Children growing up: change of job
32. Mal	B.A. App. Soc. Studies	Predegree	Career	Divorce: no financial ties
35. Pam	C.Q.S.W.	Degree	Career	Career progression
36. Alan	Poly Dip. Soc. Work	Open College A+B	Career/Interest	Needed qualification
37. Mohammed	Poly Dip. soc. Work	None	Career	Secondment: age 40
* 38. Jennifer	Health Visitors Cert.	Nursing Quals.	Career	Divorce: secondment
40. Marjorie	Nat. Cert. Dist. Nurse	S.R.N.	Career	Change in regulations
41. Christine	Combined Studies	'A' level Predegree	Career/Interest	Therapeutic: childrens age: pers. goals
* 44. Janet	Combined Studies	Open College A+B	Career/Interest	Divorce
45. Thomas	Combined Studies	'A' levels: 1st yr. another university	Career	Age: relatives need limits live nearer home

KEY

- \* Changed courses before year began except Colin in first few weeks
- + Changed course at end of first year
- Did not take up place: Steve did arrive but due to a court case had to leave

Two of the 22 interviewed were unable to take up places one due to ill health and one due to the results of a court action which changed his financial circumstance (business backup which was to help finance him) and so a sample of 20 students was the base of the study for their first year at the Polytechnic. All these twenty students had successfully completed their course or were still current at the end of the first year, despite many problems which will become apparent as the data is presented.

**Table 7**

**Research Interview Schedule**

Autumn 1985	Pilot Survey	3rd yr f/t & p/t Students	Decision made to concentrate on f/t
Spring 1986	Design of sample frame	661 students offered courses for 1987	Sample limited to 45 offered
Summer 1986	Interviews Aug-Sept	41 replies 22 intended to take up place. Some interviews with those who decided not to take up offer	Int'dctns expect'tns
Autumn 1986	Interviews Nov-Dec (one Feb 87)	First term of study	Realities of return to study
Summer 1987	Interviews Aug-Sept	5 end of crse 15 end of 1st year	Reflections & Resolutions



## **The Research within the qualitative paradigm**

The research was based within the interpretative paradigm using in-depth unstructured interviews from a small sample of mature students. The reason for this was the desire to establish some understandings of and insights into the mature student's world at the Polytechnic. It was an attempt to get the students view "as it appears to them" not through any preconceived categories which I might create. The use of collecting data by in-depth interviews was deliberately chosen as different from any statistical sampling - apart from an attempt to represent as wide a view of polytechnic courses as possible - and was modelled on the Glaser and Strauss (1967) work of generating grounded theory - theory which emerges from and around the data collected. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define theory as "a strategy for handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualisation for describing and explaining"

So using the information collected during interviews (and later transcribed) as data, theory is generated by a process of induction built up by constantly picking up points of comparison out of the data and elaborating on them. Once categories start to emerge from the data they are used to set up new directions for further enquiry. Clearly there are epistemological points which need to be taken on board here. The categories arise from the data but it is the researcher who decides what the categories are - some may seem more relevant to the researcher than others or be given more importance than was originally intended but the issue is understood here. Also at the time of collecting the data it is necessary for the researcher

to stand back and "bracket" her own preconceived ideas so that the student is allowed to express his or her own subjective interpretations of reality. This was not easy especially in early interviews when trying to explain the purpose of the researcher or to get the respondent to speak to a strange person through a microphone and tape recorder but this was the basis of the interview methodology used.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to this methodology as theoretical sampling, generating theory by collecting, coding and analysing data in order to decide where to go next to develop a theory. From the data collected "categories" will arise which are the conceptual elements of the theory - ways in which the material can be handled. These categories were not predetermined at the outset of the research project but emerge from the data. There were no set questions with pre-coded answers - although to some extent the areas of 'discussion' must be predetermined by the area of the research itself. Material is then added to each conceptual category until no more relevant information can be found when the category is then said to be "saturated". So even within a sample of this size there is room for the development of inductively developed theory with explanatory powers which a theory requires which can be illustrated in qualitative depth. At the same time categories which may arise from the first round of interviews can direct future data collection and dictate the lines of enquiry along those which are relevant to the sample rather than those predetermined in a more rigid method of data collection.

"The consequences of the traditional approach is often a forcing of the data, as well as a neglect of the relevant



concepts and hypotheses that emerge. Our approach, allowing substantive concepts and hypotheses to emerge, first on their own, enables the analyst to ascertain which, if any, existing formal theory may help him generate his substantive theories".

(Glaser and Strauss 1967)

I think that despite previous research using the methodology (Hanson 1980) and again in a small pilot project I approached the first round of interviews with some problems of "bracketing" my preconceptions of what it is like to be a mature student at this polytechnic.

I too was a mature student at the Polytechnic researching a higher degree, so I was not approaching the research frame from a position of entire naivete. Melia (1982) found the same problem in her attempt to understand the nurses' world because of the time she had spent "being a nurse". At the same time when I carried out the first round of interviews I had been in the Polytechnic for a year, working in the Continuing Education Service, teaching on a variety of courses and generally assimilating the nuances of its way of life. Clearly such a position, as in any participant observation, gives important insights into the understanding of data from the participant's point of view and in many ways may "heighten the verstehen." It can on the other hand though allow the researcher to take much for granted and so under or over estimate the importance of certain areas to examine, questions to ask, categories to develop.

Whilst certainly being aware of the negative aspects of too much background knowledge, I think by facing the possible problems at the outset, I was able to use my inside information about the Polytechnic

to advantage. I was able to understand the students concerns, I could empathise with problems such as being at the school gate for 3 o'clock, of knowing what deadlines were, of visualising the distance between two subsequent classes and the car park. I knew who they were talking about, what their degree profile was and why there were difficulties in getting to the library or the main refectory in an hours break. This had valuable pay-off in the interviews because the respondents knew I was aware of these things. This allowed them to become points of discussion so that I could let the conversations flow to points where it was no longer my understanding of these problems and issues as they affected me that was apparent but the way in which they were seen by the student. I was in effect able to use this "insider" information to positive advantage as a foundation on which to build a description from the perspective of the respondent.

Because of this the data collected in this research is not only from the interviews but is illustrated with reference to my understandings of what was happening in this, and other polytechnics in relation to mature students at the particular time. This puts the research firmly within the interactionist perspective - seeing the student, and myself, within the confines of the institution.

The data is thus based on information collected from three in-depth informal interviews with the students during the summer before they arrived at the Polytechnic, again in the second half of their first term and in the summer after the end of the first year. The formal theories which were used to generate substantive theories were again not unproblematic in the decisions about the first interview. Whilst



I knew from previous research (Hanson 1980) that it is difficult to get someone to "tell me what you are thinking about returning to study at the Polytechnic" and expect a stream of consciousness for the next half hour or so, I still felt that my early interviews were somehow constrained by my own theoretical assumptions at the outset - what I knew about andragogy, what I knew about mature students in the Open University and this Polytechnic, what I knew from the pilot project. The answers were therefore often what I wanted to hear because the respondents may have had little choice within the framework of the questions I put to them. The questions were open ended but often so wide that only a brief answer could be given and I would then follow up a lead which may not have been very relevant - to the student that is.

These issues would seem to be problematic at two levels - practical and theoretical and both have been addressed in this research with I feel some success.

At the practical level the purpose of the interviews was to find out what the respondent was thinking - not to put the interviewers preconceived categories for organizing the world into the respondents mind but to assess the perspective of the person being interviewed. Although it is easy to take this on board in theory the practice is not so easy. There are difficulties of role difference, me the "qualified" researcher going to see student about 'becoming an undergraduate', the whole scenario of the interview, the tape recorder, the question, whether or not going into their homes made a difference compared with seeing the respondent at the Polytechnic, the

gender of the interviewer vis a vis the respondent, the need to give some information but yet to stay neutral to the responses given; to build up relationships over the period of the interviews and yet not to get so involved as to influence the comments given. Many of these issues are outlined by Measor (1985) in her research and Finch (1984) and in research such as this project, many of these issues become important. It is necessary to build a research relationship for such qualitative research, to have an easy relationship so that I did not think I was intruding into already full timetables to feel that the interview itself gave something to the respondent because I was someone who listened but this in itself became problematic especially in the second round of interviews when many of the sample had reached a stage in the course when they were looking for individual help not with the subject matter but with the day to day organization of their lives and particularly the interaction between their commitments inside and outside the Polytechnic.

The interviewer needs to be able to be critically aware but at the same time to enter into the participants world to get the real feel of it and to pick up aspects which are peculiar to that individual. I had to develop such strategies, to talk to the participants around the campus, to give practical help then when possible (I helped make appointments with the student counsellor, with the housing officer, with tutors for extra sessions, with a Dean about an exam result for example) but during the interviews themselves I tried to use the initial setting up of the tape recorder as an ice-breaking exercise and as a start to the 'formal' interview - this was the research as it were. After the interview - frequently an hour and a half long, our



conversations would then continue on a more personal level and I would allow myself to make more subjective comments then. Clearly these 'conversations' would then set the relationship for the next round of interviews as I came to know the sample quite well but this was taken within the context of the information collected. They also gave information about the Polytechnic which itself became valuable data and which was recorded in field notes alongside the transcripts.

Two practical influences on the way in which the interviews were conducted which noticeably affected the responses were the work of Michael Patton (1980) (1982) in his designs of qualitative interviewing and training received as part of the Student Potential Programme sponsored by D.E.S/U.D.A.C.E using the technique of the Behavioural Event Interview.

Patton describes three different types of qualitative interviews

1. the informal conversational interview
2. the general interview guide approach
3. the standardized open-ended interview.

The differences lie in the extent to which interview questions are determined and standardised before the interview begins. The informal conversational interview relies entirely on the spontaneous operation of questions during the natural flow of the interaction - the respondent may not even know it is an interview:

The general interview guide approach involves outlining a set of issues to be explored before the interview begins. This is not a

standard set of questions but a sort of check-list of issues to be covered - it makes sure that all the respondents' are asked about certain areas but there are no standardised questions in advance.

Standardised open-ended interview consists of a set of questions carefully worded in advance and arranged in order so that respondents are asked the same words in the same order.

The informal conversational interview conforms most closely to a phenomenological perspective. It is the approach (perhaps a better word than method or methodology) used when the researcher has no presuppositions about what is going to develop from the research, it allows the researcher to move in what ever direction the information that emerges takes him/her. The questions will flow from the immediate context and so no predetermined questions can be set. This may result in all the participants giving different data or indeed the same participant modifying responses over time. These, however, may be significant 'results', as this approach is particularly useful when research is conducted over a period of time and when each interview can build upon another, expanding information from a previous interview, moving to new issues or asking for clarifications and elaborations in the respondents own terms. The strength of this approach to interviewing is that it allows the researcher to be highly responsive to individual differences and situation changes, it allows individualised in-depth communication which can often reflect the immediate surroundings and state of mind of the respondent about things which have arisen as part of their situation position and so are directly relevant to the research area as perceived by them. To be able to use this approach over a period of time with the same group



builds up a holistic picture of changes to the individual and to their interaction within the course and institutional context as well.

The drawbacks to this approach are the time involved to collect the information and the amount of information generated which has to be transcribed and analysed later (see Rachael Sharp 1980 on this).

But more important this informal conversational interview is more open to interviewer effects in that it depends on the conversational skills of the interviewer.

"The phenomenological interviewer must be able to interact easily with people in a variety of settings, generate rapid insights, formulate questions quickly and smoothly, and guard against asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation by the structure of the question".

(Patton 1980)

Thus the type of interviewing which is needed in this subjective type of research must be different to the type of questioning used in quantitative research which may force respondents to fit their knowledge, experiences and feeling into the researcher's predesigned questions.

The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.

"To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what we thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms and other commonly invoked explanations of behaviour only by seeing them from the actor's point of view"

(Becker 1970)

For the first round of interviews with my group of participants I had this very much in mind but with the added limitation that as it was the first time I had met the individuals I wanted to try and build up a background picture of the group. This involved the use of some pre-prepared areas which would fit into Patton's general interview guide approach which I had built up from previous research and from a pilot study carried out at the Polytechnic during the previous year. I also used a conversational approach to generate information about why this group of mature students were returning to study at this Polytechnic, what their thoughts and feelings were about what they were expecting. All the interviews were tape recorded - only one of the participants said he was influenced by the tape recorder although another said initially he wasn't happy but soon forgot. The taped interviews were then transcribed.

What became apparent from that first round when the transcripts were analysed, not in detail for content but within a pattern of questions and answers, was that my skills as an interviewer fell far short of Patton's ideal type and that even though the questions arose from the information given by the respondents themselves they certainly imposed restrictions on the responses that followed. What was happening was that I was summarising the replies and giving it back as another question, framed within my preconceptions of life as a mature student at the Polytechnic, in a leading way so that I almost would have been better 'setting questions' in the first place which would at least have given some benefit of objective evaluation. At times because of



this there was little of what the participants actually expected and a good deal of what I thought they might expect and they pre-empted that. What was happening was that I was not actually using open-ended questions but instead framing what I said within a string of dichotomous response questions guiding the interview and so letting the participant have very little thinking to do - I was to some extent providing the content of the interview.

I don't think this was as extreme as some of the examples given by Patton but an analysis of the early interviews shows how much I did dominate the information given by the students.

The points made by Patton in the structure of the interview and the types of questions (not the content or wording of the questions) were taken on board for the second round of interviews and an analysis of transcripts will show that much more information now came from the participants than from me. Also by the second round of interviews I was aware of the backgrounds of the participants and had seen many of them informally around the Polytechnic so that I was able to leave much of the talking to them. They also now had something concrete to talk about - their expectations had become a reality.

Just before the last of the interviews in the second round I took part in an American training programme which was part of a DES pilot project to test the possibility of using a scale of potentialities obtained from a behavioural event interview as an objective way of assessing mature/non standard entrants to Higher Education. Without giving details of the programme, which are not relevant here, it is an

attempt to remove interviewer bias by allowing the respondents to talk about happenings in their lives which are important or problematical to them and doing this without asking any leading questions. (See Appendix 4).

The importance of this 'training' for my research was the way in which it outlined to me a way of minimizing the imposition of predetermined responses in the collection of the data and of probing in such a way that was open-ended, neutral, singular and clear (Payne 1951), to allow the respondents to answer in their own terms. Even a brief comparison of the first and second interviews with 'Mavis' which was carried out on my return, showed the value of this training programme to this research although it was clearly not an intended function of the programme.

At a theoretical level the research became less problematic when it began to fit more clearly into the interactionist perspective. This seemed to me to be in line with the process of becoming and being a mature student at this Polytechnic.

Symbolic interaction described by Blumer (1962) refers to "peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or "define" each others actions instead of merely reacting to each others actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on the meanings which they attach to such actions. Thus human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining



the meaning of one another's actions. This mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation between stimulus and response in the case of human behaviour".

So in this research I am not taking these interpretations for granted. I am looking at students as they interact with other students within the Polytechnic systems and indeed as they see themselves as objects of their own actions within the context of returning to study at the Polytechnic. Here I follow Blumer in acknowledging the importance of the work of G. H. Mead (1934) in looking at the mechanisms each individual uses to interpret the actions of others because these interpretations create meaning which the individual then uses to make sense of the social world.

So it is important in this research to look at the symbols which these mature students use as objects in making sense of life at the Polytechnic. Not only those observable happenings which may seem to stimulate behaviour but which are products of that behaviour. All the day to day activities in the institution which are components in the creation of meaning for that particular student are treated as a rich source of data about what it feels like to be a mature student.

Clearly, too, because each of the students constructs his(or her) objects in an individual way he will compound this individuality by his own personal interpretations of those objects which will influence his subsequent actions. This makes it important for myself as researcher to have an insight into the way the social environment is used by the individual student and then letting him or her describe

how this is interpreted through their own perceptions of that reality. This formation of the action of being a mature student at the Polytechnic through the process of self-indication always takes place in a social context hence the importance of a symbolic interactionist approach and the place of in-depth unstructured interviews which recognise that each individual is capable of interpreting his or her own actions.

My role then to collate the individual subjective interpretations of reality and to see how much they are a product of the Polytechnic or the process of interpretation used by the acting units - how far could this group of mature student become self-directed learners even if they wanted to be or if indeed that is what they see as important in the reality of returning to study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### INTO, AND THROUGH THE POLYTECHNIC: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF ADULTS LEARNING

#### Into the Polytechnic: Adults in Transition

#### Why Adults Return to Study

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) open the second chapter of their study

"Americans in Transition" with the statement:

"To describe adult learning is one thing; to explain adult learning is another. That distinction is useful because descriptions and explanations have different purposes and because the available descriptions are more substantial than the available explanations".

As the introduction to this research has shown national statistics do exist to describe the mature student population but these in no way give an explanation as to why adults return to study. Chapter Two gives a profile of the mature students in one institution of Public Sector Higher Education with details by age, sex, area of study for example but this does not explain why at this particular time the individual mature students decided to study rather than at any other. Allen Tough (1982) (in Gross, Ed. 1982) considers that the figures which describe adult learners are very much an underestimate of the size of that population in reality with 80% of the 'iceberg' being undocumented. O'Keefe (1977) says that figures which are produced nationally present 'extrapolations of present trends rather than theory based predictions of future trends' and this is one of the problems with the paucity of explanations about why mature students

chose to come into higher education.

Any decision to open access to higher education for mature students to fill the empty places left by those of conventional age should involve an understanding of the needs of that group. To simply document them says nothing about what institutions may have to do to keep those students. This not only refers to the different curricula discussed earlier but also to the incentives to return to study from grants to time table arrangements; to providing practical facilities such as evening access to buildings, libraries, counselling, catering and creche provisions and also to consideration of courses in a 'real world' context. This should involve higher education in access policies which not only concentrate on getting mature students into institutions but increasing provision for passage through it and exit from it and this needs an awareness of the employment market for its graduates so that there can be a real 'ability to benefit' in a wide variety of ways. The problems here are closely involved with social and educational policy and they have political implications but unless an understanding of the explanations of adults returning to study is attempted from the student point of view there is a danger of no real change in the provision of higher education just more of the same ivory tower elitism - we know what is good for you paternalism.

One of my sample described his course at the Polytechnic as a form of employment - far from the concept of the development of the complete educated man - but a realistic , if instrumental approach in the current economic climate.



Some researchers, Houle (1961) Cross (1978a and 1978) Aslanian and Brickell (1980) and Tough (1968) have offered explanations of why some adults wish to return to study whilst others do not. A general picture can be built up of the stereotype mature student who is middle class, more likely to be female and already with some experience of the educational system which makes him/her articulate or confident enough to want or to be able to make the necessary steps to look for more. In many cases there may be an element of instrumentality in the decision to return to study, i.e. a need for qualifications for promotion or the need to get a job after some problem such as family breakdown after a divorce.

Allen Tough's work (1969) illustrates the high percentage of adults who initiate their own 'learning projects' in the course of a year. He maintains that an average person:

- (a) conducts seven distinct learning projects in one year (a learning project being a minimum of 7 hours.)
- (b) spends an average of 100 hours per learning effort;
- (c) spends a total of 700 hours learning per year.

Tough with a team of researchers found the same patterns in different countries of the world no matter what group was studied. The point about Tough's descriptions of adult's learning projects though is that they are individual projects even though they illustrate a high degree of motivation for study they are not within an institutional context.



Cross (1978a) on the other hand gives a profile of the mature student in the institutional setting - although again these are at the level of description.

"Broadly speaking there are three hypotheses for the consistent and positive relationship between educational attainment and educational interest. One is that education has done such a good job that the more that people experience it the more they like it - either for its intrinsic or extrinsic rewards. A second hypothesis is that those who have been successful in the fairly narrow demands of the education stay in it longer and wish to return to the scene of their earlier success.

A third hypothesis is that human beings are basically curious and enjoy learning, but that the haves possess the information and wherewithal to pursue learning that interests them, whereas the have nots are handicapped and thwarted in attaining what all people basically desire".

(Cross 1978).

Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) point to sociodemographic variables such as age, sex, income and schooling as descriptions and reasons why adults return to study but they also point to the need to look for explanations at a more sophisticated level which might affect the nature and timing of a return to study. Such explanations would include personal and situational variables such as normal life changing events, - the growing away of children, the need to secure a better job; or crisis events such as job losses, marriage breakdown or illness which at any one time changes attitudes towards the value of higher education. Explanations such as these would upset an existing balance in life and could be important in a homeostatic explanation, as presented in a moment, but they do provide the catalyst which appears to be missing in theories of innate curiosity or the need to acquire information throughout life presented by educationalists such as Rogers, Kidd and Tough.

My sample of students when analysed by sociodemographic factors would seem to fit the stereotype as presented overleaf:



Table 8

Sociodemographic Factors of sample of 22 adults in Original sample

	Males	Females
<u>Age</u>	(22-62 yrs)	(33-54 yrs)
<u>Sex</u>	12	10
<u>Marital Status</u>	5 single 2 married (no family) 4 married (with family) 1 divorced	none single 1 married (no family at home) 7 married (with family) 2 divorced
<u>Social Class?</u>		
No objective measure	8 working class 4 middle class	4 working class 6 middle class
<u>Previous Educational Qualifications</u>	7 some previous qualifications i.e. 'O' levels & 'A' levels 1 graduate with Art quals. 5 no formal quals.	9 some previous i.e. 'O' levels & 'A' levels 4 graduates one plus DMS one plus library quals. 2 S.R.Ns. 1 H.N.D. 1 no formal quals.
	Males	Females
<u>Preparatory Study</u>	9 had done some study including 2 Art Foundation courses 2 Open College 2 Pre-degree 1 degree transfer into 2nd year 2 straight from previous FE/HE course.	4 had done <u>recent</u> study 2 Pre-degree 1 Open College 1 previous poly course

Allen Tough (1969) looked not only at such characteristics of mature learners but also asked why they entered in to part or the whole of a learning project. He also made a decision to look at conscious reasons for learning at the time of the beginning of the project not some notions of enjoyment or childhood experiences, socioeconomic status or previous educational background but the first and immediate reason for undertaking the learning e.g. to write a report; build a garage etc.

This is important because it attempts an explanation of why adults want to enter into the education process and indeed why they do undertake to study. Tough also attempted to produce a level of explanation between detailed empirical data and single grand theory such as that of self-concept.

As would probably have been expected Tough found the reasons for beginning a learning project were complex - usually there were three with two being strong although often there were six per person. It was rare for an adult to give a single motivation so it would seem to be inappropriate in this study to be looking for generalisations about why adults return to study.

"If each adult begins and continues each of his learning projects for a diversity of reasons, it is probably absurd to attribute some single reason as the exclusive motivation for all adult learning".

Tough (1969)

One reason which appears in a variety of research as the primary reason for returning to study is that of the desire to use or apply



the knowledge or skill. Johnstone and Rivers (1965) claim - "major emphasis of adult learning is on the practical rather than the academic, on the applied rather than on the theoretical,..... subject matter directly useful in the performance of everyday tasks and obligations. 71% of Tough's sample of 35 gave use of knowledge but often linked to wanting to be able to perform more effectively as individuals than they could without acquiring the knowledge. This, along with a curiosity to find out and the satisfaction gained from obtaining the knowledge for what that said to other people about ones self were important elements in the reasons my sample gave for wanting to come into public sector higher education.

In fact this need to become a better "self", an "ideal self" or a "better person", parent, employee or whatever, pleasing him or herself rather than others, regarding him or herself more highly came as a strong reason for coming into an institutional context as the data will show - despite what has been said, and developed by theorists like Malcolm Knowles about what and why adults wish to learn. It is almost as if, and I shall return to this in a moment, there is an element of the ought factor here in answers to "Why are you returning to study?". The reason needs to be given in instrumental terms, "to get a job", "to know more about the counselling I was doing at a theoretical level", "to understand the Law I use as a magistrate" because this seems "respectable", legitimate less self indulgent than saying to do something I had always wanted to do, missed out on or for its own sake. This is probably not surprising in the current economic and political climate towards higher education which emphasises in practical terms - science subjects and devalues arts and humanities.

To study a project at home, alone for its practical application does not carry the stamp of approval of a degree or diploma which is recognised in society as saying this person has reached the required standard. Many of my sample were quick to say, during the initial interview before they began their courses, that they were at last doing something for themselves and were not trying to prove anything to anyone else. However, it was often the public definition of success - the award of a paper qualification which seemed to drive them on. Indeed the need for 'marks' for work to be evaluated and returned, became the overriding issue of the first term. Once there was feedback and a way of measuring performance against that of other people there was a yardstick by which to evaluate themselves as a whole - not just the person who wrote the piece of coursework. In other words it did matter what 'people' thought. As one student expressed a view:

*"I used to be frightened of saying anything before because I thought everyone was better qualified than I was, now I'll hold my own in any argument and give as good as I get".*



This growth in self confidence may also be self reinforcing. In the classroom situation for example change in self confidence from the first to the third year may allow students to initiate interactions and therefore gain more knowledge and understanding and subsequently gain more confidence in their own ability. The study by Lam (1982) illustrated this. Lam looked at initial classroom behaviour of adults and compared them with later stages of learning - showing how initial reactions are often conditioned by adults previous education experiences such as school and unemployment which gives them low self-confidence which may explain why some adults delay their return to study for so long. As they develop skills in the situation and growth in knowledge - if this is allowed and this is an important point of Lam's study - then adults take a more active part in their own learning process through more initiation of activity in classrooms.

*"I expected the Poly to be different to school but when I got here - perhaps it wasn't - but I saw it like school. It was structured with rules and essay deadlines. It seemed like that on the surface but it wasn't, it was my expectations. I was inhibited. I felt I was in a passive position I must have got it from schooling. I know I had been away from school for a long time but it created a strong impression even with a break to do night school I just couldn't behave like an adult at first. I expected to be taught. I wouldn't be like that now the three years have changed my expectations now I don't want to be just talked at. I'd rather challenge that now but I wouldn't when I first came here. Experience has given me confidence".*

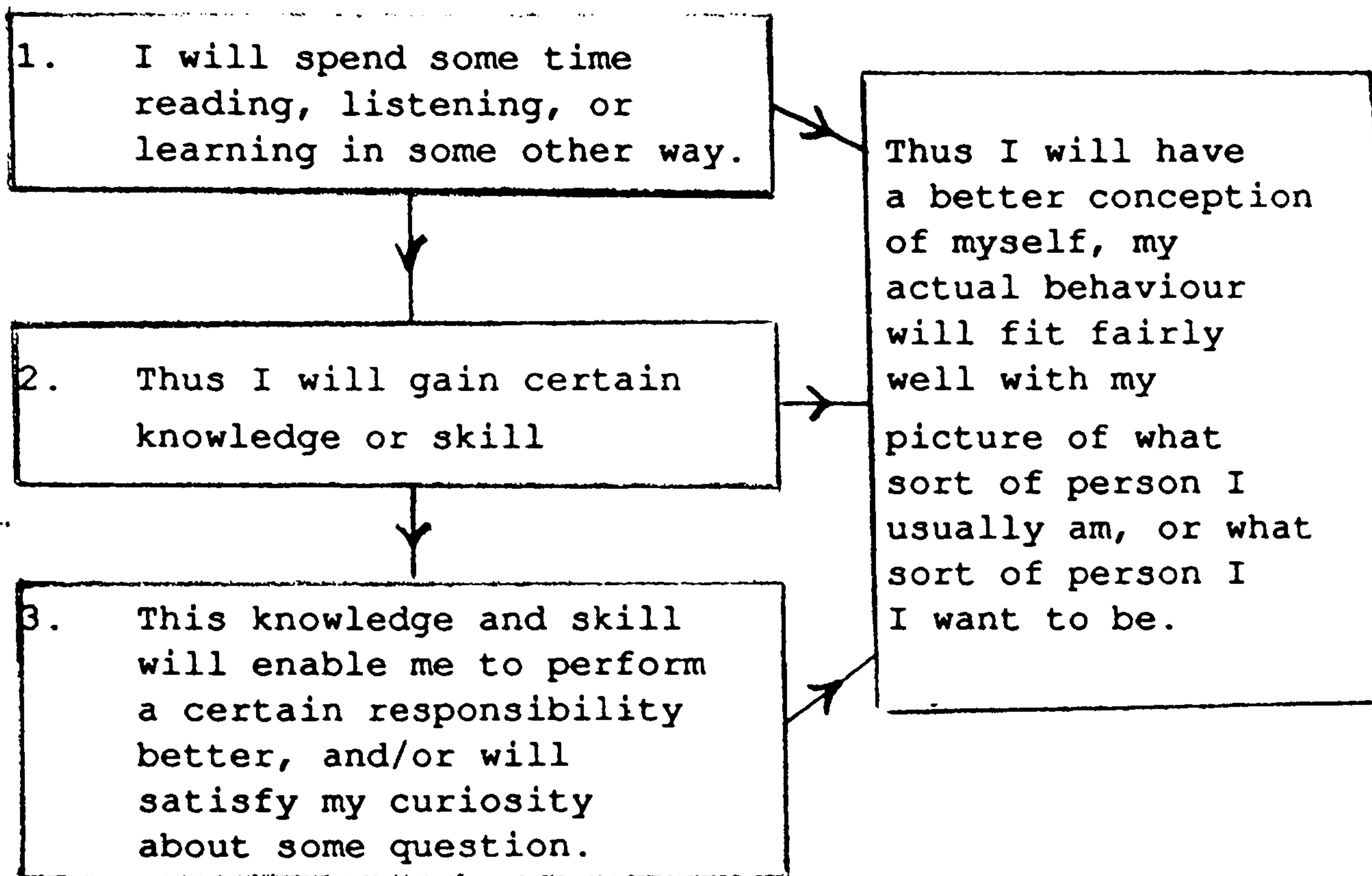
Val: Third year student: Pilot Project.

There may be a need for teachers to be aware of the model of learning necessary for adults to gain full benefit from a teaching/learning situation. If the lecturer relies on one factor such as him/herself, the learner or the curriculum it is likely to prove less effective than if a variety of factors are involved. They may need also to make themselves aware of the causes of verbal and non-verbal behaviour emitted by the learners as "recognition of the cause or origins of these messages." This could facilitate educators in delivering quality instruction through the self-diagnostic, situation-diagnostic and learner-diagnostic process.

Whilst much of the findings of Lam's research has relevance for the second part of this Chapter about the students passage "through" the institution and what happens within the classrooms it does offer an explanation of the time it often takes for an adult to return to preparatory study but then how soon they transfer to higher education from that. This also links with earlier work such as Tough of the relationship between learning and self concept which is shown in the following diagram.



Some relationships between the two major reasons for learning and adult's self concept.



A. Tough (1969)

Diagram 6

The students in my research told time and again about how they had thought about education but delayed the initial return. Once they had attended Open College, night school, Predegree they gained the necessary confidence which was as important to them as entry qualifications to apply to the Polytechnic. They did so however with few memories of school but new found expectations of what it would be like in the teaching and learning situation based on their most recent favourable experiences. The data chapter showed these expectations were not always realised and this new found self confidence was often undermined.

One researcher who does move the debate to explanations of why adults return to study is Cyril Houle.

Cyril Houle (1961) would not accept that curiosity or the desire to learn is innate, rather that "most people possess it only fitfully and in modest measure". Although he would agree that for some the "desire to learn pervades their existence. They approach life with an air of openness and an inquiring mind". They also use learning as a way of enhancing self perceptions. Using a collection of twenty two case studies Houle acknowledged that although the individuals were very different they could be categorised into three main groups and whilst there was a good deal of overlap in their orientations as the diagram will show there is some point at which the emphasis of each group is able to be isolated.

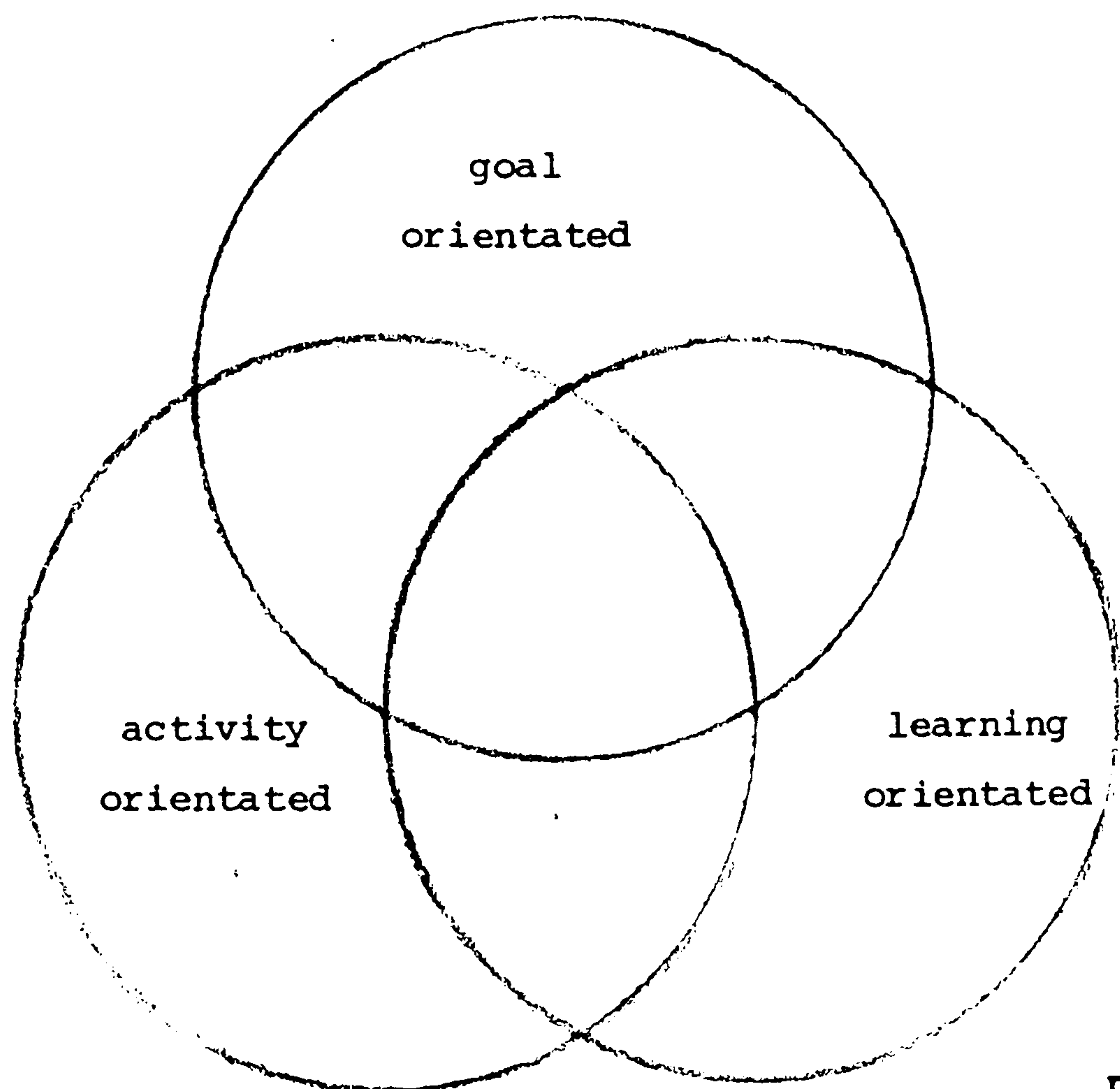


Houle's three groups have been subjected to a great deal of factor analysis since he first introduced the concepts but basically the original classification holds.

The first the goal orientated are those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives.

The second, the activity orientated are those who take part because they find in the circumstances of the learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or the announced purposes of the activity.

The third, the learning-orientated, seek knowledge for its own sake.



**Diagram 7**  
Houle's Typology  
in R.Gross (1982)

Whilst as Houle points out each of the types is likely to have more than one orientation they are discernible and as Houle was able to base his findings on interviews with twenty two individuals I have given some consideration to his explanations in the sample of 22 students I talked to in this research. The goal orientated returners are the easiest to understand and to identify but often the initial instrumental reason may be the reason given whilst the intrinsic reason may have been pushed into the subconscious only to return during the course of study or indeed when circumstances allow it to be articulated.

I also found that whilst an instrumental reason was given in terms of a job or qualification update that there was some catalytic trigger, a life change often of some proportion, which precipitated the return but may not have been the initial reaction given to my question about "why are you returning to study?" It came out during subsequent conversation if not in answer to the question "why now particularly?"....Mohammed, for example, spoke to me about needing the qualifications, wanting to do a different more worthwhile job within the ethnic community and then right at the end of our first meeting told me he was now 40 years old and maybe it was his mid-life crisis! I shall return to this trigger event in a moment but I do feel it is worth developing the reasons given by my sample as to why they were coming into higher education and comparing them with Houle's typology but in the context of what they told me at the first and third meeting.



**Table 9**

**Initial Reasons for Returning to Study Given by the Group**

1. Jennifer - job update
2. Marjorie - job update
3. Ken - heart attack - needs job change
4. Mohammed - job/seconded
5. Colin - job quals.
6. Andrew - initial job
7. Alan - job quals.
8. Thomas - quals. for personal sat/job
9. Brian - job/unemployed
10. Malcolm - job change
11. Barbara - job
12. Alison - job
13. Pam - job update
14. Philip - subject/job
15. Steve - job change/subject
16. Nancy - subject/possible job
17. John - job change/subject activity
18. Christine - job activity
19. Kate - activity
20. Mavis - activity/personal
21. Janet - job/activity
22. Clive - subject activity related

Reason given at  
first interview  
for returning on  
Houle's typology

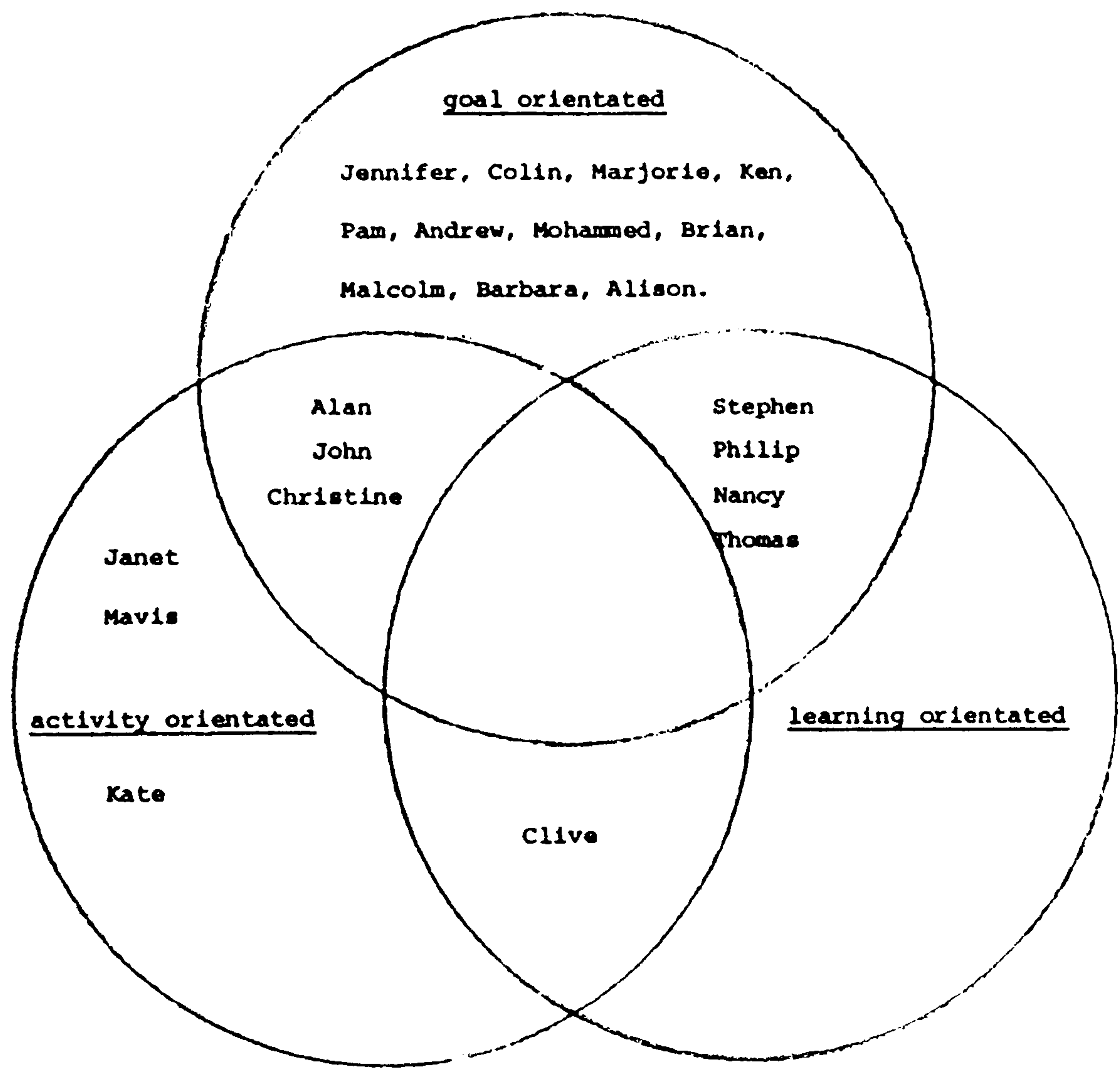
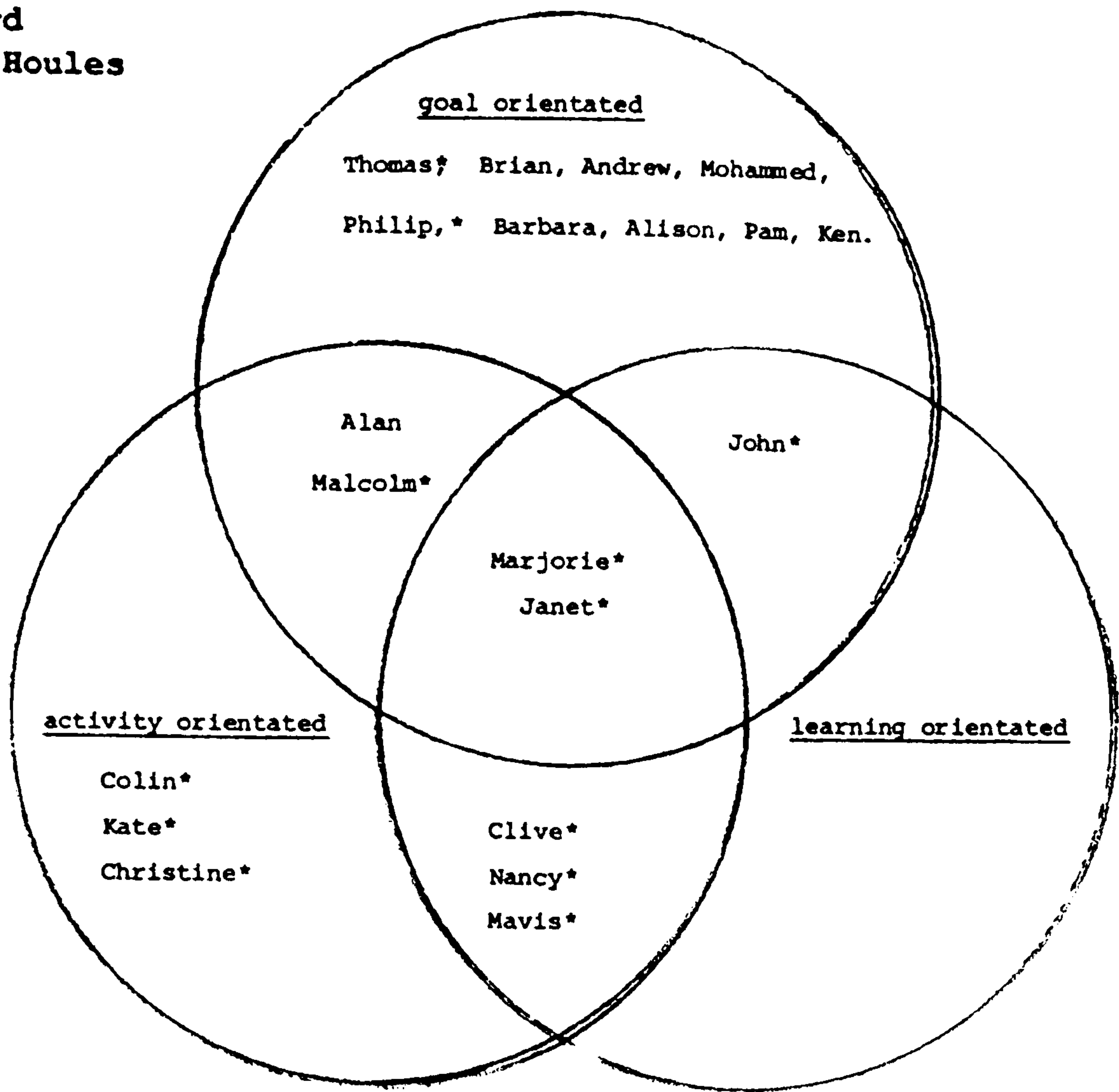


Diagram 8



Reason perceived by  
me after third  
interview by Houles  
typology



\* indicates change

Jennifer & Stephen did not  
take a course

Diagram 9

Marjorie stated quite clearly that she had no other reason for returning to the Polytechnic other than because her employer told her she would lose her job without updating her qualifications. In our third interview she said how much she had always wanted to continue her education but had been unable to do so firstly because her parents couldn't afford it and then because of the needs of her own family. Once the course began she took an uncharacteristic interest in some of the subject areas which she would never have considered before and very much enjoyed the student role and took part in a variety of

centrally organised activities.

Christine, whilst expressing some need to have a degree to be able to teach punctuated virtually every comment with how much she loved learning all the things she was doing and how important it was to her to be doing what she wanted to do and be part of this learning community.

Houle makes the point that people are loath to admit they want to study for its own sake and so state other reasons - or go for vocational classes lest they be called somehow abnormal.

"The enemy is not apathy, as many would like to believe, but outright opposition, and opposition from places where it cuts most - from the family, associates and friends who surround the person who feels an inclination towards learning".

Houle (1961)

This might explain reasons given in my research as the data will show that there needs to be a valid reason to make the return - it needs to be worthwhile to the adult for reasons such as, to get a job. For 18 year olds it is part of a normal process of progression; for an adult it is stepping out of the ordinary.

Twenty seven years after Houle produced his tripartite typology interest in his classification and subsequent developments of it by people like Boshier (1971), Boshier and Collins (1985) is still maintained. The reason links to the earlier dichotomy concerning



description and explanation of mature returners and the practical implications of course design to meet those needs. At a more theoretical level the search for explanations continue and whilst the simple tripartite division of Houle might now be taken as a beginning rather than a final classification it still provides a basis for motivational orientations. Examining the empirical foundations of Houle's work, Boshier and Collins (1985) used a more complex Education Participation Scale which they subjected to cluster analysis. Whilst the three-cluster solution proposed by Houle was clearly still discernible, extending the boundaries produced more complex analysis in areas not evident on the tripartite model. To be fair to Houle he did point to the overlap and stated that with more time to discuss motivation with his twenty two respondents he could have arrived at different orientations. What is important, with respect to my research, in the work of Boshier and Collins is not only the mixture of explanations for returning to study which emerge as further discussion - 'the fruit salad effect - a composition of components whose clarity is obscured when forced together' but also the need to examine changes in motivational orientations. I noticed changes during the first year of study but Boshier and Collins suggest using the E.P.S. over the adult life cycle. So students may need to be followed through over longer periods of time.

What Boshier and Collins do suggest as a hypothesis is that motivation changes during the life of the course. Indeed in my study at some point the adults did have to stand back and ask "why am I here", or "what do I want from the course" and rearrange their actions to fit with the answers to these questions at that particular time. Boshier

and Collins make passing reference to the idea of the student's state of homeostasis at these times (Botkin et al (1979) but feel that this approach to needs satisfaction is not adequate during rapid change as many adult learners are heterostatic (Boshier 1971) and persist with education after the initial need has been satisfied. In other words that they are happy with a constant state of imbalance which acts as the motivating force for the next stage of life.

This explanation which may have particular value to explain what happens at a particular point of time in the first term of the course when, as will be seen, some sort of balance needs to be restored. It does also offer some theoretical underpinning to the 'crisis' reason or change in circumstances which may precipitate a return to study and so add impetus to entry into an institution of higher education rather than to seek any other activity which may not give a commensurate change of status or allow a variety of aims to be achieved at one time.

Homeostasis is a concept frequently used in psychology but borrowed from the physiological principle developed by Bernard which highlighted the importance of the constancy of the fluid matrix in a body. (Bernard 1859.) In the context of psychology it is used to illustrate the tendencies with which people are endowed which cause them to maintain equilibrium or a state of synchrony between their constituent parts.

It is used here as a metaphor to offer some explanation of why adults may decide to return to study. It is not a criteria which could be

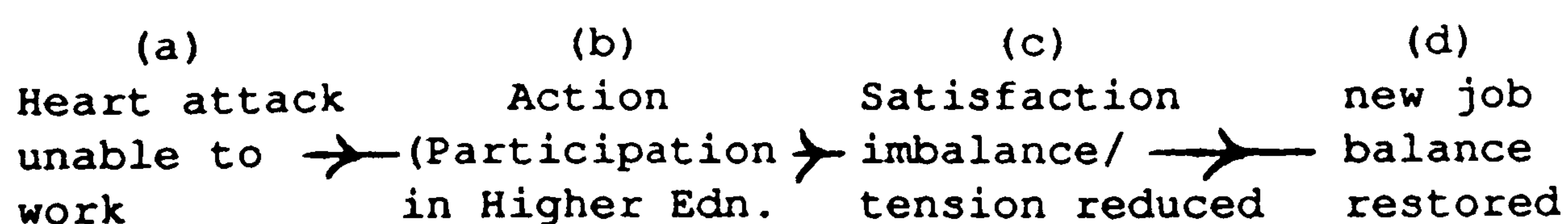


measured in any objective way but in an interactionist study such as this with an emphasis on social processes it seems to serve as a useful tool.

Adults may enter education to restore a balance in their lives to what it was prior to the change which increased tension, but after this educational participation produced equilibrium at a new level and further change would need to take place. (This point will be developed again later in the chapter within the context of entry into the in-group in Schutz's thesis and also it raises questions about the need to facilitate some mechanism for transition out of the institution as those who leave may be different individuals to those who came in.)

One of the problems of applying the physiological notion of homeostasis to any human behaviour such as the reasons for returning to study is its determinism. There may indeed be several triggers for returning to study each with its own homeostatic level and there is also the problem of determining what is the "normal state" or "states" and where did they arrive from? I would accept that in moving from an organic concept to a social or social psychological one a large gap in logic is created but in my sample it does present a possible explanation for the timing of the return to study:

e.g.



but it could be that although homoeostasis is restored at (c) it does not continue if (d) is not the desired outcome i.e. a different job; or a change in lifestyle. This new heterostatic state may then provide the impetus for a new course of action and a different "steady/normal state" is produced. Clearly there are practical problems here for mature students returning to study when the new homeostatic needs/motivation state is different from the former one especially if it causes anxieties in their families.

Researchers such as Rogers (1961,1969) follow Maslow (1954) in seeing this homeostatic/heterostatic behaviour as a natural unfolding of human potentialities - Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954) is based on heterostatic principles - each level of needs must be satisfied before moving on to the next. Adults who return to study do so at different levels of Maslow's hierarchy (so it is important that designers of courses do not presuppose the goal to always be that of self-actualisation which may be a luxury or an impossible goal for many individuals). Knowles is firmly in the Maslow mould in stressing that adult returners do have different needs and that teaching staff should be aware of them. The fact that in my group there were two individuals with heart attacks does not illustrate similar motivations or level of needs on Maslow's hierarchy - far from it and this is the importance of experiential research of this type in that it indicated differences which may not become apparent using quantitative research methods.

Ken was desperate for a new job to keep himself and his family after his heart attack, and this was his basic consideration for wanting to return to study. His own feeling of proving something to himself was



there but as the year went on and he got more and more into financial difficulties this became less important and he started applying for any menial job which would generate income. Clive on the other hand appeared to use his heart attack and the necessity to leave work as a means of moving towards self actualization. Using Maslow's terminology his basic needs, physiological, safety, esteem were already satisfied (although his "belongingness" and "love needs" were problematic) and so he was able to join the course for intrinsic reasons related to his self development. Even in these two cases the explanations are complicated by more than one aspect of motivation but the components of the motivation/needs fit the homoeostasis/heterostasis model and point to the need for a humanistic, phenomenological, individualistic approach to mature students returning to study.

This concept of a homeostatic needs - satisfaction would seem to me to offer a possible explanation of the changes at this time of self reflection - when expectations and realisations have to be re-examined and a state of equilibrium reached. If not the individual would be under too much pressure and probably have to leave the course.

So whilst this taking stock increases in importance I feel that there may be an element of the homoeostatic needs/motivation regulation present in the reason why adults return to study in the first instance. This may be kept at a subconscious level allowing for the more surface explanations of Houle's tripartite typology to be manifest at early interviews but then later to be modified. This would support the need for further investigation indicated by Boshier

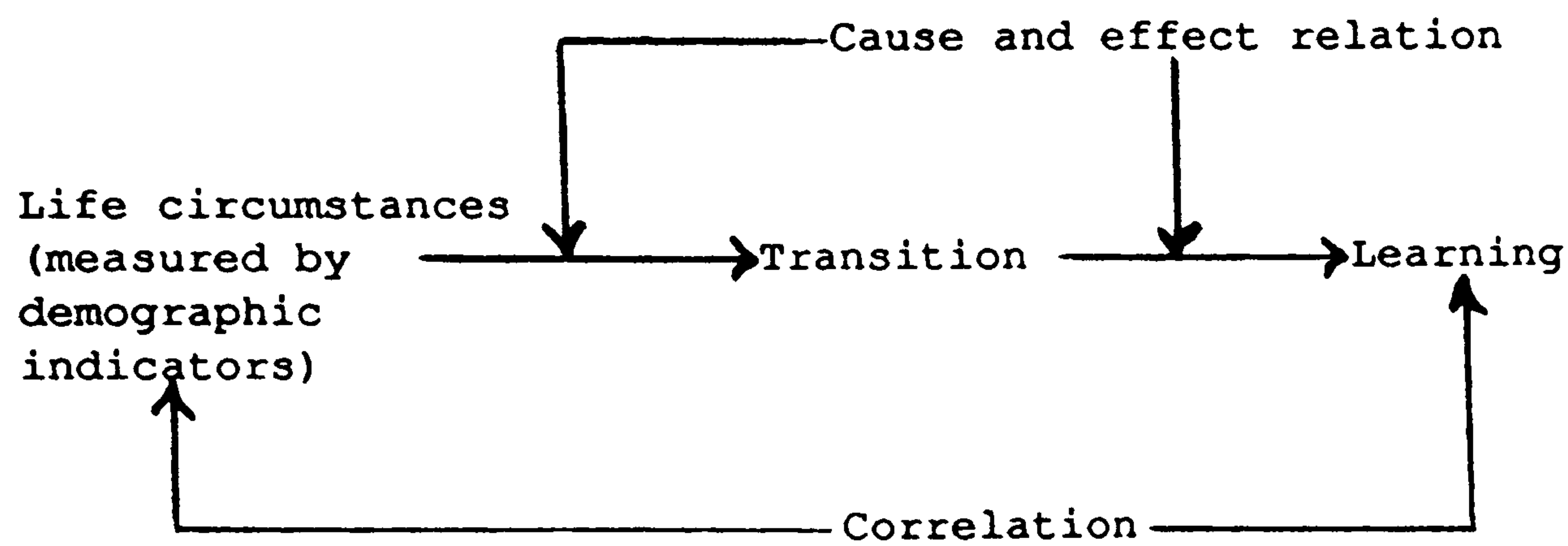
and Collins (1985) to establish "the phenomenological reality that exists within participants themselves".



Aslanian and Brickell (1980) highlighted in their "Americans in Transition" the likely factors which cause adults to return to study. Whilst they claimed that "most adults do not learn for the sheer pleasure of learning" their emphasis on "transition time" or some definite happening or change which precipitates the learning does not adequately explain why some adults return to study under such pressure whilst others do not. Again this is at the level of description and explanation which can be illustrated in my sample. It is possible to pick out these students who were at some time of transition when they returned to study as I have done in the breakdown earlier in this chapter and to see how this fits into a descriptive pattern set out by Aslanian and Brickell.

Aslanian and Brickell believe that combining demographic characteristics and status change explains the correlation of demographic characteristics with adult learning - middle class, younger, socially mobile, previously educated adults will have more change in their lives and therefore need more education. At some state in everyones life they are touched by change and the learning process they then choose will relate, at that level, to the transition the individual is undergoing. Because those changes are measured by demographic indicators, the indicators correlate with the transitions, as shown in the diagram.

Relationship Between Demographic Indicators and Changes in Life Circumstances



Aslanian and Brickell (1980)

Diagram 10

This would also explain why many adults do not feel the need to return to formal higher education and yet as Tough has shown embark on individual learning projects pertinent to that transition, whereas those who are looking for career changes need to validate their learning in the occupational market.



Taking this level of explanation further though leads to a homeostatic cause - a need to make a transition to maintain a balance at the level of society - by getting a new job or by the individual's self perception in proving his or her worth. It might be that the precipitating "crisis" creates the actual moment in time for the return to study, in two cases in my group ill health actually provided the finance by necessitating early retirement, in three cases unemployment had just gone on for too long; in four cases divorce changed the home situation to allow a return to study; in two the children were old enough to be left and two men even admitted to approaching forty and feeling the pressure of "the mid life crisis."

Returning to study restores a balance for the individual outside the institution but creates others within the institution - these changes neglected by Houle need phenomenological investigation.

In an attempt to do this I have analysed what my sample told me initially as the reason why they were returning to study and I have also taken, from the subsequent conversation, other references they may have made directly and indirectly about why it happened at this particular moment in time.

Two levels of explanations seemed to develop from the analysis of the data.

John:           Wants a job change: went into computing from army: big income small satisfaction really wants to do Graphic Design even though prospects not good: great deal of difficulty convincing educational establishments: Single and feels he must do it now or not at all.

Stephen: No previous educational background: self-made entrepreneur/catering. Always wanted to do Art for a career: Now at stage where he could finance that and keep family. (Did not do the course due to legal complications in private life) .Could not do it earlier because of previous marriage commitments - now divorced and remarried: wife supportive.

Colin: Trying to get qualifications to get his first job.  
(However I suspect this may not be very possible due to his handicap) well provided for and secure in family firm. Education may be his only means of "employment".

Philip: Wants DMS to learn how to use techniques to his own ends - i.e. to run some form of co-operative rather than capitalist enterprise. Has been unemployed for several years despite long lists of academic qualifications. Needs to get some income to support what he really wants to do.

Clive: Has always wanted to study psychology. Heart attack precipitated early retirement and gave the impetus to do the course now.

Ken: Heart attack meant he was no longer able to do active work in his own building firm. Recommended he do the course by rehabilitation centre as a means to a less active job.



- Brian: Made redundant and as a result of a motor-cycle accident not able to look for active jobs. Unemployment drove him to 'O' levels and 'A' levels and computing. Doing course as a way of getting a job to support himself and his wife.
- Andrew: Left school, was unemployed. Returned to Further Education because he was unable to get a job, continued on at the Polytechnic.
- Malcolm: Was an SEN with army background. Marriage broke up and so he no longer had to support his wife. Decided then to go back to study because he could go no further as SEN so wanted to improve job prospects.
- Alan: Self employed plumber doing voluntary work in social work field gradually becoming aware of need for more qualifications and also enjoying the activity of studying and learning the subjects themselves. Friend made initial contacts with education field but age - approaching forty made now the significant time if employment was to be found - choice of the diploma rather than degree dictated by that consideration - but still would love to have B.A. after his name one day.
- Mohammed: Needs qualification for job. Seconded by local authority where he is an interpreter. Age is significant factor. He is now forty and feels he cannot leave it any later.

Thomas: Wasn't enjoying government department job and saw education as a way of promotion. Seconded by job - at least unpaid - but job will be available. Gained 'O' levels and 'A' levels at night school over the year became unemployed and had family problems, even when decided to do a full-time course had to delay it because of this. Got a job but did go year later only to have to transfer from original university to this Polytechnic to be nearer parents. Felt had to do it now or would regret it later but had to have a job and that security first.

Nancy: University degree straight from school but not in the area of her real interest - Art - which was not encouraged at school. Went into teaching after certification but did not enjoy that work. Some personal psychological problems for which she had treatment. Decided now or never to do the Foundation course, it would be too late if she left it any later - this was what she had always wanted to do. Husband retired and agreed to tolerate return.

Barbara: Already a graduate in academic area working in retail trade at managerial level. Needs qualification to get new job in accountancy. Decided now to coincide with son starting school full-time and would have him settled. Originally intended to do 3 month course but this did not work out with problems of getting her son to and from school but taken part-time course none the less. No grant for full-time as she has already had one.



Alison: Had jobs up to now which fit in with children. Was divorced and so employment was important to support her family. Put up with variety of jobs of necessity. Remarried and her husband supported the need for a change of employment. Children growing up not now dependent. Also health problem due to benign brain tumour which needs permanent medication means no time like the present.

Mavis: A degree after initial schooling but very much involved in legislature at all levels, magistrate, unions, local councillor - pushes for the importance of female equality. Did DMS to get better qualified for union role. Always wanting to be part of academic environment but this became possible now due to a stroke which although she has now recovered from, fully paralysed her for a time, has left her with restricted mobility and so when offered early retirement she took it and returned to full-time study. Also got a grant because first degree was in India as a private external.

Kate: Variety of part-time jobs to fit in with needs of a growing family. Husband went to teacher training college and gave her the idea. 'O' levels at night school opened mind to study but was discouraged by 'throw away' comment by member of Poly staff. Decided to try again because family were growing up and she was not getting any younger. Wants a "proper job" now and so needs

qualification but also wants to study as something for herself.

Jennifer: Nurse who needs to update qualifications to improve job prospects. Divorced with son to support but it seemed this was not a big consideration as he lived with Grand-parents. Had to do the course because of pressure from work but in the end unable to do so because of ill health.

Marjorie: Nurse with SRN had to do the course now because of change in nursing regulations - with a family of four and settled life style would not otherwise have done it.

Christine: Has not worked outside home since marriage. Wants to teach primary so is working towards that with relevant qualifications, 'O' level maths, degree etc. although also interested in the subject of English and wants to be part of academic environment for its own sake. Husband has moved around because of his job and she has already given up one Poly place elsewhere. Now determined it is her turn as her youngest children (twins) are at secondary school and able to understand and come home by themselves in the evening.

Janet: Always enjoyed reading but worked at variety of jobs to fit in with the children. Then as she became more involved in education at 'O' and 'A' level her husband left her and they were divorced. She was then able to



study more although having to work to support the three children. Loved the activity of studying with Open College, decided to return full-time now for a better job, for enjoyment of the Poly and also full grant gave her financial support she did not have with part-time jobs.

As the introduction showed it is a fact that more adults are returning to study at degree and sub-degree level, and institutions are providing places for them. What is not clear is just why they are doing so. More research is needed at the level of explanation which, as the above group of students showed, may not be clear cut even then. However, an attempt at an understanding of the level of need of the individuals concerned may significantly affect the provision and practice.

## Passing through the Polytechnic

If there is an attempt to use a return to study to restore some balance into the lives of this group of people in my research it is very apparent from an analysis of what each of them had to say during the first term that this transition is not without a need for further adjustments and changes in their lives.

Becoming part of this institution of public sector higher education, becoming 'students', was not the 'automatic' process that some of them had expected would happen as they signed their enrolment form and began their courses. Indeed for some there came the realisation that they would never achieve some "ideal type" expectation of what they saw as "a student" and that in itself involved them in a need for personal reorientating (see Kate's story, Appendix 3).

The process of becoming integrated into the life of this Polytechnic, to whatever extent, was very real to this group and gave rise to grounded theory. Alfred Schutz's (1971) levels of meanings would seem not only to be useful as a methodological tool to examine the data in this research but his "Stranger Thesis" offers an explanatory framework within which to analyse the reality of returning to study for my group.

Schutz presents his "Stranger" essay as a general theory of interpretation of a typical situation when a stranger finds himself/herself in a new group and attempts to orientate himself/herself within it by interpreting the cultural patterns of



that group. As far as this, or any other institution of Higher Education is concerned, it is ill founded to see any one group or the institution itself as an ideal type of 'insider group' but this attempt to interpret a 'new culture' from the basis of a previous cultural background would seem to have merit as a starting point for the development of a theory from my data. It is not my intention to create the Polytechnic as the 'ideal type' in group for clearly there are too many exceptions which would make that problematic, but it is the process of how the stranger approaches and makes sense of the new culture and its relevance to his actions which will be developed.

Examples of different attitudes to mature students on different courses at the Polytechnic, in different schools will give some illustrations of the dangers of generalisation.

Within the Combined Studies programme or the Applied Social Studies degree mature applicants with non-standard (i.e. not 'A' level qualifications for example) are given special consideration. There are special access courses such as the Pre degree and LINCS as outlined in Appendix 2 and, as the resulting number of transfers to the Polytechnic from these courses in 1988 show, there is a willingness to admit the students onto higher education courses with non standard qualifications.

After a recent interview in the Continuing Education Service a mature enquirer was sent to a particular School to see about a possible degree course. He returned months later to the Continuing Education Service to say he had been told at 41 he was too old and that only

having two 'O' levels he was not well enough qualified anyway. He left the subject interview determined to prove them wrong and had enrolled on an Open College course successfully completing two 'A' units and was now doing 'B' units so that he could apply for a Law or Business Studies Degree with the standard entry requirements.

At a discussion meeting for admissions tutors we were presented with a collection of application forms and asked to rank them in the order to which an offer of a place would be made. One lady applicant with five children was put bottom of the list by the Physics staff because she did not have maths amongst her qualifications 'and because with five children she wouldn't be able to cope with a full-time course'. It transpired that she was in fact the first 1st class honours graduate in the Law school. There are clearly differences within schools as well as between schools, (and it would be unfair not to look at all the variables in the two examples.)

Schutz tells of the actor within the social world experiencing it primarily as it affects and is relevant to him, to what he has done, does and may do within his social context. It is only secondarily that he would perceive the social world as an "object of his thinking".

The actor sees himself as the centre of the world around him and particularly he is concerned with elements of it which may serve his ends for his 'use and enjoyment for furthering his purposes and for overcoming obstacles'. Some aspects of the social world will be more relevant to his needs than others and he will need to ascertain those



things which are important and those elements which are not - it will not be necessary for him to become fully acquainted to the same degree with all aspects of his new social world.

"What he wants is graduated knowledge of relevant elements, the degree of desired knowledge being correlated with their relevance. Otherwise stated, the world seems to him at any given moment as stratified in different layers of relevance, each of them requiring a different degree of knowledge".

Schutz (1971)

During the first term the students in my sample were preoccupied with making sense of the day to day running of their lives. The graduation ceremony and final exams had no relevance. They were more concerned, not even with essays, but with simply making sense of the practical issues such as the timetable and the layout of the buildings and the roles of the staff. In fact, being physically tired was a general topic of comment. As the course proceeds the relevances changed and even during our third interviews, which were only a third of the way through the course for some, there was talk about final exams and classification of degrees.

So within a 'social world' there will be levels of relevance for the actor which will necessitate him having different levels of competence with the workings of the group. There will be areas of knowledge that he must be fully acquainted with the workings of, there will be those he will need to know the knowledge about and still others that it will be sufficient simply to put his trust in recognising the existence of some knowledge but not seeing its relevance to him at that particular time.

The location of the actor at a particular time in a particular social group will create individual systems of knowledge which although described by Schutz as incoherent, only partially clear and not free from contradictions, have sufficient coherence, clarity and consistency to give any member of that group a chance of understanding and being understood within it.

The knowledge correlated to the cultural pattern of the group becomes taken for granted by its members. "It is a knowledge of trustworthy recipes for interpreting the social world and for handling things and men in order to obtain the best results in every situation with a minimising of effort by avoiding undesirable consequences".

For the stranger approaching a group such relevances cannot be taken for granted, his personal history is not located within the approached group, he needs to question all those things which seem to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group and at the same time the cultural pattern of his home group continues to be the outcome of an unbroken historical development and an element of his personal biography which for this very reason has been and still is the unquestionable scheme of reference for his "relatively natural conceptions of the world".

So the stranger approaches the new group with the realisation that his home group culture will no longer work as a scheme of knowledge to interpret the group to which he aspires. No matter how good his intentions to be a part of the new group he can only do so by actually becoming part of it and by taking on the levels of relevance from the



inside - it can no longer be an external objectivity to him but must become an internal reality - he must experience it. He must experience it at two levels because, in the terms of study at the Polytechnic he has a new location, a new environmental context which needs to be interpreted, and also because the less tangible but none the less constraining nuances of an institution of higher education have to be interpreted through their own meanings and not through any systems of knowledge he may have found worked for him before in his 'home group'.

Even those people who had been on the Pre degree course and felt that they had eased the transition found a difference in the "real institution". One evening a week within the context of seven days of "life" would not suffice. Kate had been warned "things would be different" but she did not appreciate how much and one of the pilot sample, Stella, noticed how the lecturer changed his whole attitude and demeanour once she was part of a full-time group.

"The approaching stranger, however, becomes aware of the fact that an important element of his thinking as usual', namely, his ideas of the Foreign group, its cultural pattern, and its way of life, do not stand the test of vivid experience and social interaction"

(Schutz)

The stranger may begin to orientate himself into his new group in the first instance by interpreting what he finds within the terms of reference and levels of meaning of his home group but it is only when he has some understanding of the new group with its interpretation of meaning that he can begin to move from the 'fringes' of the group to

orientate himself at the centre of its relevances. An additional problem for any student entering the Polytechnic though, on a full-time course particularly, is that often there is not "one group" to become accustomed to. Some courses such as social work, nursing, art worked in small permanent groups, but for others there was movement for different subjects, different seminars, different social activities and each group had its own nuances, expectations and realities. Each new group brought a different member of the teaching staff with different expectations on their part of what they expected of the group of students. It can be seen then that this is very much a socially interactive process, a two way set of expectations and my sample clearly weighed this up early on. Malcolm and Janet were in different groups on the same course and they tell of the initial weeks of trying to determine how they should behave in different contexts. Although Kate and Alan told how being in the same group for most of the time was not without different problems it was impossible to relate to some members of the group.

It is only when he is once more able to see himself at the centre of his social world that the individual can build up a system of relevances of knowledge which will allow his 'thinking as usual' to become workable in that new context.

To some extent there could be an argument that all students regardless of age are in the "stranger role" as they move through the Polytechnic. Subjects change, staff change, contexts change and new areas of relevance have to be mastered - but an understanding is reached - a coping strategy develops - which acts as a way of



interpreting new situations.

Although the concept of a coping strategy has been used in educational research in a different context ( Pollard 1982; 1985 Hargreaves, A. 1980) I have used it here in the way it seemed to develop from what the group said themselves during our conversations. In this respect I see it as an important finding because it indicated to me a turning point, a place where the adult began to assert him or herself, to take stock, to stand back and begin to regain some control. The problem for any theory of adults being self-directed learners is that it is still within the control of the institution rather than the individual but it did signal a two way process for the first time. It also then allowed a way forward to be developed within the terms of the negotiated coping strategy.

The problems of not reaching this 'insider status' of not putting trust in the new system of relevancies would seem to be well illustrated by part-time students in higher education. They do not have access to many of the rites of passage of full-time students, their base is still in their "homegroup" - and their often articulated frustrations show that they remain outsiders to the institution although they do graduate from it with its degree and diplomas.

The actor must begin by defining the situation as it actually is not as he wants to see it, it will no longer be possible to know about the culture he must have explicit knowledge of its elements and why they happen. For a time during this period he will build up a pattern of "pseudo-anonymity, pseudo-intimacy and pseudo-typicality". He may be

sincere and intense in his desire to be part of the new group but the cultural pattern cannot be internalised within a hierarchy of relevance other than by experiencing it directly and so there is no short cut to this process of becoming accepted by the new group. At the same time he has not thrown off the relevancies of his home group so that at times there are problems in where his loyalties lie and this makes him more of a stranger at times to those members of the group already familiar with its cultural patterns for he will seem still to be an outsider and his passage into it made more difficult as he remains a 'marginal man' (Park and Stonequist 1937.)

It cannot be assumed that these are problems to be faced only by the mature student though. The 18 year old straight from school comes into a new institution, often leaving home for the first time and so ,too, must approach the Polytechnic as a "stranger". In fact John, who is 28 and single living in student accommodation made the observation that it must be good to be a mature student able to go home every night away from the Polytechnic.

The difference though is more likely to be the length of time it takes to become orientated to the new in group. Conventional students living on campus arrive at the Polytechnic with a recent framework within the educational context. They are immersed in the new cultural patterns full-time whereas the mature student is new to the context and by returning to the 'home group' each evening interrupts the process of integration and maintains the marginality of his status. In this respect full-time mature students have much in common with the part time students of any age.



"In other words, the cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master".

(Schutz)

The cultural pattern of a new group is one that does have to be mastered though by students entering this or any institution of higher education before they are strangers in the institution no more. In fact there is evidence from many of my group of the "clearsightedness of a rising crisis" which was reached just before Christmas as they attempted to give equal attention to life inside and outside the Polytechnic.

Schutz's stranger thesis has limitations within the context of seeing the Polytechnic as a whole as an "in-group" and mature students as a group entering it as strangers.

To begin with the very definition of a mature student is problematic, combining objective and subjective parameters one cannot assume that a demographic description by age over 21, over 23 as CNAA uses, over 25 as University entrance defines or over 27 for LEA grant purposes creates any meaningful group. Similarly to assume that 18 year old 'conventional' students have any less problem on being part of the new group without further investigation is fraught with dangers. The assumption Malcolm Knowles makes about the individuality of adults by virtue of their historical biographies, and the evidence of my study to support this, would make attempts to generalise about outgroups difficult.

Within the sample of 22 students in this study there were very different individuals, as the few chosen biographies (Appendix 3) will show. Added to this historical data though is also the difference in how the individuals react to the situations which confront them within the Polytechnic, the interactions with staff and students who will help or hinder the process of becoming part of the institution, and also the interactions with family and friends who remain part of the home group. Kate was full of confidence about her return to study in the summer before term started, especially knowing that her husband was fully supportive of her actions having been a mature student himself. The reality was very different, true he said he was pleased she was doing the course but he gave no practical help and indeed proceeded with plans to have the house rebuilt during the first term. By Christmas Kate's crisis was very real and in fact she had a breakdown at the end of the first year.

At the same time generalisations about the "In-group" offer limitations and caution to the adoption in total of Schutz's Stranger thesis. This Polytechnic is one of 30 polytechnics in the Public Sector of Higher Education and no doubt does have its own identity, even without the Public Relations image bought to perpetuate one. That individual identity is all that is perceived of public sector higher education by this group. It is also relevant that the corporate identity perceived by those outside the institution was not always apparent to the students in this sample. Often their course members and one building was the 'perceived Polytechnic' and that makes generalisations about returning to study difficult.



My sample entered many courses, joined many groups, encountered many staff and students so that what they perceived as realities are valid to them and not to a whole "in-group of the Polytechnic" Thomas tells about doing two subjects as part of a Combined Studies degree and the differences are apparent in his descriptions. The 'scheme of interpretation' that needs to be built up by one particular student on one particular course is relevant only there and what follows needs to be seen in that context. However The Stranger thesis does offer a general theory of interpretation to use as a framework and despite individual differences the Polytechnic is an institution of higher education, it does embrace its own culture which has to be interpreted by all who enter it regardless of age, sex, race or status and that applies to staff and students. The Polytechnic does have rules and regulations which become part of the tacit understandings at this particular moment in time. The Polytechnic, as an institution of higher education, does have its own language, academic content and constraints because of its own relationship with other external bodies such as CNAA or professional institutions which validate courses. Many of these areas of knowledge must become known to the individual not remain something he can only know of. He must become familiar with the rules of the Polytechnic/Higher Education 'game.' He needs to know how the library regulations affect him, how to present essays, when an essay deadline really is a deadline, how to behave in seminars and what credit accumulation means. There may be times when he feels he can simply 'put his trust' in the fact that there appears to be a power structure in the Institution but there may come a time when that

will become more important. His final degree result may depend on it and he will then want to know the workings of it. These graduated levels of relevance can only become real as they are experienced by the actor himself and once having been perceived as real they become real in their consequences for they are what determine his life as a student in **THIS** public sector institution of higher education.

So it is not within the context of seeing the mature student as a stranger and the whole Polytechnic as an in-group that I approach my data but as a group of individuals attempting to build up schemes of interpretations for a variety of learning environments in which they find themselves to be strangers and for which their 'thinking-as-usual' has become unworkable.

Marjorie illustrates the point:

Marjorie: " .... Unless you've got some experience of education today. I've got children going through education and I know what's happening in high schools but polytechnic! I think perhaps experience is the only way (pause) In our first week at the Poly people took us round and explained what tutorials were, it was like an induction with our own tutors and they did explain your programmes (but) I didn't feel that I understood Polytechnic life and terms and it has a language too all of its own doesn't it?"

"The first fortnight, my head, I just felt that I'd been filled with so much my head (pause) my brain wouldn't take any more. It was a strange feeling because physically I felt fitter, I felt well, I didn't feel tired physically but mentally I just felt - I can't take any more of this - a strange feeling".

"One of the girls, her husband is a tutor here at the Poly and she sort of showed us round, she knew her way round, before we even got there which was nice, she took us through the (main) building. We go up to the book shop, we've used the book shop a lot because they stock all the books we need. We have used the Library a lot so we trot across".

"I don't know how I would have felt without that help,



perhaps more of an outsider looking in whereas you felt part of it, we just wandered around and felt comfortable like we had a right to be there because she was just leading the way".

Marjorie: 2nd Int: Nursing Studies

## Individuals in the process of change

It would be wrong to suggest that the building up of new schemes of interpretation is a negative process. True it would seem from the analysis of Schutz's Stranger thesis that becoming part of the new in-group is not always a smooth transition and subsequent analysis of my data will support that for students entering this Polytechnic.

However there are those Musgrove (1977), Berger (1974) Mezirow (1975, 1978, 1981) who would describe this as a natural process of maturation particularly in "marginal situations" which abound in a pluralistic world (Musgrove 1977). Berger (1974) claims that the modern individual has a capacity for making transformations of identity and a readiness to do so

"The modern individual is not only peculiarly conversation-prone; he knows this and often glories in it. Biography is thus apprehended both as migration through different social worlds and as the successive realization of a number of possible identities. The individual is not only sophisticated about the worlds and identity of others but also about himself"

(Berger 1974)

So the individual is ever poised for transformations and highly aware and responsive to the shifting definitions of himself by others, weathering the psychological strains to embrace the change. This has useful links with Schutz's descriptions of becoming part of the new group in two ways both of which are important in this research.

Firstly it moves away from the idea that somehow an adult stage or 'state of being' is reached once and for all in a life-time within which the individual then becomes fixed. Instead it implies the



inherent propensity for change which is a constructive process for the individual involved and an underlying need for the provision of Lifelong Learning in our society.

The second reason is the focus on this as a process at the level of interpersonal/institutional, inter- situational interaction not as a one-way shaping of behaviour, without the knowledge or consent of the individual concerned. The members of the sample said they did 'change' as individuals through their experiences of the first year at the Polytechnic and what such investigation at a subjective level allows is to see how they viewed that change, what they saw happening, how they felt, at the time it was happening in the second interview, and after some part of it at the end of the first year. My focus has not been to look at the impact of the Polytechnic environment as exerting a one way pressure on the individuals and to then ascribe to that some power of explanation or behavioural causality but instead to use the critical mediating process of the individual described by Blumer (1962) as 'the individual actively assigning meaning to his situation'.

Blumer's symbolic interactionism holds that the meaning of an object - whatever it maybe, physical object, institution or group of people arises out of the way others act towards the person with regard to that object in the process of human interaction.

"Thus an individual constructs meaning through an active process of interpreting what is going on in his situation. Meanings emerge out of human interaction as rules or habits of action. They are evoked by concrete objects which can be identified as symbols. Gestures, facial expressions or spoken words become symbols when the person making them is able to respond to them

from the stand-point of other people. Symbols can be used only when we play the role of other people and anticipate their reactions to what we say and do".

Blumer (1962)

So what happens is the individual creates meaning by communicating with himself by examining meanings things have for others. (G. H. Mead (1934) - the generalized other). He then uses these meanings as a way of working out how to behave. So 'meanings are used and revised as instruments for determining behaviour'.

But this is the critical problem for educational research in many instances. The usual thing has been to look for causes in the behavioural change at the level of the education, or subject matter that has brought about the change - rather than giving credit to the individual and his interaction - self with others - by the way he has been able to realign or cope with the world.

What is needed is qualitative, subjective research to focus on the individual, to question his interpretation of the meanings of a situation and how he has come to terms with it - otherwise by trying to fit what seems to happen into existing theory one arrives at what Whitehead called "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness".

To quote Becker, Geer and Hughes (1968).

"If we do not see it as they do - as a dense network of social relationships, institutional demands and constraints and temporarily connected contingencies....we will not be able to understand what they do"

Certain things happen in life which cannot be resolved by simply



extending previously used learning experiences. The history of the individual before entering the polytechnic cannot simply be extended to cope with the new situation - even those who have been on a Pre-degree or Open College course say further adjustment was needed. Janet said emphatically the Poly was different, it required learning new skills - so it is necessary to undergo phases of re-assessment and growth during which familiar assumptions are challenged and new courses of action taken. The changes may be minor or profound but resolving the 'anomalies through critical analysis of assumptions behind the roles we play can lead to successive levels of self development'.

This is not simply a different way of looking at the same thing but a changing of perspective which implies a conscious recognition of the difference between one's old viewpoint and the new one, and a decision to appropriate the newer perspective as being of more value - this is the mechanism by which transformation occurs.

Having to re-assess ideas and beliefs that we may have held for years is threatening and normally resisted. Usually there needs to appear to the individual to be a specific cause - a crisis generating pressure and anxiety before a change in perspective can take place. There must be a decision made to take action. Feelings and events are interpreted existentially by the individual, not intellectually as by an observer.

Moving to the new perspective may also require support - in the actual

transformation and in the ability to sustain the change.

It was Mezirow (1978) who developed this theory of perspective transformation by identifying several different kinds of learning - how to do something, how something works, what other people expect of one, which involved a concept of self and built these into educational programmes for adults.

He saw "meaning perspectives" as important for adult learning for they develop a critical awareness based on past experience in a current context.

"A meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated to - and transformed by - one's past experience. It is a personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships".

Mezirow (1978)

Through socialization we acquire the meaning perspectives of our culture but as Berger above outlined we have the propensity of becoming critically aware of our perspectives and of changing them.

"By doing so, we move from an uncritical organic relationship to a self-consciously contractual relationship with individuals, institutions and ideologies. This is a crucial developmental task of maturity".

(Berger 1974)

Adult education can be used to precipitate, facilitate and reinforce perspective transformation as well as to implement resulting action plans.

By 1981 Mezirow had synthesized and extended his theory of perspective



transformation and explored the implications of the emerging critical theory for self-directed learning and the education of adults. Mezirow (1975) used women college returners to develop his theory of perspective transformation which he defined as:-

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings.

Mezirow (1981)

This process, in which the adult is actively involved allowed Mezirow to point to the limitations of Freire's 'conscientization' - the process by which the Hegelian and Marxist concept of false consciousness becomes transcended in traditional societies through adult education. He felt that Freire does not give enough attention to the process of, or the transformation itself, or indeed the difficulties individuals may have to go through to achieve the transformation.

It is almost as if "conscientization" involves a single mythical or mystical change - one sees the light and never again thinks with the old conceptions of reality!

For Adults returning to study this process of perspective transformation is not a once and for all 'happening' and this is why Mezirow feels Habermas (1970, 1971) has much to offer the debate - more realistically than say Freire.

"We are never in a position to know with absolute certainty that critical enlightenment has been effective - that it has liberated us from the ideologically frozen constraints of the past and initiated genuine self-reflection. The complexity, strength and deviousness of the forms of resistance: the inadequacy of mere "intellectual understanding" to effect a radical transformation; the fact that any claim of enlightenment or understanding may itself be a deeper and subtler form of self deception - the obstacles can never be completely discounted in our evaluation of the success or failure of critique"

(Habermas in Mezirow 1981)

Mezirow felt from his study that it is in fact possible to become integrated into a new group - become 'a student at the Polytechnic' by simply transferring ones identity from one reference group to another without any critical self-reappraisal of what has happened. This is where Mezirow parts company with Berger who feels that this perspective transformation or 'alternations' as he calls them are similar to the processes that children go through learning 'culture' for the first time during primary socialization. This is important too for a process of life long learning rather than a learning process linked to an age stage and underlines the pedagogy/andragogy dichotomy and the justification for andragogy at the existential level as proposed by McKenzie (although this is refuted by Elias on the basis of McKenzie's faulty syllogistic reasoning.)

Mezirow claims though that adults are capable of being consciously critical or "critically reflective" in dealing with significant others



in a new perspective whilst children are critically unselfconscious and usually unaware of how circumstances and people involved with them have manipulated them. As to when the cut off point is for the child to adult transformation there is no evidence, whether it is over 21 or 23 or 25 etc is not clear. Also can such a critical reflectivity be taught? Can those who do only transfer identification have their consciousness level raised or indeed are they better off if it isn't so that within the constraints of an institution of public sector higher education and an unchanged 'life outside' they are better able to cope? It does raise important consideration for those teaching the individuals who may be going through a process of self-reflection and it underlines the need to consider the necessity for some sort of 'contractual solidarity' between the institution (and the staff) and the mature student. It was Singer (1965) who developed the concept of 'contractual solidarity' "which implies that commitments are made with implicit mutual agreement among equals (in the sense of agency) concerning conditions of the relationship, including periodic review and re-negotiation with the option of terminating the relationship. Such insistence upon reciprocity and equality often represents positive movement towards greater autonomy and self-determination". By allowing this ability to change perspective - and that does not imply that the new one is better than the old in any hierarchical way - it opens up the way for further self development, further perspective change because the new perspective is seen to have 'worked'. The importance within the adult learning/andragogy debate is that by using this notion of contractual solidarity Singer (1965) implies

"an independently arrived at agreement with another person

and the decision to join him without merging in him and adopting his identity while giving up one's own self-definition - a joining of partners with full maintenance of individuals".

This is the crux. The onus is on the equality of the partnership and not a power relationship as in a pedagogic teaching situation - this is what I think Yonge.(1985) is trying to say in his claim for the difference of andragogy from pedagogy. Any teaching/learning situation which allows one person to have control over what another learns is not andragogical so if the 'teacher' does not allow a mutual contractual relationship, or the 'student' is not willing to take the responsibility then the situation is pedagogical - (the art and science of teaching.) Where there is a "contractual solidarity" within which the individuals can use 'critical reflexivity' to facilitate a perspective transformation then andragogy exists (the art and science of helping to learn.) The definition of adulthood then ceases to be problematic the difference is one of underlying ideology not one of the age of recipients.

Mezirow (1981) ,however, claims that there is a difference in "becoming aware of our awareness" and being critical of that awareness. "Perspective transformation involves not only becoming critically aware of habits of perception, thought and action but of the cultural assumptions governing the rules, roles conventions and social expectations which dictate the way we see, think, feel and act".



But becoming critically aware of something has different components -

conceptual reflectivity - self-reflection leading one to

question judgements by looking at the  
underlying concepts.

psychic reflectivity - the recognition in one's self of  
making precipitant judgement about  
things on the basis of limited  
information.

theoretical reflectivity - by which one becomes aware that the reason  
for this habit of precipitant  
judgement or for conceptual  
inadequacy is a set of taken-for-  
granted cultural or psychological  
assumptions which explain personal  
experience less satisfactorily than  
another perspective with more  
functional criteria for seeing,  
thinking and acting.

Theoretical reflectivity is thus the process central to perspective transformation. Mezirow (1981) feels that these reflections are arranged in a hierarchy but that there are no specific age ranges. The whole of critical reflectivity he would see as an adult capacity - particularly theoretical reflectivity and so as this is achieved through perspective transformations it is a unique adult learning function and should be the underlying learning domain of the adult educator.

Clearly my research does not attempt to evaluate the psychological stages of human development or even to 'test' whether perspective transformations' have taken place. What it does is to ask students what actually happened during their courses at the level of the classroom interactions, coursework, exams and to examine their perceptions of how these issues relate to them raising questions about provision for mature students in one institution of public sector higher education.



These questions were used to look for any evidence that adults are helped with questions about what they are doing on the course - why they behave as they do, why they accept the power relations which they have carried with them from school, why in Knowles' words they only know how 'to be taught' and not 'how to learn.' Having reached the need to ask such questions is there any evidence that adult learners or any other learners in the institution are given access to alternative meaning perspectives for interpreting this reality so that a critique of the previously held psycho-cultural assumptions is possible?

To some extent there is a danger in this, though, in that the educator must be able to give access to alternatives but not to dictate the one to chose otherwise one form of contract is substituted for another. Instead a question needs to be asked: Is there any evidence that in the Polytechnic there is any concession to a separate way of teaching which is an organised and sustained effort to assist individuals to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners which is seen as a characteristic of adult learners?

"A self directed learner must be understood as one who is aware of the constraints on his efforts to learn, including the psycho-cultural assumptions involving reified power relationships embedded in institutionalized ideologies which influence one's habits of perception, thought and behaviour as one attempts to learn.

A self directed learner has access to alternative perspectives for understanding his or her situation and for giving meaning and direction to his or her life, has acquired sensitivity and competence in social interaction and has the skills and competencies required to master the

productive tasks associated with controlling and manipulating the environment".

(Mezirow 1981)

In the data that follow~~y~~ is there any evidence that at this Polytechnic the students are facilitated to function as self-directed learners? Is there any evidence that they may wish to become so? Or is it ethnocentric to say that if they do not then they should but they have not been given the proper help to realise how important it would be to their further education and development? Unless this happens all that takes place is a shifting of the dependency relationship, 'a reification of an institutionalized ideology noted in the socialization process'. Mezirow. (1981)



Is self-direction a valid basis for a separate theory of adult education?

In recent years there has been an attempt to develop a professional perspective for adult education whether because of demographic or egalitarian influences. It has entered the arena of teaching and learning under the broad concept of andragogy. During the 1970s and 1980s a series of exchanges (McKenzie 1977; Elias 1979; McKenzie 1979; Knudson 1979; Knowles 1979: 1984; Carlson 1979; Cross 1981; Brookfield 1986 et al) have taken place without any real resolution, on whether there are important differences between the "teaching of children" (pedagogy) and the "helping of adults to learn" (andragogy). Although some of these debates have, in my opinion, got lost in the realms of semantics and philosophy they have raised the consciousness of educators to adult education and the focus of the two perspectives raises interesting question.

Even though there are problems on deciding where the term andragogy first derived from (Knowles (1970), Davenport and Davenport 1985; Pratt 1984) its proponents hold some unquestioned belief in the ability of the adult learner to take control of their own learning and to become self-directed learners. Mezirow (1981) defines andragogy as:

"an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capacity to function as self-directed learners".

Whilst Knowles (1970) defines it as "the art and science of helping adults to learn".

What would seem to be relevant to this research is not the debate

about the differences between andragogy and pedagogy but about the basis for a philosophy of andragogy per se for these are issues which are not addressed by proponents such as Malcolm Knowles. Clearly, and the way he has been commended in the field of adult education reflects this, he has a strong commitment to his 'clients' in a humanistic and individualistic way but because of this, assumptions are made which have not been tested before a theory of andragogy could be developed. Knowles and the concept of andragogy often ignores the reality of political and institutional constraints and how these affect the individuals themselves.

Andragogy as a teaching philosophy often expounds an educational utopia at two levels - how adult educators for example would like to think institutions provide an educational environment for adult learners, and, how they would like to see adult learners behave. In the real world these expectations may be at odds with the reality. The assumptions at both levels need to be questioned and opened out into the context of education as a whole. If indeed the claims of andragogy have a humanistic reality then it would seem they are as valid for infants as for adults so that the andragogy/pedagogy debate may not be particularly relevant here.

What is much more problematic though and fundamental to this research, are the questions it raises about the nature of education itself and its relationship with what is taught, why and by whom. These questions were outlined in the Introduction and again as they impinged on the individual in Chapter One. There they are involved with the issue of knowledge and control in education. When subsequently in 1984 Knowles



revised his "Adult Learner: A Neglected Species" and changed the sub title of "The Modern Practice of Adult Education: from Pedagogy versus Andragogy", to, "From Pedagogy to Andragogy" he clearly had nuances of the debate in mind.

What was at least being brought into the debate now was the concept of power or control. Whilst Knowles to some extent avoided the issue by still not putting 'real issues' into his philosophy of adult education he was highlighting a problem which as I have outlined earlier was developed by Yonge (1985), Podeschi (1987) and London (1973) - but even then his 'ideal type humanism' avoids the issue. By defining pedagogy as an ideology and andragogy as a set of assumptions he avoids the need to question his assumptions further by a semantic shift - I don't like what you are saying so I'll call it ideology: you are biased in your thinking - I'm neutral; I'm objective but you are biased, you are ideological. One mans ideology becomes another mans bias!

"What this means in practice is that we as educators now have the responsibility to check out which assumptions are realistic in a given situation. If a pedagogical assumption is realistic for a particular learner in regard to a particular learning goal then a pedagogical strategy is appropriate, at least as a starting point. But there is one big difference between how an ideological pedagog and an andragog would go from here. The pedagog, perceiving the pedagogical assumptions to be the only realistic assumptions, will insist that the learner remains dependent on the teacher; whereas the andragog, perceiving that movement towards the andragogical assumptions is a desirable goal, will do everything possible to help learners take increasing responsibility for their own learning".

(Knowles 1984)

It is this difference perceived by Knowles which I question in my research and which echoes the concerns of Yonge (1985) Podeschi (1987)

and Griffin (1985) about the assumptions of andragogy. It is the concern to produce self-directed learners which is central to Knowles's and Mezirow's concept of andragogy and the underlying emphasis that this is the prerogative of adult learners in whatever learning context that is in need of research. Knowles (1984) outlined that there were four types of adult status (biological, legal, social and psychological) when we arrive at a self-concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being "self-directing". This again is an idealistic humanistic aim without empirical support. Even Mezirow (1981) in his definitions of the self-directed learner given earlier is more aware of the constraints of education.

If the image of pedagogy is the powerlessness of the learner this self-directed autonomy within andragogy, as Mezirow sees it, is not a sum of the total adult learners in an institution all following their own individual aims and objectives but that they are able to choose or make sense of what the institution has on offer within the educational and social context. The power and the autonomy are 'social dimensions of situations' in which individuals find themselves and as such 'require elucidation in the context of knowledge, culture and politics' (Griffin 1983)

To focus issues about adult learning around andragogy and teaching/learning situations misses the point unless it introduces a level of meaning into the debate related to aims, both of the individual and the institution which overrides what may be an identical lesson content between adult and children and adult and adults. What also needs to be addressed is the structure of the relationships between the participants. This relationship of



authority and control is evident in the data given to me during interviews and in observations made around the Polytechnic in field notes with respect to relationships between staff and students and this institution and external bodies. It has also been supported by contacts with staff and students in similar institutions of higher education in the public sector. To focus on the relationship between the participants in any 'andragogic' situation may tell more about a distinction between pedagogy and andragogy, if such a distinction exists, than examining unfounded assumptions in terms of needs or self-directed motivation.

"At this point it should be emphasised that the child's becoming an adult under the pedagogic guidance of an adult is a graduated occurrence and there is no precise point at which it can be said "now X is an adult". This lack of a clearly defined boundary between being a child and being an adult is not a weakness in the concepts of pedagogy and andragogy, nor does it undermine the importance of this distinction. This lack of precision is found in life itself and not in the relevant concepts: this is partly because adulthood, viewed phenomenologically, is a way of being human (as is childhood) rather than a stage or state into which one passes. It is a way of existence which is gradually won, but it continually needs to be sustained and reaffirmed even though it becomes more or less habitual (automatic).

Yonge (1985)

This is the crux of the debate about a separate theory for the education of adults as far as this research is concerned. Knowles et al with their humanistic approach place great emphasis on the individuality of those (adults) who return to the educational environment - a point which is apparent from the individual biographies presented in Appendix 3 - but by presuming that mature students are all at the same stage of development on some

pedagogical/andragogical divide overlooks the way they themselves perceive their needs within that system. To concentrate on these perceptions tells us more than making assumptions about the importance of experience, motivation or need for self-direction all of which may be important in a social context but which are often of little value when entering an unknown situation. Indeed there seems, from my data, to be evidence that these students are willing to suspend their adulthood at the door of the institution and submit themselves to its constraints. This however does not make them children again by that submission to authority. They accept the authority of the andragog in that particular situation only so long as they assume the andragog has something to offer which will justify this acceptance of authority. Once this assumption no longer holds the relationship of authority is broken for the adult - the child does not have the experience by which to test the authority figure.

It is this relationship of knowledge and control as perceived by this group of adult students which I have used to look for as evidence of a different way of 'helping adults to learn' rather than teaching a body of knowledge to a homogeneous group of students. By adopting an unquestioning acceptance of the assumptions of andragogy and looking at individuals (adults) in the teaching and learning situations in any institution there is a danger in examining characteristics but avoiding issues of a philosophical nature about what ought to be. Griffin (1983) expressed the concern about the way Knowles looks at the individual learner ignoring the "broader context of adult experience in "differentiated social, cultural and political settings" and also that "adult knowledge is socially defined, distributed and



evaluated in a context of power and ideology".

The strength of andragogy lies in its humanistic approach to education as a whole so that the pedagogy/andragogy divide ceases to be one of age or stage of development but it seems that this debate has overridden the philosophical questions of purpose, of how knowledge is defined and the relationship between the individual and the society. What has thus tended to happen is that research about adult learning and a separate theory of andragogy has looked for evidence to reflect the beliefs of the researcher in the individual characteristics of the adults - learners and educators. There has been a danger of accepting the philosophical assumptions of andragogy as set down by humanistic educators such as Knowles and saying this is what should happen for the education of adults. Adults should be self-directed, should be able to make use of their own experience, should want to know things for a reason and at a particular time in their lives and that this will be achieved through perspective transformation and the growth of critical thinking and self questioning.

But this might not be the case, to have a sympathy for the assumptions may influence the result, to declare one's<sup>1</sup> values to the respondent at the outset may influence the context and even the content of answers in a qualitative study. It cannot be assumed that adults are different to the conventional 18 year old student in this Polytechnic, either that they perceive themselves as different or that they are perceived by the institution to be different once they are within the polytechnic system. At the outset of this research there was a danger that issues involving questions about andragogy were going to impose meanings which would have laid the results open to what Gordon (1985)

calls "paradigm ethnocentricity".

"Educators, like all social scientists, have a personal and professional interest in the paradigms and the frameworks through which they view themselves and the world....this knowledge has made them "winners" within their own fields and intellectual circles".

Gordon (1985)

Instead, by allowing the respondents to articulate their perceptions of student life at the polytechnic, the analysis became more an examination of the philosophy and purpose of education, how knowledge is defined, the relationship between the individual and the institution, the individual and the society and the institution and society.

This then is the place of andragogy in this study, not as a testing of the assumptions at the teaching and learning interface but as a philosophy of providing for mature students as they pass through this institution. The philosophy may be one which pertains to all students but because of demographic changes or egalitarian aims mature students are singled out as a special group for current educational provision, and this study asks a group of such students what they experienced as a result of this philosophy. It asks the question whether or not they perceived they were treated as different, whether or not they had control over their coursework, the pace of their work, the content of their course programmes, their examinations. As the preceding Chapter on methodology showed, the research is based on the subjective perceptions of the individuals during their first year in the Polytechnic rather than on any attempt to test assumptions based



on intuition or on an examination of practical considerations, such as classroom arrangements, which may or may not provide the necessary conditions in which adults can learn.

Whether how individuals perceive themselves in the social, cultural and political relationships whilst they are students is a true indicator of a separate theory of adult education (andragogy) is probably part of the theoretical debate which needs further empirical examination if it is not to impose one set of untested assumptions for another.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EXPECTATIONS AND REALIZATIONS; INTO AND THROUGH THE POLYTECHNIC

Stephen Brookfield (1986) describes the educational environment for the facilitation of learning as a

"highly complex psychosocial drama in which the personalities of the individuals involved, the contextual setting for the educational transactions, and the prevailing political climate critically affect the nature and form of learning"

Brookfield went on to say that whilst folk wisdom may indicate that learning within such a setting is a satisfying experience, this may be far from the reality and that

"encounters might contain elements of conflicting purposes, contrasting personality styles, or challenges to learners to engage in an anxiety - producing re-examination of self or of previously unchallenged norms (organizational, behavioural, or moral)"

The biographies in Appendix 3 have been used to illustrate the individual nature of some of the mature students in this research. From their 'stories' it is evident that they have very different experiences and backgrounds prior to entering into the "complex psychosocial drama" of courses at this Polytechnic and these differences would be enhanced in the 'stories' of the rest of the group if those had been included. Indeed an early attempt to make common patterns from my sample such as by age or social class, or educational background proved to yield little of value and it is the very difference amongst them which has been the underlying strength of the study for it illustrates the particular problem of categorising



mature students as a homogeneous group. The same of course must also be said of any group of students regardless of age. However, if schemes of entry, access or provision are being directed at a target group such as mature students it seems wise to point out the nature of the group at the outset and to take cognisance of this variety and length of experience - often the difference between adult and conventional students - for as Knowles claims adults 'are' their experience (Knowles 1978).

What now follows, bearing in mind the heterogeneity of the group, is an attempt to treat them as 'mature students' and to see what emerges from their conversations with me before they came to the Polytechnic, during their first term and at the end of the first year, the end of the courses for five of those in the sample group. Many of the interviews were an hour and a half long, so what is presented here can only be a small sample of what this group actually told me. From the transcripts of these conversations categories emerged of what the students themselves saw as important issues before, during and at the end of their first year of study and I have used these to create the picture of their experiences.

Several issues led me to believe that I was creating what <sup>a</sup> ~~Mes~~or (1985) calls valid "data." Not only did I see the group for the three interviews but also I met many of them around the various buildings, in the library, as they left lectures, in the refectory and coffee rooms and during my three years as a Research Assistant we built up an easy repartee. Some of the group I have come to know quite well and although there is a danger of becoming too submerged in the

background of the individual in participant observational research our conversations led me to believe that I was sharing their real experiences. I made fieldnotes when I could of our meetings and have incorporated them into the biographical details when I felt I was able to do so without betraying friendships and confidences.

My own position at the Polytechnic was also changing as I became involved in more aspects of work with mature students at a level which could have some input for policy decisions. I have indicated earlier my involvement with the Access Working Groups, the Admissions Group, the Student Potential Programme and generally a move towards the Continuing Education Service. This provided a rich source of contextual data against which to evaluate the comments of the group in the psychosocial drama of the Polytechnic.

This Chapter then reflects what this group of mature students expected to happen when they embarked on courses of higher education in a polytechnic, what actually happened and their reflections at the end of the first year. The quotes are small parts of long conversations used as illustrations of what they chose as significant during these interviews. I have used my overview of all the comments to pick out the categories which emerged from the data - not categories I had in mind before the interviews. Areas which do not appear during this analysis are not deemed to be insignificant. In some instances there were areas which were important to one particular student but which were not seen as significant to the others in the group. This does not make it insignificant but only that it was not an area for discussion at that time. Clearly there was a limit to our



conversations and I was conscious of my adding to their already busy lives as it was. So what is presented here are the issues which did emerge as important or worthy of mention as I talked to this group of mature students.

There is an element of my subjectivity in the choice of subject areas to present here and the particular quotes I have chosen but this subjectivity was used to develop a level of reflexivity with the spoken word to try and arrive at the meanings as they appeared to the individuals themselves not as 'objects' of my study

My third interview with Marjorie and her husband Frank gave me an illustration of the dangers of using my interpretations of what the words were actually saying.

I went to see Marjorie after her course had finished and as a result of which she had now got a full-time day job as opposed to a part-time night job which she had held for years before her studies at the Polytechnic.

Marjorie had overcome the problems of the level and amount of work that she had experienced before Christmas and was delighted with the way her course had gone. She felt she had needed to learn a 'Poly language', a way of doing things to get 'on the right wavelength', but gradually that had come and as essays were returned with required pass marks they provided the incentive to keep her going.

All this information seemed in line with what I had heard from others

in the group and I was feeling an almost warm glow from this family who had clearly coped so well with the return to study of one of its key members. In fact I asked Marjorie about how home life had been during the year and she told me how good her husband had been, how domesticated he was and how, because of this, she had been able to sit down and work in the evenings knowing that he was taking over. There had been spin offs in the direction of her elder daughter who worked extra hard for her 'O'levels because she and her mother had worked together. All in all there had been no problems, not like some of her fellow students had experienced and this was so much part of why she now felt her new job was almost a reward for all the family pulling together during her year at the Polytechnic.

I had asked Marjorie's husband if I could have a word with him and as he sat down to talk to me I had built up a picture of what he would say about how it had not been easy with the study but Marjorie wanted to do well, also he had done what he could and it was worth it in the end.

However, as I sorted out the tape recorder it became clear that these just were not his feelings and any surprise that I might have had was insignificant to that experienced by Marjorie. In fact I said to Frank, almost to diffuse the situation, that he sounded a bit hostile to the course and this unlocked what had obviously been a year of unspoken resentment which, as Marjorie said afterwards, if she had known about she would not have overcome her early difficulties with the course.



Frank "bitterly resented" that Marjorie had to do the course at all. "I thought why the hell should they come along and up end things when we are doing very nicely thank you." He didn't like the way it had changed the family's routine, how he no longer had full-control of the children in the evening because their mother was still in the house. She used to work at her studies in the evenings, he objected to having to be quiet whilst she worked in the warmest place in the house and why he had to do the jobs when she was at home - in her evening job the housework was done before she went out!

He also resented her study with respect to how it changed her - especially the psychology. "Why did she need to learn it anyway and come home analysing us all?"

Marjorie sat almost open-mouthed through this - clearly hearing it for the first time and whilst I am aware of the dangers of interpretation of what Frank said I use it to illustrate how important two different experiences of the reality of the same situation can be, and that only by asking Frank for his description did I arrive at a second level of meaning, that which was significant to him. I had seen the family together since the end of the year and before this evening I had gained no impression of what Frank had felt about the year. They had been away on holiday and he was so proud of Marjorie (and his daughter with her 'O'level results.) The crux seems to have been the new job. If they had gone through the whole year and nothing had changed Frank might have voiced his opinions earlier, but he didn't need to, he felt they were all better off now and Marjorie had done well on the course.

As I left the house I felt that the discussion would probably go on into the night. I feel that this example does illustrate the fact that I am aware of the limitations of subjective interpretations of reality and the ethnocentricity which can creep in when using such material as data. Marjorie saw her husband as supportive and because of that was able to do well on the course. If I had not asked Frank for his views I would have felt the same.

#### **Before the Course Began - Reasons for Returning to Study After a Break in Education**

A question which I asked everyone as we talked in the summer before the course began was:

"Why are you returning to study?"

The responses to this question produced many similar answers and often at two levels. One seemed to be intrinsic, some form of inner reason for the individuals themselves, such as to satisfy a long felt need to study for its own sake. The other reason was more in terms of how any qualification gained would be the means of proving something in a tangible and socially accepted way.

It was as if the group were almost conditioned to giving an answer which had some instrumental worth - 'to get a job', 'to enter teaching' 'to change my career'. The overwhelming response though was in terms of 'looking for self-fulfilment' 'seeking self satisfaction' 'proving something to myself', 'doing something I had always wanted to do', 'giving a meaning to my life' or allowing 'something inside my



head to develop that I always knew was there but hadn't been allowed to come out before now'. Those who gave instrumental reasons in terms of needing qualifications often added a comment about new areas of interest rather than study for its own sake and some element of waiting to see if they could 'still do it' and "show what sort of people they really were"

This dichotomy of intrinsic and extrinsic response raised two issues at the outset about returning to study. One I have already pointed out in the context of Cyril Houle's work about type of returner but it is relevant again here when looking at levels of meaning and the interpretations of what the students said to me.

In answer to the question, "Why are you returning at this particular moment in time?" the answers were in terms of jobs, or interests or doing a degree in similar patterns to the Houle typology but the actual reason or 'trigger' often did not appear in their answer but was a practical consideration in terms of health, life event such as age of children, job change or their own mid-life crisis - reaching the age of 40! This was not the initial response to the question why now? - it often emerged later - but it was interesting to see the need to justify the return in terms of conventional expectations - that is, ways in which they perceived a return to study would be acceptable amongst family, friends and society as a whole.

It would seem then that answers to the question "why are you returning?" also had this element of justification, although their initial answers were in terms of some personal reason it would be

difficult to evaluate. Whether or not these somewhat idealistic claims for wanting to return to study were the real ones or post hoc rationalisations for the course of action they were now well embarked on it is not possible to say but it led me to think about their answers within the context of Allen Tough's work. This group were embarking on long courses of study in an actual institution of public sector higher education instead of 'proving something to themselves' by following an individual learning project, reading or painting, they were instead, doing formal courses. Indeed I was moved to ask many of them - why they didn't take up absailing or something really heroic to prove this 'something' - their answers told how they needed to prove it within the context of a degree or diploma programme, a socially recognised symbol of success. This would seem to be another reason for placing this study in the context of symbolic interaction, for although many of the group were emphatic that they did not care what other people thought that they were proving something to themselves the external validation of their endeavours was clearly important. This took on a great deal of significance in the 'problems' of the first term too as the slow return of 'marked' course work did not allow them a measure of how they were seen by significant others such as their tutors and fellow students (this will be elaborated later)

A question that seemed to need asking in the light of this perceived need for paper qualifications was, why had they not stayed on at school? Indeed many of the group had already undertaken years of preparation at night school or on various preparatory courses to arrive at the Polytechnic. Some did have the opportunity from school but had made a conscious decision not to carry on into higher



education at that time. Brian hated school and couldn't wait to leave, he wanted a job but soon got tired of it. He married early and went on a building site to increase his income but a serious motor cycle accident left him unemployed. Four years out of work with no prospects of a job turned his thoughts to education as a means to an end as he had developed an interest in computing and saw that as a career opportunity. To follow that possibility he put himself through educational 'hoops' he never would have believed possible when he left school at 16.

David said "I wouldn't have liked to do a degree at 18. I'm glad I've done it now, I wouldn't have been ready for it after grammar school."

#### **Social Divisions as a Barrier to Returning to Study**

The possibility of continuing to higher education after school had not existed for many of the group. For them social, economic, family pressures (which may be termed social class pressures) necessitated the need to leave school and get a job as soon as possible or to conform to the norms of the reference group. Several of the group were able to make comments about this reason for not staying on at school.

Steve: "It's something I've always wanted to do right since leaving school and its the first opportunity that really has presented itself. Ever since I left school I had to earn a living....doing 'A' level at night school I realised that the opportunity was there....deep down inside I have really always wanted to do this rather than what I was doing but circumstances just don't let you - life's not like that"

First interview B.A. Fine Art.

Janet: "I would like to have done it when I was younger but my parents never really encouraged me plus they were never very well off - there were no grants like now - I just went into a job".

First interview Applied Social Studies.

Janet married very soon after school and her husband felt that by studying she was trying to better herself. After her divorce she began her studies.

Janet: "I don't think I would have got this far if I had been married. He wouldn't have put up with it. He would have thought I should have been happy enough at home with what I was doing and not wanted something else".

First interview Applied Social Studies.

Kate: "All my formal schooling I was conditioned to believing you were capable of doing something with your hands and you would get married and that was it. I was one of nine children, my parents didn't go to school so education didn't play an important part in our upbringing. 11+ or not we knew we didn't have it. I felt we had a raw deal.....the pressures were on feeding and clothing us"

First interview B.A. Applied Social Studies.

Ken: "You must remember the environment I came from. I came from a Belfast ghetto where everyone has to be a little bit cheeky and a little bit mean to be accepted socially. I was quite good at school....was approached by the Vice Principal and Principal to stay on but circumstance being what they were, being the eldest from a family of five, mother and father - my father was a labourer - I didn't give it much consideration. Where you know you have to go out and help the family sort of thing, in the environment I was in the thing was to get out of school and get work and that's what I did".

First interview HND Building Studies



During the conversation I asked Ken what his friends had thought about his coming to the Polytechnic and his reaction was one of surprise that I had asked because he had noticed a change in their attitudes towards him.

Ken: "One or two seem a bit put out....I don't see why but they might sort of feel I'm sort of leaving them behind a little because I associate with people of my own standards"

Q: What do you call your own standards?

Ken: "Working class"  
"Some of my friends are pleased about it, some are really nice and try to encourage me but some of them try to encourage me but at the same time give the impression like - "what the hell, who does he think he is?" I don't think they can help it its part of their nature".

#### First interview HND Building Studies

During our conversation I was struck by how articulate Ken was for all his comments about lack of formal education and indeed several times he made the point himself, often as a joke, that he was brighter than his friends. I asked him if he had ever considered going back to study before.

Ken: "Well before I have never really felt the necessity to do it apart from the fact that I have always felt that I should be in a better position than I was - I have never been out of work. I have always had enough money to live on; I have never felt threatened and if I had never had this illness I would probably have never considered it at all in that respect. In the environment I lived in people don't do that sort of thing; you see it is more a middle class thing - going from school to college. People of my age, for middle aged people to suddenly sit down and think of going to college - its just not done in our area. Its something that has to be forced on you. There are any amount of chaps I know who are very bright who would never pack in work and go to college"

#### First interview HND Building Studies

These sentiments that education is a "middle class" activity were illustrated time and again. They were given as we have seen as a reason for not entering higher education straight from school but they were also a barrier to returning to study as adults.

John is 28 and had gone into the army straight from school to get away from the pressures of marriage and family which he felt was the norm for his peer group. He used his army training to gain a lucrative job in the computer industry but he found the work most unfulfilling and decided to leave to get on to a degree course in Graphic Design - something he had always had an interest in. His family and friends found this decision impossible to believe and the admissions tutor at the local college told him he was making a foolish move. Education it seemed, especially when one was giving up such a well paid job, was totally self indulgent and not something someone like John did.

Malcolm put it in perspective:

*"I think it depends where you come from socially. In a working class area of Preston people with a degree are in a minority. In Surbiton probably a majority, it depends where you come from".*

First interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

The influence of family and friends, the social context in which the potential mature student is located is important for the decision to return to study. Even when there is a 'trigger situation' which may redress the balance of the deterrent effect of this and a decision to return to study is made, the negative influence may still be felt.



Part of the problem may lie within the early socialisation of the individual themselves and the way in which they perceive they will be treated differently by their social groups if they gain qualifications. At the same time though members of those groups may imagine changes which do not really take place but, by acting as if they have done, create a self fulfilling prophecy.

The experiences of two students within a group of Open University students allocated to me serve as further illustration. They are husband and wife who began their studies together. He worked in a semi skilled job she at a secretarial level both in what would be described as 'working class' jobs. As their courses proceeded and they became involved with our group as well as the course material and went away to summer school they began to find difficulty with their other social groups, workmates, family and friends until as they told me one evening "we never talk about our studies now apart from here or to each other. If we do there is silence or someone says, "there they go again using big words".

The pair made no efforts to change friends or work situations but eventually the husband began to have problems at work. His workmates had less and less to do with him because they felt he was trying to become better than them. His boss started giving him difficult jobs, overtime on study centre nights and would not allow him a week away for summer school. Sam assumed this was because his boss also felt he was trying to become better than him although there was no element of this in Sam's original idea for returning to study and I never felt that he changed in any of his dealings with people that I saw. Sam

became more and more determined to work at his degree and in fact look for a "better job".

The couple did start doing 'different' things and have become more insular, even their sons joke about it, not because of anything they have instigated but because of the way people have acted towards them or their perceptions of what certain behaviour means. At the moment, part way through their degree courses, they are 'spanning two cultures' as it were, although Alice has moved up with her job Sam does not have the qualifications to look for a new career yet in social work.

So it would seem that study is not an activity within the normal conceptions of some groups in our society. The impact of this is felt not only at the end of the initial period of education but as a barrier against returning to study as an adult.

When adults do return it seems there needs to be a trigger event, a catalyst to start the reaction but also there needs to be a change in attitude of family and friends to overcome the original negative values placed on education. Many of my sample were keen to point out this new support.

*"My husband is 100% for it".*

*"My friends wish they had the confidence to do it".*

*"My father thinks I'm mad giving up a job but he understands".*

*"My relatives have seen me pull myself up from the 'D' stream through night school and now they are doing some study".*

*"My wife says although she does want us to have a family*



she will work 'till I finish and get a job".

### **Age as a Barrier Against Returning to Study**

In one case though a further dimension was added by the oldest student in my sample who was very much part of what would be described as 'middle class culture'. Because he is almost at retirement age he is an extreme case but his comments illustrate what is an often stated view amongst mature enquirers that at their age should they really think about more study - will it be worth it? It would seem education is for the young - a once and only activity - clearly as life spans enlarge and skills go out of date this is an outdated concept but one still held by many.

Clive: *"I've been criticised by our works manager, he said that he thought it was disgusting the fact that I was taking up a place that some youngster may want and especially since I wasn't going to do anything with it at the end.*

*My 85 year old mother said "good for you". My wife, I think the only thing that concerned her was I was giving up an extremely well paid job and as long as her standard of living doesn't drop she doesn't want to know. She thinks returning to study is a waste of time. Its for the young people. There has to be an end product and my wanting to study psychology makes it worse. Its quote "an odd subject. "Normal people don't behave like this why can't you behave like normal men? None of my friends husbands would be reading books like this"*.

### **First interview BSc Psychology**

So it would seem that social factors, often aligned with social class, cause individuals to drop out of education in the first instance and militate against their return later. A trigger event with or without the support of family and friends allows these to be overcome but by that time it seems additional barriers exist such as that of age which

in turn have to be faced.

### **Barriers to Entry from the Educational Institutions Themselves**

If social, cultural, family and age constraints create barriers for entry into higher education for mature students before they actually apply these would seem, in some cases, to be compounded by the educational institutions themselves. Part of this is no doubt the whole cultural apparatus of our educational system as outlined in Chapter One and as described further by Westwood (1980) Keddie (1980) et al which is socially divisive in ideological terms.

There may be those institutions who would defend a negative attitude towards mature applicants by pointing to the perceived barriers erected by those applicants themselves which have no truth in reality. However to say that we welcome applications from all groups in society is not the same as making positive moves to support such a claim.

Many would be mature students have images of higher education from their school days or from books, films, television and hearsay and whether or not those perceptions are real has little significance if the resulting behaviour is that those individuals do not apply to return to study.

On the cassette tape "It Takes All Sorts" Vivian tells how fearful she was of entering the buildings for an initial advisory interview

Vivian:     *"I expected to see people in gowns and mortar boards - instead I was met by someone who looked just like myself - just like anyone else".*



Vivian's expectations were not proved right in reality but she had to pluck up a great deal of courage to find that out. We will never know how many others are discouraged by their expectation.

In my sample there was repeated evidence of the discouraging experiences from further education colleges and the Polytechnic itself as the individuals made enquiries about returning to study. However, these are matched by descriptions of very positive experiences which have resulted in a return to higher education. Obviously those who do return have overcome the barriers although the descriptions of their experiences can act as a lesson for future action.

Both Brian and John, men in their mid twenties had unpleasant experiences and memories of their early enquiries to local further education colleges which were to be their point of return to education. Clearly individual staff personalities are involved (they may not reflect the policy of the institutions as a whole, far from it in one case where a specific team of staff exists to help mature applicants at any level) for it is individuals who deal with specific queries and give the initial impressions.

John wanted to give up a well paid job in computing to do a foundation course in Art and the person he spoke to couldn't understand why he wanted to <sup>do</sup> it

John: "I decided when I was in London, I was 23 I think then, that I was going to college, 24 when I made my first application but it took me to 26 before I was there."

Q. "Why because people wouldn't accept you on courses?"

John: "No. I applied to do a Foundation course at (Local Technical College). I had a few drawings and I was very nervous - I was very out of touch with the environment - the only information I had was from books in the library so I went to see a tutor at the 'Tec' to ask if it was a feasible idea to want to do this sort of thing".

"The response was very bad, it nearly put me off. The first tutor couldn't understand why I wanted to do it, to pack in a career in computing to go and do something like art. I said "I don't want to do this (that is computing) for the rest of my life" and he said "well I don't want to do this for the rest of my life" its not what I want".

"Then they said yes I was good enough to do it if I really wanted to and then I went to see another man because I wanted to do graphic design and he said yes you could do it but you'll probably find you are too old because in graphic design most students are leaving college at 22 these days and they are too old.

I remember the actual words he said - for the advertising industry and that.

I thought, I could hear what he was saying but it didn't seem right to me and that worried me for quite a while afterwards but its only lately that I've realised that its just a load of rubbish, but that was the first impression.

I've had nothing but obstruction"

First interview B.A. Graphic Design

Brian told a similar story about initial enquiries which were met with less than helpful advice although his situation was further confused because the term had started, another barrier to starting to study, and he was constrained by unemployment benefits from doing a full-time



course

Q. Why did you choose this Polytechnic?

Kate: "Well I had heard that you didn't need to have all the qualifications to get in. I heard that there was a stand. on an exhibition in the shopping centre. It had been eight years since I started wanting to do something (she had been to night school for 'O' and "A" levels during that time) and so I went for more information and the man on the stand said you need 'A' levels to do that - the fellow assumed by looking at me that I couldn't have any 'A' levels - it really put me off. I took a prospectus, I felt put off.

I would have done something with a bit of encouragement You see I felt nervous about the fact that I may not be doing things in the right order - its a mysterious area - as if you need qualifications just to get through the initial asking of people and you need to ask the right sort of thing but as I found out its all so easy its not really like that, its all so welcoming.

Last year I decided to do something, I rang round for all the prospectuses two years ago so I decided for this year. I went to the Poly for an interview, the places were filled but I went on the Pre-degree. When I actually got down to it it was all so easy, nothing to be frightened of and yet there had been this fear of contact ..... I still hold tutors and teachers in awe, its back to childhood".

First interview B.A. Applied Studies

This negative picture is balanced by some very positive stories of what it felt like to come into this institution. John was full of praise for a perhaps unexpected but important area of the Polytechnic.

John: "I decided to phone round Polytechnics. I phoned up here, they were the only people who sounded human, it made an impact, the Lancashire accent sounded really friendly compared to other polytechnics - who were almost stropky as if they objected to being phoned up".

First interview B.A. Graphic Design.

Clive had interviews at a nearby university, where he was offered a place (despite the fact that he was older than the professor) and then came down to this Polytechnic. He felt that both institutions catered for mature students but he felt more at ease in the Polytechnic.

For those on the inside of an educational institution who have followed the conventional path of school to university back to teach in higher education this feeling of hostility may be hard to understand. However, it is important to realise that a return to study needs to start somewhere. For individuals who are not so familiar with how the system works any less than enthusiastic response acts as a rejection and is often seen in personal terms. Knowles (1984) claims that adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and a need to be seen by others as being capable of self-direction. They resist any attempt by others to impose a situation on them against their will and this may need to be borne in mind by institutions who purport to be providing access to education for adults.

#### **Barriers to Access - Financial and Administrative Constraints**

Unfortunately it is not only the initial making of contact which is a barrier to access but the administration and often that linked with the financial aspects which adds further difficulty.

Mature students returning to full-time study on designated courses at



the Polytechnic are eligible for a mandatory grant in the same way as conventional aged students. The regulations describing the designated courses and the conditions for eligibility are described in the D.E.S. handbook, Grants to Students (1987).

The standard rate of grant is determined by the Local Education Authority by assessing the 'maintenance requirements' and 'resources' and subtracting one from the other: what ever is left is the net grant.

In 1987 the standard rate of maintenance grant was: £1,972 if living in a hall of residence or lodgings for study outside London or £2,330 living within the London area.

£862 if provided with free board and lodging at college.

£1,567 if living at parents home but this does not apply to married or 'independent status' students.

There are additions which may be made to this standard grant but for mature student there are additional allowances - up to £718 - if the student is 26 or over and has earned or received in taxable unemployment or supplementary benefits at least £12,000 during the three years before the start of the first academic year of the course.

Consideration is also given to the number of dependants i.e. spouse and children although the actual figure is decided by any income earned by spouse and by children in some cases and by age and number of children. There is provision for additional help for single students with dependants but for this amount and indeed the final grant available to a mature student consultation needs to take place with the Local Education Authority on each individual case. Clearly the actual amount of money may be a deterrent in itself, but the administration needed to arrive at a figure may add problems.



Students are encouraged to begin these consultations before they start their studies - in the March - but often they do not get the results if there are individual problems until the term begins.

Philip did not know up to the early days of his course whether or not he had funding. Thomas who had transferred to this Polytechnic from a university into the second year felt that the whole of his first term was upset by going backwards and forwards to sort out his grant and living from hand to mouth because no money came through. Ken found the problems of living on a grant just too much and when his wife took a job for a few hours a week to supplement it the grant was reduced further. The worry of lack of money lead to increased physical problems for him. By the end of his two year course his heart condition was worse, he had developed an ulcer and his 25 year old marriage was over - it is difficult not to be dogmatic about cause and effect, but financial problems did not help his concentration on his studies.

If the problems getting onto a course were not enough for John he also had this administrative and financial difficulties.

John: For the first month I had no finance, I thought I would be thrown off the course. I had no grant, no fees paid, no maintenance. I saved up to pay the tuition, worked in a bar so lived off that. After a few weeks I went to my home town for help but they weren't interested so I went down to London - I played them at their own game.

Q. But why didn't you get the full grant?

John: "I wanted a mature student grant - but my different jobs didn't help. I got a letter from the tax; they said it was okay but 3 days later another letter came. No one knew the answers. In the book it says if you have earned £12,000 in 3 years before you go you are entitled to a mature students grant. I had earned £17,000 in 21 months so I had done it, but no one could say if 21 months was enough. I used to go down and get very angry because I wanted to do this course and they were hindering me. It looks like I'm going to get it now though"

Q. Most people would have given up!

John: "I would think so but it makes me more and more determined.

First interview B.A. Graphic Design.

This conversation was the week before the term began and only then did he think it might be alright.

For men with a family to support and a house to run there are clearly financial constraints about returning to study, although for some who are unemployed there may not be such a disparity. Single women with families face the same concerns as men that is the true, and for



married women the situation is made worse because of their legal position vis a vis their husband's income - which brings them into the same level of dependency as the 18 year old student on their parents.

These students in my sample had already decided they could live on a grant and being full-time their fees were paid. They had not expected extra problems in getting the actual payment sorted out. Again it may be accepted that there will be problems with the actual amount of money of the grant. There is often little perception of the difficulties to even obtain that.

**Where do the Expectations of What it will be like at The Polytechnic come from?**

What then did this group of students expect it would be like coming to this Polytechnic?

Only two of my 22 mature students had not had recent educational experiences or already followed courses of higher education to degree level. This, whilst reinforcing the evidence that 'to those who have had education more shall be given', raises the question about where expectations of what life will be like at this Polytechnic came from. It does also give rise to an equally significant question about what the staff who will teach/administer the mature returners will expect was their last previous educational experience and therefore how they will react towards the students. It is a popular misconception that mature students have delayed their return to study for so long because they have unhappy memories of their school days. This is perpetuated by andragogues such as Knowles who stress the differences between school and adult education in practical humanistic terms.

If the staff at the Polytechnic assume school as the last educational experience and expect that these returners are using that as a basis of what will happen then they may be mistaken. During the first interview before term began I asked the question to all the sample what they remembered about their school days having Knowles' (1980) division between school experience and adult learning in mind. Most of the replies were very low key "it was okay"; "I quite enjoyed it"; "It was a traditional grammar school education". In most cases for those who left early the reason was economic as I have shown earlier, not hatred of the system and six of the group had gone on to higher education straight from school.

Ken, one of the group for whom school was the last education he had experienced did remember it very much as "the masters" and "the pupils" and that did set the expectations for him of what life would be like here at the Polytechnic. He then joined a school where there was a strong classification and framing of knowledge (Bernstein (1971)) which Knowles (1978) and others would associate with a banking theory of transmission of knowledge, the primary concern being to cover the syllabus in the allocated time. The image was that of 'the teacher' who knows all about the subject passing on the information to 'the pupils' who know nothing or at most very little. His memories of school were thus reinforced with some disappointment because he thought the Polytechnic would be different and many of his problems during his course resulted from his inability to overcome this feeling of "them and us" and being unable to ask for help on an individual basis, the same situation he remembered from school.



Q. How do you expect it to be, do you expect it to be formal like school?

Ken: "No not quite. Obviously the chap in charge will have to have a bit of authority but he will be in authority on a more friendly atmosphere than it was at school I presume. He will not be dictating to you, he will be talking to you rather than down to you sort of thing. That's the way I see it at the moment".

Q. Where have you got this sort of impression from?

Ken: "This is the way I imagine it to be. I imagine it will be adults mixing with adults because that's what it boils down to, I mean even 18 year olds are considered adults. You can't expect to be browbeaten like you would at school - well when I went to school they used to browbeat you - so I expect they will talk on very level terms these people".

Q. Do you think you will be on equal terms with the staff - you will be older than them?

Ken: "Probably yes I would think so. I would think if you had a problem you would be able to sit down and talk it over - well maybe not sit down and talk it over but you would be able to ask to have it explained in a mature sense of the word if there was something you don't understand?

.... I think I am old enough and strong enough to be able to tell someone when their attitude is not quite right i.e. that the teacher has a bit of a dictatorial attitude towards us or he tries to be a bit, um - I think I could talk to him and make him see his folly - as far as I'm concerned anyway".

Q. But this person will be assessing your work?

Ken: "Yes, well that's what I'm saying, you talk to them rather than - I mean anyone can browbeat you know, but if you talk to people and that's your experience of life again, you learn different characters and how to handle them and how to come across to them and get them to see your point of view in a reasonable manner".

First interview HND Building Studies.

When I met Ken for our second interview he was in a very different frame of mind telling me that the course was going "badly - very badly in fact." He could not cope with the standard or the pace of the work and was in no way able to "use his experience" to talk to the staff and I reminded him of how he said he would be able to ask for help adult to adult as it were.

Ken:       *"Yes I was actually but we're not on as personal a level as I thought we might be, at least not yet. Perhaps I've seen too many American films, where you just spoke to each other as associates who had met in a bar-room or something like that but it doesn't work like that - we've still got the pupil and teacher atmosphere".*

Second interview HND Building Studies.

For Ken his adult status was under attack because he was not allowed to use his experience in the learning situation. The things that he knew about were not taken into account and he was returned to feeling like he did at school when there was an authority structure between the teacher and pupil. This undermined his self confidence in and out of the classroom too.



Kate was another person who remembered her secondary modern school experience as:-

Kate:       ... "hopeless, they never got to know you personally, I just felt all that is there now was there then - why didn't they say - now look Kate, this that and the other. You didn't learn at school"

First interview B.A. Applied Social Studies.

For Kate it was a long slow process of overcoming that school experience but when she arrived at the Polytechnic unlike Ken she had a more tangible basis for her expectations than American films and she is more representative of the group. Kate had been to night school for 'O' and 'A' levels and done the Polytechnic's Pre-degree course so her expectations were based on those experiences. She was used to being treated as an adult and that was the expectation.

Time and again it was the recent experiences of night school, Pre-degree, Open College of the North West which determined the expectations. School memories were no longer significant in this respect. As we shall see when these expectations became reality, the Polytechnic staff did not always take cognisance of this fact. It needs to be pointed out though that this is a self selected group. To those adults for whom school was a horrific experience the memory may be sufficient to prevent any return to study even at an intermediate level which may change perceptions of the experience and value of education. There is also the case of individual attitudes of students and staff involved. All it is possible to say here is that for my group the last educational experience was significant in building up their expectations of the Polytechnic not whatever happened during compulsory schooling.

One such experience was the Open College of the North West. This is a network of courses set up as an alternative to 'O' and 'A' level for mature students under the auspices of Lancashire Polytechnic and Lancaster University. It is based in the local Further Education Colleges throughout the North West of England.

Q. What do you expect is going to happen at the Polytechnic? You had a very good experience at the Open College.

Alan: "Tremendous. A wonderful place. It was a very adult situation. It could have been horrendous. We went into Block 10 and it was almost as if we had invaded the privacy of young people and we got a lot of abuse. As a result we got a special coffee bar opened for us. But within the classroom whilst we did sit in desks in front of the tutor we were able to express ourselves, have discussions, do some written work. Even the tutor was able to express herself and to connect with us. It was a good atmosphere and as such you get quite a lot more out of it".

Q. Is that what you see as an adult situation?

Alan: "Yes. We were able to express ourselves properly. You get angry sometimes and want to get something out of your system and you are able to do it. I no longer get embarrassed about answering questions. I no longer worry about appearing thick to some people, if I want to know something I just ask".

Q. So do you think this is going to happen at the Polytechnic?

Alan: "I vary from being terrified and very excited. I went in on a days induction and I came out feeling so down. I talked to my colleagues, they say its natural - you're with 25 strange people and I'm worried about giving up my job to live on a grant. But I feel better about it now and I've no doubt that after a couple of weeks at the Polytechnic we will have sorted ourselves out"

First interview Diploma in Social Work.



Janet also had the same feelings after her Open College experience and this was reiterated by others in the group.

Q. Why did you enjoy the Open college?

Janet: "I think because it was older and younger people mixed together and because you knew that the exam at the end wasn't just the exam like the 'A' level..... Plus the whole approach - you were treated like adults - to the whole concept.

Q. What do you think an adult approach is?

Janet: "Well you're not treated like children having to be told what to do. You can add more to the lesson, the teacher is just there to put ideas into your head and for you to bring them out - now with younger children I would think that would be more difficult because they haven't had the experience of life and they're not as able to be as forthcoming as that so they have to be more led, all the way, than an adult has.

Just the way the teachers treated you - they treated you as if you had a certain amount of knowledge to begin with - that all they were doing was bringing out knowledge that was there, that was hidden - you didn't feel that they were teaching you from square one thinking they were thinking that you didn't know anything and you had got to learn everything whilst you were there".

Q. Was that different from how you were treated at school?

Janet: "Oh yes, although its difficult I expect because when you are at school you don't know any different, you accept it, that's the way you were taught. But as an older person going back if then they were to try and teach you how you were taught at school you would feel a bit resentful that that wasn't the way to approach an adult when you have already got some knowledge there to begin with".

Q. And has that set the standard for what you think will happen at the Polytechnic?

Janet: "Well hopefully yes. I'd like to think that the tutor would look on mature students as adults - which they really are - in that way and not try to approach them as they would 18 year olds but it is something obviously I will see when I get there.

Q. How will they approach the 18 year olds?

Janet        *"I don't think that they will expect as much of them as an adult in certain areas because of experience an older person has that a younger person hasn't especially in my subject area.*

*Certain questions a younger person would not be able to answer but they have got more up to date knowledge of their subject whereas we have been out of it for so long - so that's where we can gain from them".*

First interview B.A. Applied Social Studies.

Those of the sample who had been on the Pre-degree course had similar experiences and expectations that this would continue although Brian resented the emphasis on meeting informally after the timetabled sessions on grounds of cost and Kate had concerns that the friendly supportive atmosphere could not continue on the real Polytechnic course.

Kate:        *"Its wonderful to study for a couple of hours away from the awful pressure. The staff are like friends, it all seems so friendly I keep thinking isn't it great. But I get the feeling that the Pre-degree is nurturing students that the Polytechnic can't be like that. I've heard that once you get there you can't find a tutor!".*

First interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

Six of the sample already had degrees from conventional university educations and although this was some time ago they were basing their expectations on what had happened there. This group did express views though that they would be different or at least have different expectations this time around.

Barbara: *"What I'm doing now is what I want to do. I got myself all mixed up with the wrong subjects at school. I can see the relevance of what I'm doing now and so I need to understand it. I will be different I have more experience I'm not*



just learning for the sake of it. I hope the lecturers treat mature students with respect because of their experience. Graduates tend to think they know it all but they don't. Now I will have to comprehend more than learn".

First interview B.A. Accountancy (part-time).

Pam: "I enjoyed every minute of my university experience not just the academic learning but the living on your own, getting on on your own, having to find holiday jobs, becoming independent basically; with intelligent people, discussions into the small hours of the morning which was wonderful at that time.

My experience there colours my expectations now. I think there will be a lot of seminar work and people will draw from students experience of where they have been and what they have done, I hope that is a difference because I'm sure that there are other people like me who have had some experience in the work, who will be able to contribute to that. I doubt whether there will be sufficient time for a lot of open-ended discussion because of the quantity of work that has to be got through to satisfy the needs of the course so I will have to be prepared for less discussion to get the formal information of the course".

First interview C.Q.S.W. (1 yr post-grad.)

What emerges from the data then is the significance of the most recent prior experience of education in colouring expectations of what it will be like to study at the Polytechnic. This was not the often quoted negative response to school and feelings of being a passive participant but it created a positive, almost bouyant expectation to being actually involved in the learning situation. It was as if this group approached their courses with the capacity to be self-directed learners and it was on these foundations that they had built their expectations. This has important implications for those who teach these mature returners and this became apparent from the data during the year.

## **Expectations of the Relationships with Staff at the Polytechnic**

Before the courses began though the question of what they expected from their relationship with the staff gave no clear separation from views of what it 'would be like at the Polytechnic' as a whole. Two final points at this time of entry into the institution did emerge. There was a dichotomy of views about whether or not as mature students they would find it easier or more difficult to ask questions, take part in group discussions or initiate conversations and conduct seminars. Clive, Alison and Pam all felt that mature students were more willing to express their views and were not frightened to put themselves on the line. Alan, as illustrated earlier, felt that asking questions was the only way to learn even though people might think he was a 'plank'. Mavis, Brian and Mohammed certainly felt that mature students were more timid, less likely to want to expose their ignorance but even having said that knew that the onus would be on them to ask if they didn't understand. Two representative views might be.

Marjorie: *"I'm sure I will be bewildered at first. There will be so much new work. I shan't be voicing my opinions for many weeks".*

First interview Nursing Diploma.

John: *"I talk to people as I would talk to you, they (the tutors) are here to help me, they are not people up there. The first thing I found out is that because they are tutors does not mean they are right, young people tend to take everything tutors say as gospel and that is bad, its only opinions and you should be able to think for yourself. I*



think its down to the individual. If you come from school and act like a school kid you will be treated as one but if you behave as an adult they treat you like an adult. I didn't have any trouble. In fact the feeling I get is that mature students are appreciated because they do ask, because they tend to work harder, they work in a different way".

First interview B.A. Graphic Design

### **Expectations of the Other Students**

Again these comments were very much based on recent supportive educational experiences. Like the quote from Ken earlier about watching too many American films, they have built up an image almost of what they would like the situation at the Polytechnic to be. It is also significant that it does include a learning contract in so far as it is a two way process - "it's down to the individual" - "you behave like an adult they treat you like an adult." The point being that this group of returners felt that they would have some control.

This view was also expressed when looking at the difference between the conventional student and the mature student. It also supports the relevance of subjective perceptions of definitions rather than chronological age as a demarcation between the two groups. My sample felt that maturity was a state of mind, an attitude towards the study and to some extent towards life. It was very much involved with experience of life as Janet's quote earlier showed but it was very evident that it was not age but a way of behaving that made the difference. There were no expected worries about being in mixed groups and as Christine put it the divisions may be pretty arbitrary anyway.

Christine: "We think we know it all: they think they know it all".

First interview B.A. Combined Studies

### **Entry into the Polytechnic - The Period and Process of Enrolment**

One area of comment from the group which was raised by me was the experiences of the group concerning enrolment on to their courses. I particularly asked during the second interview about the enrolment period because it emerged as a separate issue during the pilot study for this research. For those who did talk about it, it represented a significant departure from the way they had been treated on preparatory courses like Pre-degree or Open College and indeed the way they were treated during initial advisory interviews or at specific course interviews. It must be pointed out that I did pick the issue in this research and what is recorded here is from those people who wished to make comments. The fact that some people did not have any comments to make or who found the process 'okay' is not insignificant. I was also concerned not to lead the comments in anyway by asking whether or not enrolment was a good, bad or indifferent experience and so during the second interview in the first term I asked if they remembered enrolment and to tell me something about it.

The responses to these enquiries were about the bureaucracy of the enrolment procedure and the often mundane detail of what was involved. There were frequent references to having to go backwards and forwards between buildings to get to different parts of the process done; arriving without the necessary documentation;



"the whole business was tedious".

"I had to photocopy my certificates when there was a machine there which could have done it".

"It was disgusting. I was shattered, my feet - and I'm a fell walker and I've seldom done so many miles in a week".

"Then you go to pick up your grant cheque, trot off to the library to get your library ticket done and then they tell you when you get to the library that you need a photograph, which I wasn't aware of so then you have to shoot off up to the bus station because that's the nearest place"

"The rushing about was unsettling and something hard to recover from".

"This was a Business Studies course, you would have thought they could have done better with their instructions".

"In fact there was so much rushing about that you quickly learnt that people didn't care if you turned up or not"

Even though these were the main issues of discussion about enrolment - often spoken with a good deal of feeling and sophistication by people like Thomas who described it all as an "alienating experience" it leaves open the question about whether or not these are the main concerns about what happened during the enrolment process. It would seem rather trite to suggest that for adults used to coping with jobs, families and otherwise complex social lives that problems about numbers of photographs needed should cause any hardship.

If these are not the 'real' issues how does one decide what are without moving from the level of meaning as it appears to the student to the level of interpretation as it appears to me? There may be something of significance in the timing of questions about enrolment. My interviews were some weeks after it had all taken place and other aspects of being a student at the Polytechnic were more significant.

Descriptions of what actually happened during enrolment were becoming entangled with current experiences so that a second level of meaning was being developed which involved what should have happened to alleviate the current problems.

Philip illustrates this point:

Philip: "Enrolment was a total farce. They had asked us to come in a week early because we had so much work to get through and we needed to get on with it. Its claimed and I can in no way dispute it - that all the lecturers were informed but the majority of them did not turn up.

The first day was supposed to be induction, we filled in a form and had a trip round the Library and that was over and done in about 3 hours. We then had three days of lectures by people who were not our lecturers but who suddenly realised that other members of the department should have been in attendance so they came in for them. So of necessity they gave very general introductions - understandably not wanting to go too far for fear of encroaching on colleagues. Looking back it would have been better to have given us some help with study skills because that is a need now reflected in the way we tackle our course work.

There was a great deal of dissatisfaction during that first week and for a week or two afterwards - quite honestly it took a while for it to settle down - even now (November) I think its just under the surface because we are starting to get agitated about the exams coming up.

This may seem a trivial point but when you have been away from study for a long time actually sitting down and writing a 1500 word essay is quite hard work. I was hoping the induction week would deal with a lot of things like that and a lot of us felt the same."



Q. Do you think the staff were not aware of this need?

*"I think they pay - this is not disrespectful - I think they pay lip service to it but that's the difference but it seems that for practical purposes that's as far as it goes. The rest of the time a number of us feel that certain assumptions are made about our ability to cope with what perhaps to them are quite trivial things like essay writing".*

Second interview D.M.S.

The question needing to be asked was could it have been so haphazard or was it that by the second interview Philip was already worrying about the exams - something which I did not pick up at that time and which later became so significant to his progress on the course? Was Philip at this stage actually laying the foundations for blame on which to rationalise his failure in an area he already knew from experience was an individual problem? In my initial interview with Philip before the course began he said he did not want any special help for mature students to separate them out from any other group but now at the end of the first term he was saying he wished there had been special help with essay writing and study skills for those who had been away from study for some time and that has given a different meaning to the whole process of enrolment and induction.

If this puts an element of post hoc rationalisation into comments about enrolment does this detract from what the 'real' issues involved may be? Up to this time the group of people I was interviewing only had expectations of what the Polytechnic would be like. At enrolment the reality began - it did set the scene for each individual who experienced it and gave an indication of what might be to follow in

the teaching and learning situation. Interestingly enough it was often administrative and clerical staff involved in the bureaucratic process not the people who would teach and assess them but the students were not to know this. They were at this stage "outsiders". Marjorie had the help of a fellow student who's husband was a member of staff and who knew how to work the system. Marjorie was able to describe the time as busy and "I suppose it worked okay".

To the rest of the group who did not have such insider help the only information they had was prepared by people who take it all for granted, the people who helped to set the enrolment process up. To new entrants the needs of the system, photocopies, photographs, certificates are part of a new and at present alien language and culture.

*"You went right in at the deep end"*

*"I was so tired I couldn't get back to the evening social activities so I've never been to any since"*

*"I kept waiting for something to happen but it didn't come"*

*"Nothing much happened, I filled in a form and wanted to get on with the course - I wasn't interested in anything else"*

*"It was all rather a grey area. I suppose it showed the difference between someone who has never been a student before - they were lost!"*

*"Nothing happened they just told us what was going to happen for the year - what subjects, what exams - no techniques, or how to study - just thrown in at the deep end".*

Is this the real issue then these students were made to feel inadequate, they were 'in at the deep end'? The 'fact' that they



were unable to interpret the pre enrolment literature, arrived in the wrong place at the wrong time, with the wrong number of photographs put them in a subordinate position. They were no longer adults in control of their lives, they were being 'told what to do'. They were not self-directed individuals from the time they entered the Polytechnic they did not have any say in what was happening to them. Whether or not this was actually the case did not matter - the student perceived it to be true. The number of photographs needed was in the literature, the manifestation of not being able to understand that was the arrival at the desk without one.

Q.           What about things like enrolment etc: Did you find that very administratively orientated?

Sally:       *"The enrolment for the Pre-degree course was centred on a cup of coffee, so you had a cup of coffee, all in one big room and you enrolled as and when there was somebody there to take your enrolment fee. The enrolment for coming into the Poly - abysmal- you stand in queues for one thing then you have to go to find another room and you queue for that. There was nobody to welcome you, nobody the slightest bit interested in you. I'm on the staff/student liaison committee and I'm hoping that for the newcomers in September, we will get something organised for that because it is so appalling. I don't see that it is necessary for people to feel so alienated on the first week in. You are so excited about it all and you come in and you're met with this 'damp flannel' in your face".*

Q.           Do you think this enrolment procedure is acting as a barrier to mature students coming in because it takes them straight back to memories of school?

Sally:       *"They feel intimidated yes, that's true, I find that all the things I've said about seminars and that, definitely does not apply to the first week, because you are finding your feet and you have to be made to feel like a student, that you are one of 'them' instead of one of 'us'. On the Pre-degree course that wasn't the case we were all 'us'.*

Sally; Third year Combined Studies Student, during pilot project:-

There is a problem from the point of view of the staff who set up and

administer enrolment here or anywhere else with respect to all new students which may be relevant here. The notes for guidance are written by those who know the system which can cause some difficulties but at the same time it is difficult to know what to take for granted about the capabilities of those reading the notes. The same might apply to study skills help, examination preparation or practical details about the working environment of the polytechnic campus. It could seem that a point is reached when staff ask themselves - just what do mature students want? Do they want to be treated as self-directed adult learners or do they want to be instructed in the ways of the institution?

That though is not a fair question in the context of what is actually happening at the time of enrolment and to link that process with the content of the curriculum misses an important point. The two issues are related though at an ideological level which is at the heart of this research. It is also the point being made by Podeshi (1987) and Yonge (1985) about adulthood being viewed phenomenologically - as a way of being human. Mature students, when entering an unknown situation, may be willing to submit themselves to practical situations which involve them being given detailed instructions on how to fulfil certain obligations. This does not mean that they become children again by, at that moment in time, giving in to the authority of the situation. However, once that has moved into another scenario the condition of dependancy is over and the relationship no longer holds. The providers of education may need to be aware of the needs of adults in these different situations and also that because of their experiences they can evaluate them differently. Something which may



not apply to children in a school situation.

**Through the Institution: The First Term:**

Teaching on all courses had begun at the Polytechnic by the first week in October. Although I had seen many of the group around the different buildings I did not start the second round of interviews until the middle of November to give the students time to settle in and take stock of what it was like to be in full-time study. I knew by that stage that two of my sample had not taken up their places and despite two letters there was no response from the 26 year old on the Engineering course (as his comments to me during our first interview indicated his lack of interest and his wish not to be treated as a mature returner this was no real surprise. He was still a student on the course though).

The rest of the group were happy to see me, some of them coming considerable distances over to where I was located to do the interview and even those who found it difficult to sort out a mutual time did manage it in the end. Mavis, who was the last of the first round being the last of the second round of interviews which didn't take place until the second week of February, but all the others I was able to talk to before Christmas. Apart from Brian and Alison, I saw them all at some venue in the Polytechnic.

If the overall feeling after the first round was one of apprehension but excitement at starting a course of higher education and the beginning of doing something they had always wanted to do for

themselves the feeling I had after the second round was of a group of people in difficulty, by no means confident in themselves or in the decision they had made to come to the Polytechnic. In fact if I previously had the impression from our first interview that some form of change had been the catalyst for their return to study I felt that at this time in the first term they seemed to be reaching a crisis because of having done so and I was greatly concerned how many would make it to the end of the year. Many of the interviews could easily have turned into a counselling session and indeed when the tape recorder was switched off and the "research" seemed to be over most wanted to stay on and talk. In some cases I felt that I needed to help by providing contacts with the student counsellor, the personal tutor or in one case to join me in a project to produce an audio tape for mature students interested in returning to study at the Polytechnic.

There was no doubt of a situation becoming apparent that I was more than a 'researcher doing a project' to this group (Kuhn 1962) and because of the frequency with which we met around the Polytechnic it felt that I had done more than two interviews for this research. This is probably also the perception of the students who in some cases were prepared to share so much personal information with me during the second interview and why in return I also felt some responsibility towards them.



## **The Realities of Returning to Study - The Initial Problems**

The causes of the problems that emerged during the second interviews fell into two categories, situations arising in life outside the Polytechnic - family, health, finance for example and the organization of the academic work - level, amount of work, interaction with staff and students inside the institution. With the interaction between these two areas being most important. It became apparent, from information given in an earlier section, that many of the group had been involved in study before so that this interaction should have been no surprise to them but now for the first time - it was full-time and there had been no preparation for that reality. It seemed that in this first term the practical needs of the course had to be met but the demands of life outside the Polytechnic went on regardless. Any thoughts of proving anything to oneself or anyone else for that matter seemed to be lost in issues of keeping awake or fit to walk between buildings.

Ken:       *"I know I'm a bit irritable but I'm so tired, that's a big part of it"*

Second interview H.N.D. Building

For Kate the two areas were so closely interwoven that in her stream of conversation she found it difficult to differentiate the two.

Kate: "I came here with bags of confidence and I feel that's really been undermined in lots of different ways. I felt really insecure in as much, after the first week feeling that I wasn't happy here. I wasn't enjoying any part of it. It was like a trial, so much to take in and I wasn't part of it and I wasn't really relating to any of the other people in the group".

"We've been having a kitchen extension built at home, we've been without a kitchen for three weeks now so I don't know if you can quickly realise what its like, no hot water, no central heating on, washing dishes in the basin upstairs, getting friends to do the washing or going to the launderette, all the problems that entails. Also my kitchen things are in the dining room, with no water of course so my dining table is in the lounge so you've got to work in a room where there are two children wanting to do homework and it would cause an uproar to want to have the television OFF. My husband will say "Come on and sit in here where its warm and get on with this" and expect you to do it with the television on. Well I'm not capable of doing that. I would like to be able to sit in there in silence. Constant interruptions and problems, daughters coming in or not coming in so I feel totally frustrated. For most subjects we have to have the first piece of written work in and the history essay to be in last Friday which I was really at the last minute in doing. I go home knowing and wanting to get on with it, thinking that as soon as I get in I'll do this and if I get in at half past three most days its, I've counted up to six hours later before I can say "right, now I'm ready to sit down" - once all the problems have been sorted out and then its absolute sheer frustration thinking I wanted to do this then and now I'm so tired and I'm panicking now and I can't think straight".

#### Second interview Applied Social Studies

For Kate, at this time, life at home and life at the Polytechnic were totally interwoven and yet she had so much wanted to be a student and had found her one night a week at the Pre-degree an escape from home and a relaxation.

Alan too, full of optimism from his two nights a week on the Open College course had problems.



Alan: "I think for the first four weeks I kept getting it wrong. I turned up here at 11.0'clock according to my timetable but I should have been in the library at 10 o'clock. I turned up one day at 10 o'clock and I wasn't due in until 1 o'clock. It's just down to me getting used to reading the timetable.

Maybe some of the gloss has gone. I know I'm getting into my work getting into a routine and I have actually "arrived". I was anticipating this for some three years now apart from being obviously worried about it. I was also very excited about it, well now its here, its happening and I'm having to knuckle down and get on with it. I think some of the excitement has gone out of it, I think that's perfectly normal, you've got to settle down to your work and get on with it".

#### Second interview Diploma in Social Studies

Janet: "I'm just beginning now (December) to feel that I know what I'm doing. Like everything else its new and you have to work your way into it. Although I had been to Open College I was prepared for what was going to happen but this is a different approach again and you have just got to work your way into it and not panic too much and think that I can't understand this, I'm not giving up after the first few weeks, you've got to persevere".

#### Second interview B.A. Applied Studies

Nancy: "I know I don't have all the parties and the fun and games and inter-relationships going on between the girls and the boys which I suppose distracts them. On the other hand they can say 'to hell' with everything and just think about what they are doing and believe me when you've got a project and you're trying to think up an idea you do need to give your whole attention to it. They don't have the responsibilities that we do as older people with husbands and children and things to look after. I do find it difficult switching all that off and concentrating on what one is doing here".

#### Second interview Foundation Art

John: "I was worried about not doing well at all at the beginning because I think if I hadn't done well to start with - its a very pressurised environment - I tended to fluctuate, not in the work but in the sort of thing - I seem to be getting very moody and irritable. One minute I can be alright and the next minute I'm sort of really bad".

"I keep telling myself I should relax a bit but I don't

seem to be able to do it. I keep going. It's a twenty four hour thing, Its a very isolated environment being at college. I find that I go through weeks and haven't a clue what's going on in the outside world whereas before I was very aware. I don't watch T.V. I don't read papers, listen to the radio, I don't have time any more".

#### Second interview B.A. Graphic Design

For adults returning to study there is not only the problem of coping with the work and a new environment, but also fitting these into what may be already busy lives. This is not to deny that students of a conventional age do not also have problems, as Nancy mentioned above. However, for the adult who may, as in Kate's case, be the lynch pin of the family, there is a difficulty of combining life inside and outside the Polytechnic. There was also the feeling of a lack of preparation for full-time study. A course one or two nights a week had been possible, a full-time programme was difficult and necessitated a reorganization on a major scale.



## Combining Study with life outside the Polytechnic

It seemed that no amount of preparation at night school, Open College or Pre-degree set the scene for what would be involved in full-time study which suggests that institutions may need to provide some full-time preparatory courses. In fact it was, as Schutz's stranger theory suggested, necessary for the students to come to this realization themselves before they were able to start to deal with the problems of home and Polytechnic.

Alison: *"I think I'm finding it hard work, a lot of the time I seem to have a constant battle to get the work done. I think its just time - if I had more time to work".*

Q. What is stopping you doing the work?

Alison: *"Just so much else to do besides at home. If I had a daily for instance to come in and do all my cleaning and I never had to bother about that then I would have more time and also I've got to allot time to the children, a lot of time helping (her daughter) with her homework. I've always done that with all of them ..... My husband's girls come at the weekend and they want me to help them. So its that sort of thing, domestic responsibilities I think are probably time consuming".*

## Second interview B.A. Business Studies

Mavis: *"Sometimes the family is helpful then at other times, when I need them to be they are not. I think they forget that I'm at college and they leave something undone at home and I go back and I play hell. I say "Why didn't you do so and so you knew I would be back late tonight?"*

I'm so much part of the home that I'm always there when they need me so that I think they just take it for granted that you will always fit in. I've always fitted in - all my life - any activities with the family and home and I think if you deviate a little from that then they get bothered about it.

On some evenings I would like to stay on at the Library and I can't. I can't fit both in so I go home and do extra study at night when they are all in bed.

They want me more at home. They miss me being at home because I was always there for them - although when I was at work full-time they fitted around me very well then. I think they accepted that I was out of the house from such a time to such a time and I was working, but Polytechnic is different because I'm going at all different times and coming home at different times".

Q. Why do they think it is different?

Mavis: "I think its like my husband once said, its not something you really have to do, its something you want to do and I think that there is something in that really. Its something like when you go out to work you have to be there between 9 and 5 or you won't have a job, but Poly seems to be different to them. They think I can fit it in any time - it doesn't matter, two hours here, three hours there. Come home and I can carry on life at home then pick up the threads again. I'm fitting it in now but at the beginning I had to juggle around a bit. I think that now I'm settling more into it".

Second interview L.L.B.

This feeling that "study is not a normal legitimate activity for adults" was at the root of Clive's 'difficulty' in the first term too. He was really enjoying his course but the animosity at home was causing him considerable stress - stress which in fact built up over the year and in Clive's case may have contributed to another heart attack just before the end of the first year exams.

Clive was not alone in meeting this opposition though as I illustrated earlier as a barrier to returning to study.



Clive: "My wife is not interested, not a bit. Her view is its great for you, you're doing something you enjoy. Sometimes I may be up until 1 o'clock writing something and I will say that I've really got to get this done, or sometimes I will come home and say "I've had a hard day today" and she says "Well you chose it" and if I say I'm tired she'll say "you're doing something you enjoy". so there is a lot of resentment at home and really I could do without it.

I enjoy being here. You see what I say to her is if she says the grass needs cutting. I say look I've got this to do and its got to be in tomorrow. She says "What benefit do I get from that, its something you enjoy". To me its like a job. I get a grant, its full-time and I say to her that she accepted it when I worked at the office that I had certain commitments but she says - Yes but you enjoy doing this".

Q. Did she think that you didn't enjoy your work?

Clive: Yes. Part of the job I did enjoy, part I didn't. I think the fact that I'm enjoying this so much devalues it. Work if you don't like it is alright but this is rather like going to the cinema or another form of entertainment. That's how she sees it. She just sees it as useless at my age. Its a waste of time, it is for young people.

There has to be an end product. Having chosen psychology as well, its quote 'an odd subject' normal people don't behave like this. Why can't you be normal like other men, none of my friends' husbands would be reading books like this"

#### Second interview BSc Psychology

Not only was it an individual realization of the nature of the problem of fitting study and responsibilities outside it together, it also required the help and support of significant others. At this early stage those significant others were still outside the Polytechnic, husbands and wives, children and friends and there was a tendency to see problems within the home group context as Kate, Mavis and Clive above have illustrated.

As time went on the peer group within the Polytechnic became more

significant as a source of help and support. As the knowledge about the workings of the Polytechnic increased so did the ability to cope with the problems in terms of what was available in the educational context. Tutors, Counsellors and meetings with fellow students were used more frequently to develop a way to combine study with life outside the Polytechnic.

Brian's comments summarize the feelings of many who, by the end of the first year, felt they would want to share their experiences to help others.

Brian: "I was having problems with the course and went to see my personal tutor and all he did was ring up the man who had lectured me and say this guy's having problems which is something I could have done myself. I just wanted to talk to someone to see what my options were, a way out and then make my own decisions. Perhaps he's never been in my position. Perhaps he can't see it from my point of view, that might be his failing, he might be perfectly alright if he'd had the experience.

I reckon I could be of more help to somebody because I've been through it myself."

" ... I went to see (a second year student) because she said to me if you're having problems come and see me. So I said I am having difficulties and she found me an exam paper. She said "look, I did my exams in a cupboard" ... it was comical, her experience was far worse than the experience I was having. She thought she'd missed the exams and in the end she convinced me that all I needed to do was do my work and then sit the exam.

And I found going to that exam I was the only person within six feet of me who wasn't nervous, purely because of what she'd said. I just needed to hear those words because in the back of my mind I probably felt it myself but it just convinced me."

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies



## Developing a Coping Strategy

It was with this development of a way of coping with life inside and outside the Polytechnic in mind that I decided to get the group to reflect on these issues in the third round of conversations.

This group of students had been under a considerable amount of pressure at the time of our second interview due to the internal and external demands on their time. Significantly they did not easily talk about the impact of these pressures as a holistic problem during the taped part of the interview but often after the tape recorder was turned off our conversations continued for some time at a more personal level. Kate for example told me afterwards how it made her stop and think about how much she did need to talk to someone, and, by an appointment I made with a personal tutor, Ken was able to get extra help with a subject on his course.

When the third interviews showed me that this 'crisis period', which is illustrated in a moment, had obviously passed, or at least the group had come through it, I wanted to find out how it had happened, what had changed, did they in fact remember this first term? However I did not want to lead the discussion by saying "remember last time when you had such and such a problem how did it resolve etc"? So I asked each of them "Was there a time when you felt like dropping out of the course"? The answers did often go back to the end of the first term beginning of the second and produced almost universally in the group a "coping strategy" - a way of being able to carry on - maybe on different terms - but as the whole group made it to the end of the first year and those who are following courses longer than a year are

still there - it obviously worked. But it raises questions about the reality of returning to education, the expectations of the individuals in interaction with the expectations of the institution and the reality of what was possible as a mature student. That is not to say that students of the conventional age do not reach similar situations but as so many of my group had considered their reasons for wanting to study in personal satisfaction terms rather than in instrumental terms it is useful to consider how this decision to 'change' was made and what it says about higher education and the nature of the institution.

Apart from Colin who said he was happy all the way through - although he did have to change courses because he was not able to cope with the work and Clive who was 'determined' to do the course despite his wife (who at one stage threw all his books into the garden and his word-processor on his bed) and who suffered a heart attack at the end of the year, all the others described a time when they felt they reached a moment of decision.

*"At the beginning of the second term things got out of hand, I got very depressed" - Nancy.*

*"At the end of the first term I got in control" - Barbara.*

*"After Easter things got sorted out and in the summer were really different" - Alison.*

*"I was doing too much at Christmas and made myself ill". - Mavis.*

*"I failed the Christmas exams, I should have known then something was wrong and seen a counsellor by the time of the end of year exams I was losing control" - Philip.*

*"I never felt I had any control over what was happening " - Ken.*

*"Right up to Christmas I felt in conflict with myself - alienated from what I had been taught. Every week I thought of dropping out I'd had enough of working all the time, of not going out, of feeling guilty if I stopped. I felt like I had been dropped in at the deep end" - Brian.*



"Its been one long feeling I wasn't in control" - Kate.

"Everybody gets to the point of not seeing a way forward just before Christmas: There had been so much theory and no feedback from essays" - Janet.

"It took until Christmas because of nerves and lack of confidence, a complete lack of confidence in my own ability" - Marjorie.

"Didn't feel at home until after Christmas and felt like giving up in November because of not having my grant and the new environment. I'm conservative by nature and don't like change, ironically those who don't like them make big ones" - Thomas.

All these comments illustrate the feeling of a crisis period - a time when they were not in control of what was happening. Certainly there was not an indication of them being self-directed learners.

Apart from Ken however, for most of the group, the end of the first term brought a significant change. This might, on the surface, have been due to the Christmas holiday and two or three weeks without the pressure of work at the Polytechnic, but even when term resumed the crisis did not return. The explanation seemed to lie elsewhere.

Brian sums this up and it is further illustrated by Alan and David.

(David was not part of the original sample but had been a mature student at the Polytechnic. He had just graduated with First Class Honours and was keen to discuss his experiences with me. I have used similar students throughout the research, some of whom I have been in contact with since the pilot for this research.)

Q. What happened at Christmas that changed it all?

Brian: "I got smarter. I thought to myself now this is not bad. I got my essays back and I got 70s so it hadn't been wasted. I'd literally gone to town with everything I'd done and tried my best and I succeeded. The feedback came after Christmas".

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

Alan: "It came probably about February and March this year when they were starting to push us for essays and I knew I was already late and I had developed an argument and I think at the time I had bitten off more than I could chew. I knew what I wanted to say but I couldn't find the research material. I sat there sometimes in the Library and thought Oh God, what I'd give to be a plumber again, just no responsibility, just go to work, do your graft, pick up your wages, you're making life so complicated for yourself.

Q. Tell me what you felt like at that time?

Alan: "I saw lots of people on my placements suffering from very real anxiety and I don't say for a moment I was as bad as them but I did feel on a couple of occasions something that was out of control in my mind. I'd reached anxiety levels that had become obvious to my tutor, to my friends. Its not just like being worried its a difficult feeling to describe these anxieties but you think or you are of the belief that things are not going to come right, that you are not actually getting anywhere but the thing is that its a burden and its weighing you down and its frightening you because your whole career rests on you getting this piece of work in and passed. To fail it is to fail your course, you are out, you are finished".

Q. So what did you do?

Alan: "It was a horrible feeling. I tried to get in touch with my colleagues but I couldn't get in touch with anyone. I rang a friend up who is a social worker.....we went to the pub and I had half a dozen pints and a good chat. I felt better initially, whether it was the pints or the chat but I didn't have this over-powering anxiety when I went home but I was still very worried but with a new resolve for the following day".

Q. Didn't you think of talking to someone at the Polytechnic, what about the student counsellors?

Alan: "Well no I felt that I could go if things really got bad, I felt I could go to my tutor anyway but also I felt, I kept telling myself that if you cannot cope with this sort of



anxiety and pressure you will never cope as a social worker so get a grip and that's the way I was talking to myself. I'm not going to cope with other peoples problems and situations that have gone wrong if I can't deal with my own adequately so its a question of keeping a grip on myself and talking to a friend.

Q. So you got out of it?

Alan: "Yes I got my first piece of work back and I got 64% and that sort of tended to go phew - that's okay. Once you get one under you belt, I wouldn't say its easier, people say it gets easier as you go on but it doesn't, I think that you are more able to cope with that sort of pressure, you also become more familiar with things like to find research material in the library, when you first start you can spend hours just looking for one article to substantiate an argument or send you off in a direction, now I can walk around the library and I can virtually go to anything I want".

Q. But you did have good preparation at the Open College?

Alan: "A bit of panic set in and I just started writing. I had to have feedback. I had to see something for my efforts".

#### Third interview Diploma in Social Studies

David too described a low point during his course when he was worried and described how he felt he had to devote 100% effort to everything he did - until he developed a coping strategy.

David: I'm no expert because its difficult to judge across institutions just what workload is but I had my head down all the time and I couldn't keep up, you know, I was going home and working until nine and ten o'clock at night seven days a week and I couldn't keep up".

Q. So at that stage you felt that you had had enough, that you just couldn't cope with it?

David: "Yes it was piled on top, as I say it was already a big workload, in seminars we had to do, it ended up we had to do about two a term each out of different subjects, it wasn't big, big is not the right word, it was over the top, the workload was over the top".

Q. So what did you do to resolve this?

David: "Just kept going".

Q. What happened at home, were you a different person at home, do you feel that you.....?

David: "Yes I threw a few wobblies at home when I felt that I couldn't cope any more with this that and the other, I sound blase about it now but it was bad at the time. We haven't got any children. My wife was really understanding because of her OU studies and her experiences but it did take it out of me but I think I took it a lot more..... I think that is as well on the type of person that I am, I'm a natural worrier....."

Q. Did you talk to anybody about it, did you go to the Counselling Service or.....?

David: "No I didn't I tried by practical means to do something about it, first of all by approaching the subjects, taking it up through the Staff/Student Liaison Committee, the Combined Studies Board but it came to a blank and I thought well, go to the Counselling, what can the counselling do, I was more interested in what the practical implications might be because I thought well what can the counselling do, make you take time out, you've still got to do the work so then I approached it with a more instrumental view, the workload is high, that doesn't matter a lot and I found out things that didn't matter that much and....."

Q. Such as what?

David: "Contextual Studies but ironically I scored the highest marks in... I thought well take the approach that Contextual Studies doesn't matter, do this do that and the other but I found I couldn't do that, some students said they can write a 50% essay and then the next week come up with a 72% and I never believed them because I can't because everything I did I did with the same approach, every subject I took I had the same approach to and the same approach was....the approach was that I pushed myself it wasn't anyone pushing me it was my internal motor that drove me on I couldn't stop it, I couldn't sort of say I'll take it easy on this one I'll just float through it because I ended up knocking my head against a wall metaphorically speaking....."

Q. So when you say you coped with it by looking at things that didn't matter as much, in actual fact then you couldn't do that?

David: "Right, that was the strategy it almost made me feel better by thinking ah well now I've got a coping strategy for this I can.....that's the way they get round it, the way they get round the workload, so that made me feel marginally better but when I actually got into it I still did the



same, I just went at it with the same determination I suppose. The only thing I did do in the end which I worried intensely about at the time, I took a holiday, a weeks holiday which was during term time which my code never allows me to do, I thought well it wasn't on to go in term time but I did and I took a skiing holiday, I took an essay with me on the skiing holiday and I bored everybody about this essay all week, I had to sort of go through all the anxiety before I could actually get to a position where I didn't care any more and when I got to that position I just took a week off and as soon as I took a week off different lecturers were ringing up to see if I was alright because I looked like throwing a wobble two weeks before and I took that week off, I didn't miss much, I did an essay I got a high mark for it..... only when I had done it I thought I will do it in year two because year two only counts for two ninths and it's more important to get all these things straight by the time you get to year three and so I did but I found it difficult.... other people didn't seem to have that many problems but I think that's only a surface thing".

Q. Do you actually think that at the end of that two weeks off you were somehow different, had you changed your approach to the Poly or changed your perspective on you as an individual?

David: "I think I had changed the approach to.... only slightly but it was a significant change in that I didn't.... I felt the heat had been taken off, I knew that I still had to get through x amount of work and there I had done it, I had the week off and the world hadn't come to an end which is what I thought it would do if I did take a week off but it didn't, nothing seemed to matter, it went on, no problem. I was under the impression that I had to study everything because something might come up in the exam and then I started taking a more instrumental approach thinking I've got to survive this, this is taking its toll on me physically and mentally and my family life, you are going home and snapping at your partner and stuff like this, this is not what its all about so I started then backing off and I think I was worse in year one, I went marginally better in year two and in year three I was much better, that's my wife's opinion.

Q. Did you discuss this ever with the staff?

David: "Oh yes".

Q. They were aware of this approach?

David: "Yes but I wouldn't say as aware as perhaps they might be because you did come up against this same thing where they felt.....let me put it this way.....I never got the feeling from the staff that they had actually realised what its like to do three subjects".

These were three illustrations of what was a very general comment made by my sample. It is worth reflecting that, at the outset, many of this group were at pains to say that they were doing their courses for themselves, not to prove anything to anyone else. Nor did they care, they said, about what anyone thought about why they were doing it or how well they did or didn't do.

What was becoming clear was that there needed to be a change of attitude of how they saw themselves in relation to their performance as students. It was as if they had to stand back and see what it was possible to achieve realistically within their lives as they were now not what they might have achieved if things had been different. This may be post hoc rationalization but it was the reality and once having reached this state - be it equilibrium or homeostasis it was then possible to move on to the next stage.

I listened to David addressing a new group of Pre-degree students when he said:

*"You will be alright if you keep the problems under your control."*

I wondered then how far it was possible to help with the developing of a coping strategy or whether it is something which can only come with experience.



## **The Return of Coursework - A Yardstick by which to Measure Performance within the New Environment**

It would seem though that, for most, the resolution of the problems of the first term were made in relation to the assessment of performance of course work and some measure of evaluation of their worth as a student. Clearly then there was a 'need' for their performance to be validated and legitimised in socially acceptable terms even though this involved a great deal of personal anguish in many cases. As a following section will show this group of students were well aware that those who were doing the assessment of their work were far from objective but they were willing to subject themselves to such measurement as was necessary within their institution to be able to weigh up where they saw themselves in it.

This is in contrast to the feelings of alienation and lack of individuality at the time of enrolment but is a socially constructed fact of life well documented by people like Berger (1966) in terms of societal explanation and Mead (1934) in terms of the self. So the results of essays within Blumer's context of symbolic interaction are important - not because they say anything as such but because they signify a hierarchy in which individuals locate themselves and behave accordingly (Jarvis 1985). So when Alan says "I got 64% - phew that's okay" or Brian "I got 70% so it hasn't been wasted" it is a measure of how they see themselves within this institution and its ideological framework but also within how such grades reflect the 'survival of the fittest' ideology of our society as a whole.

Brian:       *"So much of it was feedback, was due solely to feedback and whilst its quite alright to be told don't worry you're doing alright, don't panic, getting those marks back,*

*seeing your work analysed by someone who is trained to look at your work critically - it puts some sort of pointer to the direction you are going"*

### Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

By getting some work back and for the first time being measured in the 'role of a student' this group had made not only a status change but also had a way of seeing themselves in relation to other students in the group. Up until this time their status was still in terms of their lives outside the Polytechnic, wives, mothers, husband, employees for example and, as the problems showed during that first term, these situations were being undermined by now having to play new roles within the requirements of the Polytechnic. These students were now at their 'marginal positions.' Because of the pressures from their coursework they were no longer able to perceive themselves as being as successful as they used to be in their roles outside the Polytechnic. Yet up to now they had no benchmarks against which to evaluate their performances in their new roles, when the essays began to come back, they had different points of reference. They were now able to compare themselves to the rest of this new group, as a student, and nothing succeeds like success. It does raise questions about Knowles' concept of self direction though in terms of the student's experiences before returning to study as these are not the criteria used by those concerned with education as legitimate terms on which to measure worth and so were not those used by the group now that they are students within an institution of higher education.

What also becomes problematic is the way in which this success or failure in academic terms becomes part of the perception "of the self"



of these individuals and becomes the only measure of performance.

Alan's comment - "its weighing you down, its frightening you because your whole career rests on you getting this piece of work in and passed. To fail is to fail your course, you are out, you are finished", illustrates the finding of such researchers as Belbin and Belbin (1972) with adults returning to training and Murgatroyde with Open University students and examination stress and performance.

To succeed is to pass the course to be a better person; to fail is not just the course or exam but to fail as an individual.

Mohammed's experiences give illustration to this need for measuring the self within the group and on common ground.

Mohammed: "Before (my essay came back) I did not know whether I was doing right or not, then the essay went in, it was passed, the tutors had seen that and they were satisfied then it gave me more encouragement about what I was doing well and then I tried to do better and I knew the standard they wanted. There was no difficulty, I could cope with it.

Q. Did you think about yourself differently after that?

Mohammed: "In some ways yes, before it was not there. I felt more confident, the same thing happened on the placement, before starting the placement I was very worried really how I would go on meeting people and seeing clients or dealing with them but once I started it all went along very well and the tutor there was very helpful, so the placement was very enjoyable".

Q. Was it a general group feeling, do you think you all reacted differently?

Mohammed: "Yes, I think before that all the students worried so once we started, as it went along, all the student got more confident, and the group began to help each other".

Third interview Diploma in Social Work

There may be important implications here for changes in perception of the role and value of coursework and the timing of initial feedback. These will be referred to later in the conclusion. The implications would seem to be that mature students put a very high emphasis on knowing how well they are doing. This is not only in terms of the academic material but also, and this is what may be overlooked by staff, with how they are coping with their change of status to become insiders into a new and complex culture.

### **The Early Experiences of the Reality of the Teaching Learning Situation**

The group had all been on courses for at least six weeks by the time I saw them at the second interview so that as well as the problems of orientating themselves with respect to family, background, or financial situations they had time to take stock of what was happening within the organization of the institution itself. For the people I saw at the beginning of this series there was a shorter time for reflection about the reality of the return to study in this respect and because of that it was an area to be returned to when we met the third time but here specifically I did ask about the "classroom" situation and how it differed, if at all, to expectations.

The first point which needs to be made concerns where the expectations derived from. As was indicated in the first part of this chapter the research which shows the previous educational experience profile of mature students in general was well indicated in this group and expectations were not based on school experience as might have been



expected would be the case.

I have earlier shown the expectations which had existed for the people who had experienced education since school, now it became important to look at the reality. It needs to be placed though within the context of what the staff who teach at the Polytechnic think the expectations of the mature students will be. If, for example, the members of staff have the understanding that these students will be comparing this new learning situation to the last one they were in - which they presume to be school - then this could have different implications for the way in which the staff react to the group than if they were aware of the reality of the recent experience.

The first experience of returning to study at the Polytechnic is usually that of enrolment. This may have already upset the expectations of those mature students who have recently experienced supportive teaching environments. They then arrive at the first academic sessions unclear about what to expect and unsure how to behave. They may thus have to begin by 'testing the water', seeing what the tutor expects, evaluating the relationships. Janet had studied with the Open College of the North West and very much enjoyed the experience. Here she tells of her first few weeks at the Polytechnic:

Janet: *"It's not the same in each subject area, that's why it's so confusing. Every seminar leader seems to have a different view of what they expect from a seminar, and you can talk to a person doing the same subject in another group and it's completely different but you are supposed to be doing the same subject. It's all very confusing and especially when you have a Study Skills Programme which is supposed to tell you how all these things work and one of them is on seminars*

and you know quite well that seminars don't work that way because each seminar leader has their own view of what they want to do in those seminars."

"... you've got such a wide variety, it is not uniform, every subject is approached in a different manner which takes some getting used to, but once you get over the first three or four weeks and you realise exactly what they are wanting it begins to slot into place and you can then build your work around what each particular individual wants."

Q. "So, in actual fact you are conforming to what the staff want? You are not having any influence over what happens really is that right?"

Janet: "We thought there would be a set pattern to everything which would have helped us to cope with the work really, if you know exactly what's going to happen each day when you went in. Instead of which it takes us four or five weeks to get into everybody elses planning. It doesn't help when it's thirty years since you went to school and you come to all this coming in, you could do without this as well, especially when it's new subjects, some of which you know nothing about at all and you haven't really got much to contribute to the seminar in the first place."

Second interview B. A. Applied Social Studies

The question which needs to be asked here concerns the role of the teaching staff and whether or not they are aware of these problems of adapting to their individual styles. Even if they were aware of the most recent experiences which may have broken the adult student away from the school tradition if there is not an understanding of what happened during the enrolment process they are unlikely to identify with the problems for the students.

As the history of this institution has shown, and often as the individual backgrounds of the staff themselves are concerned, the teaching/learning situations encountered by the students are more likely to be within a paternalistic and often didactic framework. It



ought to be pointed out though that for staff it is an initial encounter too, so that they are also taking stock of the situation. However, within the 'power structure' involved in a teaching/learning scenario the staff are usually able to exert the strongest influence and so set the scene.

In terms of the interaction of the situation in the Polytechnic this scenario may be further reinforced by the layout of the rooms and even the expectations of the non-teaching staff so that early, maybe misguided, interpretations of the situation may then be hard to change. (Goffman 1971).

Philip had noticed this influence and felt it devalued what was supposed to be a postgraduate level course.

Philip: "That is the keyword - it feels like a classroom. That for me is the biggest single disappointment - that we are still operating from a classroom structure. Now that's not the fault of the majority of lecturers who would wish it to be otherwise - its just all sorts of practical reasons. The majority of them have indicated quite clearly that they don't really like standing and delivering lectures and giving the straight one to one answer thing. The majority of lecturers I think are more happy in facilitating group discussion .... we have on a number of occasions rearranged the desks into, if you like, more of a committee structure and they feel much happier".

Q. Well what is to stop them staying like that?

Philip: "Principally because its a classroom structure and you've got people in rows and the odd thing is the power lies with the caretakers and cleaners, it doesn't actually lie with the Directorate very much. The cleaners made it very clear that (one of the building) is an out post on its own out there and it doesn't have its own cleaning force and if we move the desks we will have to requisition staff to put them back again".

Q. But why do they have to be moved back?

Philip: "Because different groups use the room and different staff

have different ways of doing things and we don't have a room of our own for a post graduate course. Its something again that the course leader is very upset about and takes to quite a high level but with no - the same feeling does not come from the Directorate obviously".

Q. Do you feel that this is inhibiting what actually happens in the group?

Philip: "Yes it does inhibit because if you happen to be sitting at the back of the group and a great deal of interactive or interpersonal skills, discussion, dialogue or whatever is conducted on a non-verbal basis and you can't actually pick up those ones, if all you can see is the back of someone's head. Also you tend to address questions to the lecturer because he or she happens to be standing at the front. So in terms of our lesson this morning there is teaching territory at the front of the class and the student territory in the other two thirds and that is not satisfactory for a post-graduate (management) course.

Second interview D.M.S. Student

Alan was also an ex Open College student keen to build on that positive experience. I asked him what happened in the classroom remembering how he talked about give and take, not bothering about feeling foolish asking questions and how approachable his Open College tutors were.

Alan: "Its very much down to the individual tutors and if they can come down to earth long enough to recognise that we are there - some of them are in an academic cuckoo land. It's as if they have got a face there and they are talking away, its almost as if they were in another world.

Its just that you feel that you are sat there and you are listening and they are talking on and on and on and its all very interesting stuff and what have you but you sort of wonder about just how close you could actually get to them. They make all these noises when you start the Polytechnic - we will always be here, you can come and see me in my room, I will be available when you have a problem and you don't understand. In reality trying to get anywhere near them is something else, they are really elusive animals, they are really hard to get at.



Q. Have you tried?

Alan: "Yes you can actually say hello to somebody in the corridor and because they are away with a mixer they walk past you -

Q. So you don't feel there is repartee between you and the staff then?

Alan: "I think its largely down to me. I came from a good college, the Open College, where I got my education and the tutors there were always available, they seemed to be 'gettable'. I could go along to one of my tutors and there was a response in their face, a recognition in their eyes, somehow because its much higher education they seem secluded somehow".

#### Second interview Diploma in Social Work

This is the point I made earlier about the staff also needing to evaluate their positions. Maybe they need to have 'role distance' to give them credibility within an academic context. However, as will be shown in a later section, this was something that my sample did notice and which they were willing to spell out as a disappointment of their studies in higher education.

This comment from Alan, about the relationships with staff says a great deal in terms of my earlier points from the work of people like G.H. Mead that he himself is unsure of his position in this new situation. In Schutz's terms again he is still the outsider and he had at that stage no feedback as yet to let him know how he was getting on. He was at home in his Open College group - could read the non-verbal as well as the verbal clues here he is unsure of his status in the group and with the staff. Much of this second interview with Alan was in very aggressive tones about happenings in the group between people he did not like and could not get on with. It was obviously still a time of exploration at a personal, interpersonal and

institutional level (Lam 1982) and his comments about tutorial discussions illustrate this.

Alan: "I think that (discussion in tutorials) largely depends on how much you put into it yourself. There are some tutorials that go on and although there is a group there the actual tutorial is happening between five or six people and it largely depends on your ability to overcome any shyness or awkwardness in a group situation. I usually don't have much of a problem unless I make a mistake. I was using a quote the other day and I got it half wrong and I felt like crawling into the ground - swallow me up - From that moment on I never said another word in that lecture".

Q. What did the lecturer say?

Alan: "Nothing, it was purely me being embarrassed, there was no comeback from the tutor or anything like that, I was never made to look foolish or anything. I just made a mistake in my quotation and after that I just felt my face going redder and redder and I thought that's it and just shut up from then on. I'm not sure I've put my finger on it I think maybe its down to them being extremely academic people".

#### Second interview Diploma in Social Studies

A few days after having this conversation with Alan, and having some concern about the way he was perceiving difficulties with the course and to some extent disappointments in what he felt it offered, I happened to sit along side the person he had told me was his personal tutor. Not wanting to betray any confidences I asked if perhaps I could have a word about Alan sometime, that he was part of my research sample as the course leader would know, and if Alan agreed there were one or two points I would like to have clarified - I was thinking particularly about one rather unpleasant incident Alan had referred to.



The response I got although negative to any request to discuss anything specific, was informative with references to my comments about Alan's need for some feed-back as to his performance. His tutor's perception of how he was doing on the course was very positive, that he was a 'good student', well thought of, well integrated. The important thing though was that this had not yet been part of the process of the course to feed the information back to the student, who probably would not ask directly "How am I doing"? but who would have been receptive to non-verbal reinforcement in the way he felt it was given at the Open College.

Janet felt this also as the following quote illustrates:

*"I think when you don't know anything you've got to have more lead from your tutors. When you get into the subjects obviously you can offer more then. At the moment the staff are so well versed whereas when we take the main part they will guide us through it."*

These experiences would seem to indicate the importance of the early interactions between staff and students and the social processes which are involved in arriving at a working relationship.

They may illustrate the problem of dividing pedagogy and andragogy because the difference is not being determined by age or self direction of the student but by a dependence on the 'teacher' to give guidance with a new body of knowledge about which previous experience outside their current courses gives them no help. This does not, however, mean that in all other respects they do not wish to be treated as adults.

Testing the reality against recent educational experiences - the problems of adjustment.

Despite Janet's problems of adjusting to the new situations she was still pleased that she had become a full-time student but in her comparison with her new role and that of the Open College she made an observation which could explain Alan's feelings and those of others who make the transition.

Janet:       *"You have so many different people that you see at the Poly. When you go to Open College you are going on one night a week and its the same tutor you are seeing and you tend to be able to build up a bit more of a friendly relationship with them. There are certain tutors which encourage you to speak to them outside, others tend to speak when you are in the seminar group, some you never see because they are in a different building anyway. So apart from coming in to do the seminar they are not around at coffee breaks or at dinner times so you don't see them anyway".*

Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

It would seem that this one evening a week, almost club type atmosphere of the Pre-degree for example, was something which maybe gave false expectations of what would happen on a full-time course at the Polytechnic. So even though the Pre-degree is actually held in the same buildings, with the same staff as full-time courses, there is a very different atmosphere and relationship in reality for some of those who did then come full-time.



Q. You seem very enamoured with the Pre-degree course, and the Pre-degree staff: Do they have a certain way of dealing with mature students?

Sally: "I think that their idea is that you go back to study as a mature student because you want to study not because you want a piece of paper at the end of it, and a lot of people repeat the Pre-degree course because they find it so good. One of my friends didn't complete all the course work and she's quite happy about it because she found it means she can repeat the course again this year, she enjoys it, its more stimulating than night school, its pleasant, its a terrific idea.

Q. But it is leading on to a degree course, isn't it, its not a social evening?

Sally: "I think it does lead on. I wouldn't be here doing a degree now if it didn't lead on. I've walked past this place for the best part of ten years and never done a degree! I think from the point of view of making you feel you can, of giving you confidence, of making you realise that there are other people in very similar situations as yourself that are managing to cope with that sort of course. It has everything for me, that course".

Q. Is there a difference then between the Pre-degree and the course now at the Poly?

Sally: "The difference for me wasn't apparent until my first psychology lecture. The person giving the lecture was the same person who had given the lecture on psychology on the course. In the lecture on psychology on the Pre-degree course he sat on the edge of the bench, we all sat on the edge of benches. He laughed about what he was saying; he was very, very funny. We went and had a coffee break, he came and sat with us still chatting about different aspects and us enquiring about what the actual course was like.

*The difference when I came to the Polytechnic was, that barrier was there. He stood behind a desk that was the first thing. We went for a coffee afterwards he went somewhere else, I don't know he might have gone to another class but its "I'm here for this hour, then goodbye, I'm here to do a job and that's it!"*

Third year Student, B.A. Combined Studies, Pilot sample

This particular preparatory course, based at the Polytechnic, was important for Sally's return to study but at the same time it allowed her to make comparisons about the Polytechnic, its agents and its philosophy concerning mature students. This quote encapsulates the concerns outlined at the outset of this research about the need to evaluate the reasons for recruiting mature students into higher education. Whilst it would clearly be wrong to interpret the intentions of the whole institution on the basis of the actions of one individual member of staff, it does raise the question about philosophy and purpose.

Sally was not the only one to notice the difference, there were others who picked up the attitudes of the staff as well as other elements of provision.

Kate, like Sally, found the social atmosphere of the Pre-degree course an important aspect. In fact it was the lack of this social bond that she found most disappointing on her full-time course and it was this that she compared with the Pre-degree. Kate's expectations of life at the Polytechnic were influenced by the Pre-degree but also by the time that her husband had spent at a local teacher training college for mature students during the 1960s. These experiences created a 'student image' for her of being 'at college', of being part of a



group - almost of perpetual 'talking about things' rather than actually doing any work. Most of the expectations she had given me during our first interview were in those terms, even to the point of picking out all the social activities on offer in her student welcome pack. When it became clear that because of the amount of work involved and the pressures of her home life limiting the time available for such activities and the lack of interest probably for the same reasons by other members in her group she felt very let down.

Kate: *"Well I think I enjoyed the Pre-degree - I don't think the relationship is as good here really but I think that might be because I made the effort to socialise afterwards and realised how much you benefit by talking to the people over a drink afterwards so I got into the habit straight away of going to the pub for a drink, it was not as if you were getting a lot more help there but it was as important as any of the lectures really because you were putting things into perspective then."*

*I wish there was some sort of social thing within the day really. For instance I would imagine that people you meet would say shall we go and have a pub lunch, we are here all day and its boring, everyone is bringing their butties in a bag and sitting upstairs drinking that awful coffee. That wasn't what I imagined it would be like really."*

Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

If Kate felt let down by her expectations from the Pre-degree and in her first interview with me she thought that might happen when she said she had heard the Poly wouldn't be like it - 'you can't find a tutor then' - Brian felt too that it was no preparation for the real course and was very critical of this emphasis on socialising.

Brian: *"The Pre-degree has not prepared me for any of this - it felt entirely separate. I wasn't expecting that anyway, I was just expecting the sort of work we would be getting which in a way has been sort of true. There were too many on the course to get to know each other and the lecturers."*

Another thing I really hated, they all used to say we'll go to (the pub) afterwards - go across to the students union bar. I couldn't afford to do this and there's quite a lot of other unemployed people who couldn't afford to go and chat to the lecturers. They want to chat to the lecturers whilst they are in the college not in the bar at 85p a pint!"

#### Second interview B.A. Combined Studies

Clearly though individual interpretations of reality are important here as are the 'needs' of the people who embark on the Pre-degree course. To Sally the confidence boosting and the social atmosphere of the course were important elements in allowing her to enter full-time higher education and as she said without it she never considered a degree course. This is a small group of people out of the many hundreds who have taken the pre-degree and even amongst them there are different interpretations - Brian was given a fair guide to the standard of work he felt and Malcolm said

Malcolm: "I think the expectations I got from the Pre-degree have largely been realised on the full-time course. In fact the course is more like the Pre-degree than I thought it would be. The Pre-degree was only one night but it was fairly laid back and its proved to be so on the full-time course".

#### Third interview B.A. Applied Studies



What is at issue here though is whether the Pre-degree is presented to the students as a 'course' on its own or as a taster of what life will be like on a full-time course at the Polytechnic. From what this group have said and this applies to Open College too, these courses do not set the expectations for the course proper as far as relationships are concerned. This maybe needs to be considered by those who run such course and also the staff who then teach students who have been on them because problems are being created at a time when mature students are already having difficulties due to their changing roles. Conventional students who come straight from school or college already have expectations within the framework of educational establishments often of a dependant nature although there is often some element of individual freedom at 'A' level. They, though, are fixed in the student role and may not need to re-define how they are seen by others or how they view themselves - In Aslanian and Brickell terms they are not in 'transition' - except from one institution to another. The receiving institutions thus need to be aware of the backgrounds and expectations of the students of the social processes involved, indeed of the whole 'psychosocial drama' of life in a Polytechnic.

## Different Subjects - Different Realities

What actually happened during the teaching/learning situations for the group were different, not only through the perceptions of the students themselves - three of my sample ended up doing the same course and have different interpretations of reality - but also on different courses at the Polytechnic. Thomas who was on a Combined Studies Degree experienced very different attitudes and behaviour towards the students in his two subject areas - which were taught and administered from two different faculties.

Thomas: "I'm fairly happy with (x subject) particularly as its a minor subject and people tend not to concentrate as much. In the (y Department) I find it hard to come to terms with certain things and their approach has been different, one that I would not have bargained for and secondly it was significantly different from the (x department) so two different approaches that you've got to make provision for".

To give you one example, in the (x department) they give you your paper back personally in a seminar or in a lecture and then in (y) we have one person who believes that they don't give you a paper back until something ridiculous like four weeks after you have handed it in - maybe he's had a great deal of work on so eventually I had to go to his room and ask for it. Before one could even get down to saying can I discuss it he was - he would go into his office and take things out and say "I've had this for ages, here you are" then he just made his way out of the room as if he was going somewhere else. Maybe I should have pursued it but one didn't feel as though this person wanted to discuss it.

I think sometimes it travels back to the nature of how you think the institution is, whether you think the institution is a place in which tutors are very friendly and all the rest of it and very helpful or are they more like the world of work where some people are not always so interested in their jobs and what have you or prepared to spend a few minutes with you so in that sense maybe you could say that the Poly is a bit like the world outside, or some of it, one or two of the tutors, not all of them because very many of them are really committed both in their academic work and in their students".



Q. What did you expect to happen though?

Thomas: "I don't know, as I say I came in with an open mind, the only thing about an open mind is one takes in an awful lot of rubbish!"

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

So what it was like in the 'classroom' clearly was different on different courses in different faculties in the Polytechnic and it would be wrong to paint a totally pessimistic view of the reality of returning to study for this group in that respect although more than once I had these sentiments by Sally expressed to me.

Sally: "They forever talk about facilities and provisions for mature students but I don't know what they are, I haven't experienced any".

But her view of the teaching/learning situation was very positive:-

Sally: "If you go into a seminar room here its like going into the kitchen at home, its familiar, the people are familiar, we are very fortunate in that most of the seminars that we go to we all sit round one table, or in a group and we feel equal with everyone else there, that there isn't a threat, that you can enjoy whatever there is to be discussed that day. I find it stimulating, it feels creative".

Third year Combined Studies

John felt the same.

John: "You are set a brief, a problem to do and you are given a time and all the requirements and you work at your desk in the studio. Tutors come and see you individually. They rely on you if you have a problem to find the tutor. That's what they want, not a solution by a tutor but something that has come from the student. They are in a dilemma all the time because they have to give you tuition but they don't want to influence you because you have to do it yourself. The tutor is another piece of equipment almost".

Second interview B.A. Graphic Design

This might seem to be some evidence of an andragogical or humanistic approach to the teaching of adults, that they are self directed learners able to follow their courses with the teacher as facilitator, within this Polytechnic. However this was not a universal feeling in my group and an assumption that cannot be taken without question. True as I indicated earlier Knowles would agree that there is no such a thing as a clear andragogy/pedagogy divide but what my group were telling me was more in line with the dependency on new knowledge to be learned. There was the dichotomy of the adult returner, wanting to be treated as an adult but at the same time lacking the knowledge of the specific subjects and also the skills of how to deal with the knowledge. They were also in a position of knowing that the tutor would eventually assess them and this too had implications for the way they behaved and to some extent the way in which they were willing to go along with what happened in the classroom. The external constraints of the course and the final examination were extrinsic factors which seem to have over-ridden any intrinsic motivation of 'always wanting to do something for myself'. Many of the group articulated this feeling.

Pam: *"The course is too full for us to follow any extra areas of interest".*

CQSW Postgraduate

Barbara: *"There are large numbers of people on the course and a lot of work to get through so there is no time for discussion".*

Diploma in Nursing

Mavis: *"The course is syllabus orientated - the pace is not open to negotiation: The staff cover the work and say they will go back if we need anything but they don't have time".*

LLB

Clive: *"In the lecture we don't have the opportunity to interrupt. There's a lot in the lecture, its packed with information, the lecturer tends to come in, speak very quickly, produce the facts, pick up the papers and go.*

BSc Psychology



This wasn't, I felt, perceived as a problem by these people, it was stated as a fact of student life at the Polytechnic and indeed there was a view expressed that it was a necessary fact of life. Brian went so far as to express his frustrations with not getting basic background information in the form of a gardening analogy.

Brian: "We were given notes and half the terminologies and asked to discuss things that we are only starting to learn about now. Now that we have got the information we can start to understand it more. An analogy might be simpler for me to say, if you are doing gardening they tell you all about hybrid plants and then start at the seedling stage five weeks later - it was all backwards, it was very confusing".

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

Alison felt the problem too and puts it into perspective not only for the mature student but for younger students as well.

Alison: "I expected the course to be more academic, not quite as practical, I just want to get on with the work and what I have to do...."

Q. What do you mean by more academic?

Alison: "More theoretical rather than problem based. I know it has to be to a certain extent, you have to work out problems but let me give you an example.

Playing the Woodstock game is a business game, we are divided into groups and you compete with each other. I've been lumbered with two boys. One of the problems we had to solve recently was that our employees had put in a pay claim and we had to bargain with them. Now I've done that before in HND but the boys hadn't and they had absolutely no idea. Now to my mind the theory of collective bargaining should have come before being thrown in at the deep end so consequently the group are relying on me".

Q. So do you think being a mature student helps, that you can use your experience?

Alison: "It could be part of it but I don't think they should give you a practical problem without being well versed in the theory first".

Q. Doesn't it come out of the problem?

Alison: "No it didn't at all, nothing came out of it! When we did it on the HND course we were given theory and then we had to produce a practical situation - we were video taped and told in part where we went wrong and then perhaps we were given another problem to solve. In (Law) we have theory first, we have lectures and then we go to a meeting with problems to solve but we have already been given a lecture about these problems so that we know where to look for the answers to those problems."

#### Second interview B.A. Business Studies

This wasn't only the case with more academic or theory orientated courses but also in her art course, and with pottery, Nancy felt that she did want to develop her own ideas but that she needed to have someone to discuss them with, a tutor who would know what 'the theory' was and then she would be able to put that into practice.

This need for theory, information or guidance was not within an adult/child dependency framework (Yonge 1985) but related to the subject areas only, although it clearly did then influence the realities of the classroom relationships for the individuals and the way in which they approached their studies. If Knowles' claim that we only teach children how to be taught rather than help adults to learn is valid - there might seem to be an element of staff only knowing how to teach and not helping anyone to learn. By trying to give independence, to introduce practical problems, without any help would seem to give, on the surface, some recognition to the adult status of these people but do little to really build confidence or self direction if there are no foundations within the subject area.

Clive seemed to have found a way of dealing with this dependency in



the subject subordinate role and his clear need to be treated as an adult or indeed equal to the lecturers (all of whom he was much older than) by behaving differently in the 'classroom' and out of it. He had lunch with the staff in the refectory and was always involved in animated conversations whenever I saw him. However during our interview he told me how he wouldn't interrupt in lectures and how he wouldn't discuss essay marks with staff.

Clive: *"Yes I can talk to them as friends, being older than most of them makes it easier to talk to them because I'm used to talking to people of that age and probably in senior positions so I can talk very freely".*

Q. But you couldn't go and discuss your essay?

Clive: *"No I wish I had been able to. Its like when I see my doctor if we are talking about social activities then we are on first name terms and he stays on first name terms all through the consultation but when I'm talking about health matters then I address him as doctor, it perhaps seems artificial.*

Q. Do you do that with staff as well?

Clive: *"Yes I'm seeing the two situations because I've never been in higher education before its never occurred to me to challenge them. I don't know whether (the tutor) would have been prepared to discuss the mark. I would have enjoyed arguing the point with him but I feel they haven't got time really to do that.*

#### Third interview BSc Psychology

Malcolm understood the need for lecturers and seminars for information but felt some dissatisfaction with the fact that in one group the tutor did not know their names seven weeks into the course. Many felt that despite the amount of information to be got through within the classroom the staff and students were equal - although this will be returned to in a later section - but that the language, jokes, presentation did influence the situation and the use of students experience is a point of contact.

Q. What was it like in the classroom?

Marjorie: *"I think the first fortnight I was very apprehensive, very quiet I felt perhaps a bit out of my depth really".*

Q. Was it very formal?

Marjorie: *"No I don't think so. We sit in a 'U' shape, the tutors are very relaxed, you see we are only in the classroom for two weeks, then we are out, then we are back in for a month. Towards the end of the month I felt more comfortable and then when we break up into small groups, we do a lot of group work, I find that easier than when the whole class is there.*

Q. What do you do in the small group? Why is it different?

Marjorie: *"We often have a lecture prior to splitting up and we have been given some reading and then its for discussion or group work which involves what we do out practising as nurses, making out assessment forms and things like that for patients and then we discuss it between us or we might work one out between three of us and then present it and things like that.*

#### Third interview Diploma in Nursing

The important issue is that the group knows the area of discussion; is able to contribute because of theory and practice so the group worked better. This is where Knowles' emphasis on experience becomes so important. Also Marjorie made the point that staff were all ex nurses so they too had relevant experience and this type of discussion was easier.

Marjorie had apprehensions of putting herself on the line in a large group in areas she did not know anything about, whereas in the small group she was more confident. She had not had any preparatory study for her return and this linked with new areas and stories about how hard the work would be influenced her expectations. There was only one other person in my sample with no previous educational preparation and the reality of the classroom for him rapidly became a nightmare. He could not understand the work and felt unable to ask questions



because of what that would say about him as a person - again an illustration of how individuals see themselves in terms of what they don't know rather than what they have learned from experience.

Q. How do you feel things are going at the Poly?

Ken: "Badly - very badly. In fact I think its wrong of them to accept people on courses that require a certain standard without finding out if people are up to that standard because once a person gets here obviously they want to make the best use of it and it can be very difficult if you are not up to the standard they require".

Ken then explained how he could not reach the required standard and how he had expected, by virtue of the fact that the staff had offered him a place, that he would have been able to cope with the work (although he did no preparation during the summer after his interview)

Q. Do you feel you have been taken in under false pretences?

Ken: "In a way yes, I feel disappointed with myself, I feel disappointed with the college that they did not give me any idea of the intensity of the course".

Q. Why are you disappointed in yourself?

Ken: "Because I was coming here and this was to be the be all and end all of my problems but I feel its only going to add to them because I feel I'm going to be very very disappointed

....I don't want this to sound like poor old me sort of thing I know its as much my fault as theirs really because in retrospect if I'd thought about it really seriously or more seriously than I did I should have prepared myself better really".

Q. But you were offered the course by people who thought you could cope - why put the blame on yourself?

Ken: "The work that I'm struggling most with is work that I have been able to do but can no longer remember from the memory factor, its so long ago that I did it that I'm actually ending up confusing myself by remembering little parts of it and trying to do it and mixing up various parts of the equations into one so I'm finding I'm making it even harder by trying too hard".

- Q. If the pace is too much could you not interrupt and ask for things to be explained?
- Ken: "I don't really know, its not something I would like to do 'cos I would feel a burk! You would feel like you were interrupting everyone's advancement. I know I wouldn't be, like in the sense that I wouldn't be interrupting everyone, but there are a few who are bright - they have ONC. But I realise that I can actually tell one or two of the younger ones a thing or two and I sit down and discuss with the younger ones various aspects that they are having problems with as well. When I say I'm putting them right we just sit and discuss what we are having problems with and I suppose some of them are probably struggling as much as myself really".
- Q. So couldn't you ask for things to go more slowly, say in the classroom rather than taking the blame on yourself for not being able to do the work or being better prepared?
- Ken: "Well I still have a slight feeling I may catch up. Its the pace really. Everything we are doing could be learned at a slower pace. Everything seems too advanced, we never repeat it. When I was at school you did a thing until you had got it and then you took it a bit further but here its just advancement all the time, whether you can see the idea in your brain or not, they just carry on. We have no time to discuss things, we are busy all day, every day - I suppose at the end of the day we might have a bit of time".
- Q. But do you have tutorials for discussion?
- Ken: "Very very little, its learning all the time or taking notes all the time".
- Q. When I spoke to you before you came you were pretty sure you would ask if you didn't understand things.
- Ken: "Yes I was actually but we're not on as personal a level as I thought we might be, at least not yet. Perhaps I've seen too many American Films, where you just speak to each other as if you were associates you'd met in a bar room or something but it doesn't work like that - we've still got the pupil and teacher atmosphere".
- Q. So is that what stops you.....?
- Ken: "No I think what is stopping me, most of us, myself included is the fact that we don't want to look a burk in front of the class by saying look I'm too thick to understand this will you stop and explain it again? Which I suppose is to our own detriment really".



Q. But the fact you can't understand the maths doesn't make you any less of a person?

Ken: "I appreciate that - I feel more prospects slipping away and I feel annoyed at that - not less of myself. What I can't understand is how they can expect me to have the standard of education required to do this course when they know that I've had no education for over 25 years now. I mean, even some of the masters - tutors make mistakes when they are giving us examples and they are doing it every day so how can they honestly expect people like myself to be up to that standard"?

Second interview HND Building

Preparation is therefore important for the student to be at the right level, without it failure looms - not with the subject but as a person although Ken could rationalise this superficially by putting the blame on the interviewing staff. In reality this was not the case and as his course went on Ken became more and more depressed.

This scenario has repeated itself again and again with different students and different courses during the completion of this research and has implications for future policy. An attempt to fill places left by a declining number of 18 year old students with underprepared mature students does no service to them or to the institution. Within this context there are plans to introduce a Foundation course into the Polytechnic based on a negotiated learning contract after twenty three weeks of preparatory study. Successful fulfilment of the contract for a specific course will guarantee a place on that course. This should ensure students arrive better prepared, without the pressure of feeling that they may miss a place in a specific year and also the institution will have more idea of student numbers and clientele. For mature students it may mean yet another year of preparatory study but

it may avoid the situation which Ken describes above - one which affected not only his life at the Polytechnic, but outside it as well as he gradually became reduced in self confidence.

### **The Role of the Staff as Experienced by the Student**

Within Brookfield's "psychosocial drama" of life in an educational environment, one group of actors appear to play the 'key roles' as far as my group of students were concerned. As the examination of what the students had to say about the 'classroom' situation showed the scene was set not only by a 'part learned' in another educational context (Open College, Pre-degree, other institution or whatever) but by the members of staff within particular classroom settings in this particular institution. Also the individual climates of the different subjects, schools, faculties and in turn demands of external validators set the backcloth against which the individual members of staff then fulfil their roles - these in turn act in combination with experiences, personalities and expectations of what is valid to them of a mature student in a teaching/learning situation on a course at this particular Polytechnic.

It is perhaps not unexpected that this group of students should have strong perceptions of the importance of the staff on their return to study in the light of what Schutz has to say about the role of 'significant others'. He describes the concern of individuals with elements of the social world which may serve their ends "for furthering his purpose and for overcoming obstacles" (although some in



my group saw their relationships, or lack of them, with staff as further obstacles!). The staff, and various aspects of interactions with the staff, of the Polytechnic was an area discussed by all the students in the group during the second interview so that in Schutz's terms they were at the level of graduated knowledge closest to the individuals during that introduction to the culture of the Polytechnic in that first term. From the information which came to me during our interviews at that time the interactions with other students, which may have been more frequent, were not so relevant, at least not that they talked about, and so it would seem were at a different level of knowledge. It may be that the staff were seen as holding the key to information about how to behave, how to get grades and orientate oneself within the institution at the level of their necessary "knowledge of the workings of" the institution, the students on the courses with them were also outsiders, learning the plot and so were not as significant. In fact more than once other students were quoted as causing problems by not living up to expectations, not behaving in a certain way and when the staff did not react in the way the individual expected they should towards them more anxiety was caused. Kate described the group as not behaving in seminar groups in the way she expected they should, of the staff not setting the scene, of not interrupting in case they hurt the presenters feelings and under it all was the feeling of Kate wanting the guidance of the staff and not the interaction of the group.

Kate: *"I came here with bags of confidence and I feel that's been undermined in lots of ways. I felt really insecure in as much, after the first week, feeling I wasn't really happy here. I wasn't enjoying any part of it. It was all like a trial, so much to take in and I wasn't relating to any of the other people in the group. I didn't want to, they*

didn't seem the sort of people - I wasn't attracted to them and didn't find them stimulating in any way. That put me off and I did a tremendous amount of thinking in the first couple of weeks and I had to make a tremendous effort to put myself out to actually approach them and get involved because that was seeming to make me feel so insecure, to be holding me back.

.... the sort of things that annoyed me in the first weeks when you were getting to know these people were some of the comments made in all the first groups that we went to with different lecturers. A lot of them seemed rather ridiculous and I was thinking - well, whatever are these people expecting, the stupid comments that are being made and it was as if they were undermining the value of it being a degree and expecting to have everything said to them in plain simple language".

Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies



Alison: "If things don't get better I might pack it in. I don't see why I should put up with a lot of aggravation to get a degree. I'm not there to drag a lot of little boys about and kick them up the arse when they don't work. I'm a student, I'm not a lecturer. I'm not a member of staff that's not my role but I seem to have been put in that role somehow".

#### Second interview B.A. Business Studies

David: "You felt like saying to them why didn't you go to Open college and do your study skills and you could have got all this banal stuff out of the way...."

#### Graduate Combined Studies

Clive: "I like to get to lectures on time and I have to travel twenty miles to get there I can't understand people not going so early on in the term. When people do go to lectures I see them sitting at the back writing letters or reading a book .....I'm twenty years older than any of the others I think older students are more motivated, there is a feeling that the young ones.... I know I'm stereotyping, they don't seem as motivated.

#### Second interview BSc Psychology

Colin: "The students are to blame as much as the staff because a lot of them just want to doss around. They don't attend lectures or get their essays in on time so they deserve to fail. The Polytechnic should be more careful about selection.

#### Second interview Foundation Accountancy

Clive: "I'm surprised that people don't ask more questions and I often feel that I would like to raise a point but since the others tend to be silent I don't want to be the old man who is always challenging something or questioning something or asking for an explanation."

#### Second interview B.Sc. Psychology

Alan: "We have all got something to contribute - well about 80% of us have got something to contribute. That's being a bit bitchy but there are some people - one bloke hasn't even opened his mouth yet and we are seven weeks into the course and I've never heard him speak".

#### Second interview Diploma in Social Work

Brian: "We all get on quite well as a whole there's nothing good nothing bad but I have noticed that the younger people are only just getting involved and that's to their disadvantage.....

I do feel that the ball is in the student's court but its difficult to approach someone when you don't know where to start. Its like them and us and it seems to be getting more like that, even though you get to know them (the staff) a bit better it still feels as like its you and them and you're left to get on with things and there is nowhere you can go to find out if you are doing well or if you are doing badly.

I would like to know what is expected. Its difficult to know what is expected I suppose in so short a time and being fair to the Polytechnic itself now, we've been there eight weeks now, its not a long time for them to assess and give feedback so perhaps I'm being unfair if I really think about it but I do think the onus is on the Polytechnic at the beginning of the course to get the involvement going and it hasn't started yet".

#### Second interview B.A. Combined Studies

Questions need to be asked about why these mature individuals, with existing adult roles outside education, with good or at least relevant experience in group interactions were now willing to 'suspend their adulthood' at the door of the classroom, seminar room or whatever although as Malcolm said:

Malcolm: "Its a problem when you first come you don't know anyone at all you're frightened of speaking or they'll think you don't know anything - you don't know what to expect so you let the tutor set the pattern and you do the work that is expected of you".

#### Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies



Malcolm had done the Pre-degree and Open College but this did not act as preparation for this new "in group". The adult students were not able to use their previous life experience either because that wasn't relevant here. An added complication was the number of new relationships being entered into, which was something Janet and Alan had highlighted earlier. Open College, Pre-degree, night school was one night a week, one tutor to get to know, now it was many tutors, many courses and, as Thomas showed, often wide discrepancies in what would be the reality in each situation, in and out of the classroom. This need of direction from the tutor and the role of the staff in the Polytechnic came universally from the group. As I did not interview staff it is clearly a one-sided picture but it is obviously relevant to this group as so many people expressed opinions about inter relationships with staff and students.

It did seem, from the comment, that there was a negotiation taking place almost within the terms of Goffman's dramaturgical approach. The students were weighing up the scene, watching the performance, but with an eye to the fact that they were not equal partners in the contract that the staff could see the 'script' and knew the outcome.

Brian: *"I feel that a lot of them have this sort of class system, they are the lecturers and we are the students and you feel it as soon as some of them walk in. Some of them can walk in and its just another person that has walked into the room and they are the lecturer and its great but some of them may walk in and they like to let you know that they are in control. We were in one lecture and it was just a waste of time and he was having people sitting there basically because he wanted to talk to an auditorium that was fashioned in the way he wanted and my friend and I decided we could hear perfectly well where we were, we weren't going to move forward to allow him to perform and so we walked out and he just carried on".*

Third interview Combined Studies

One or two of the group were willing to see the situation from the tutors point of view even Brian was willing to admit that the above 'performance' might have been because the tutor was unsure of himself. Christine felt you could tell when a lecturer was nervous and "just kept on talking all the time and reading from notes" and Pam thought it must be very overfacing for a tutor to meet a group of adults like us, all graduates with experience in the field". These were the only expressions of such sentiments although Nancy did think that her pottery tutor may have been influenced by the fact that Nancy was so much older although it was maybe also a personality factor. Because the others did not comment does not mean they did not feel anything about the issue but what was much clearer was the expectations the group had of what they would have liked 'a good tutor' to be and what actually happened in reality. Obviously there could have been personality problems here too and I was certainly at pains not to get involved with stories about named individuals. In some instances and this was a positive experience, a close working relationship seems to have been set up with particular staff members either as personal tutors or subject tutors and that seems to be similar to Open College experiences for example where something of a mentor or catalytic process emerges and sets the tone for expectations of relationships with other members of staff. This, no doubt, led many of the group to build up expectations of what they felt was a good tutor.



## What is a "Good Tutor?"

Time and again the expression a good tutor came up and I got the following types of classification.

Brian: "People who plant ideas and seeds of ideas in a way that's productive, you don't feel you have to learn everything: the tutor puts the onus on the student, you bring in personal experience and she makes you feel as though its relevant.

She's very good, you can talk to her, she's one of those lecturers that I feel every lecturer should be like, she comes over as though she gives a damn about us and she does make it quite clear that if you want a word with her she'll make an appointment for you and you can go along and see her. She's the only one like that really".

Malcolm: "Good tutors in seminars are those who will discuss things. There is one tutor who is unpopular. You might approach him in class if you were struggling but you wouldn't approach him outside the class. I mean - he doesn't know anyones name in the group. Most people make an effort to know everyone's names - he hasn't even tried to know anyones name. He hasn't asked, doesn't address anyone by name and you think well how am I going to get on in an assignment if he doesn't know anyone by name.

John: "The staff are always there if you need any help".

Colin: "The lecturers are interested in us they ask about us in class.

Alan: "A good tutor, to me anyway, is one that will (pause) he speaks clearly, in a lecture you can understand him. It's a profession, he establishes the level of the group, he doesn't teach at them, he's part of that group even though he might be doing the lecture. You can (pause) like some tutors are difficult to approach and others you can just run into anywhere and they have got all the time in the world for you, they'll sit across the road in the pub there and really discuss that lecture that might have been the previous week. You enter into some sort of relationship with them rather than are pumped at, pumped knowledge at, where as some of them you feel like one of those French geese, it's liver fattened up to make pate having all this knowledge pumped down your throat.

Marjorie: "The staff are approachable, they are there all the time, they are just in the next room"

Mohammed: "The students and teachers are not really different. We get together and discuss things really different to what

it was at school Not like teachers and students, very friendly They encourage us to go to them, to talk to them and discuss. They mentioned at the beginning that this course is not what staff want students to do but what the students want to learn and discuss".

Mavis: "The lecturers are good. When you first went in they made it easy to talk, they made it seem not like you were attending school. They crack jokes. They made you feel comfortable. They made you have a laugh it cuts the tension. Its the way they talk, the language they use .....they'll always spare a few minutes to put you at your ease, or tell you to come back at such and such a time"

Despite this 'feeling of ease' though Mavis did have concern about the level of work right from the outset. She felt that the staff did expect too much because she was a mature student and too much ground was covered too fast. Janet expressed the same sentiments - "I think the staff should take the time to find out what level we are at."

It would appear then, from what has been said, that staff have an impossible task to live up to what is seen as a 'good tutor.' They need to be aware of the expectations of their students at whatever age and stage, to be up to date with their academic disciplines, to contribute to the smooth running and development of the institution, to be always available for individual help and guidance and to feel like going for a drink in the pub whenever the occasion arises.

Indeed this requirement of availability was a separate issue which arose from the data given by my sample in way I would not have thought to ask questions about.



## Staff Availability

The issue of staff availability was one which was raised frequently. There were perceptions that the staff in the Polytechnic had high teaching loads and a good deal of committee and administrative work as well as other Polytechnic duties to attend to. However, the problem of lack of availability and lack of approachability (which are not the same thing it is true) manifest itself to be a real problem.

Philip: "Generally the staff/student relationship is good what happens outside the classroom reflects what happens inside the classroom. Usually there is a coffee break and all of us go down to the coffee bar together circumstances permitting but very often the lecturer will have to use the coffee break to run off and do some administration but there is generally pretty good rapport between the staff and the students - if its a teacher/student relationship in the classroom then a teacher/student relationship outside the classroom and equally if its more broken down it will remain broken down in the coffee bar"

Second interview D.M.S.

Nick: "Just about all departments and all staff said if ever you have any difficulties come and see me and I think that's universal. Quite a lot of people take that up and it might not have got them far in terms of understanding but its a system that is there and people honoured it which is good but for practical purposes we need people who could make the issues and subject areas more accessible. These people are not just teachers but maintainers of an institution. They run around having meetings, shunting paper around, administrating to a degree that's to my way of thinking excessive. It comes to all institutions....comes a time when teachers need to ask themselves how much of this is really necessary for my job of teaching. Is it just maintaining the system and institution in which I work?"

Q. How does this affect you as an individual?

Nick: "When I want to see people to use their time, friendship, interest - I won't do it because I think the staff have enough to do and so if I can manage then I manage".

Graduate Combined Studies - Pilot Project

Alan: "They say they will be available when you have got a problem and you don't understand. In reality trying to get anywhere near them is something else, they are really

elusive animals, they are really hard to get at. I think maybe its down to them being extremely academic people and maybe when you see your course tutor you don't realise that sometimes they have four or five other courses to teach on as well. Maybe they are overworked that they just haven't got the time to stop and talk or whatever".

#### Second interview Diploma in Social Work

Colin: "The Head of School was always so busy that he was always cancelling classes. The (economics) lecturer always had time for us but he hasn't been re-appointed!".

#### Third interview Foundation course in Accountancy

Janet: "I think its strange that these people are paid to teach and sometimes they come in not even knowing what they are going to teach".

#### Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

Brian: "...but they are so overworked some of them. Whenever I went to (Xs) room it was empty or he was doing this or he was doing that, just overworked. That can't be good for him and it certainly can't be good for the students and yet other people seem underworked".

Q. How do you differentiate?

Brian: "I always asked and he was in lectures or he's gone to another building or whatever but he was always in and whenever I went in he had a cup of coffee in his hand and was leaning back in his chair talking. Perhaps I always went in at the wrong time but my academic counsellor was always like that when I went in and if he wasn't there there was a bag with a badminton racquet sat on his desk as if he were off somewhere and he was going to come in and pick it up and he would be off. I don't have a very good opinion of him".

#### Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

Ultimately the students came to a decision about who they can contact and who they cannot.



Thomas: "I think in the end you have got to go to people who are more sympathetic towards you, the only disadvantage with that is that its very unfair on those tutors because of others not pulling their weight because everyone goes to them with their problems and the poor tutors are getting away with not doing the job which is a pity."

### Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

Thomas also felt that the work load of the teaching staff at the Polytechnic was greater than that at the University he had attended in his first year and that influenced the availability of the staff and the time available for 'socratic type' discussion.

These are the perceptions of a few students in a large institution but they are clearly related to real situations which have been experienced. They raise important issues in an institution which has within its mission statement the commitment to the needs of special groups in order to allow them to benefit from their learning experiences.

I feel also that they highlight the need to question a policy which may seem feasible in theory but became diluted in practice by those who actually have to carry it out.

### The Staff as Assessors of Coursework

To complete this section about the perceived role of staff I have included one or two illustrations of the assessment role on relationships per se and another issue which arose from the data about staff relationships and how students perceived that they may affect them. The two to some extent are interwoven as would be expected in the social processes of life at a Polytechnic within the external and

internal constraints which exist there.

Pam: "....its a curious mixture of adult relationships in the sense that here is somebody talking to us as another human being and you want to relate but then there's the pupil/teacher thing. You know because you are aware that these people are going to assess your essay and therefore the way you behave and the ideas you put forward - in the last analysis the way you write your essay is going to count for something with them so its a curious mixture. Some people are easier to get on with as one human being to another than others".

Second interview C.Q.S.W. Postgraduate

The individual personalities of the staff and indeed the students and the interaction of them may have been expected in this assessment role but I was probably not so prepared for the comments about the political and racist/ anti-racist bias of the staff and how this appeared to my group. I probably should have been more prepared because of a debate on access from a special Section II funded course on to the Applied Social Studies course in one Faculty but the views and behaviour of staff servicing this and other courses in the Polytechnic were picked up by Clive, Malcolm, Alan, Mohammed and Janet.



Clive felt the political bias in a Contextual Studies course option too difficult to accept and raised the matter at a staff/student committee. Malcolm felt that his choice of work was limited by what he could write and "I certainly wouldn't have told the tutor that I served in the Falklands - that would have reduced my grades".

Although Alan made very specific references in his comments about the way the subject of race had been handled in his course and felt the mark he had been given on one piece of coursework reflected a point of view he had put forward in group discussion which was not the same as the tutors, he also made general comments about what he felt was bias. As if to support this Mohammed felt that the approach to racism offered by the course team was actually producing the effect of causing more hard feelings rather than less. As he was an Asian student on the same course as Alan this was a useful observation.

Q.                    You are particularly interested in working with ethnic minorities aren't you, was there an element on the course?

Mohammed:        "There was some discussion on ethnic minorities but some people did not like that so there were discussions about that. There were discussions about racism and some people did not like that, they felt they were being labelled as racist people so they had to keep it very limited and then for the next year there was one option for ethnic minorities and they did not get enough people for that option so they had to drop it".

Q. How do you feel about that?

Mohammed: "I don't really know. I do feel that people should know the facts but you can do only that much that people could accept, you can't always give them too much to discuss if they don't want to know about this. I actually want more experience with ethnic minorities so that I could work with ethnic minorities when I have finished this course but I think we should get all round training on a wider scale so that we could work with everybody not just the ethnic minorities"

Q. So who was it didn't want the course?

Mohammed: "The staff wanted it but the students, some students didn't, some students even stopped coming to the lectures on this and coming to the class".

Third interview Diploma in Social Studies

Without getting involved in a specific situation Alan felt his whole experience of returning to study at the Polytechnic had been influenced by the attitude of staff in this respect.

Alan: "...the Poly itself was what I expected it to be, what I didn't expect was the politics, the almost bitchy relationships there are, natural enough processes I think, but I suppose everybody would like things to be ideal.....what I have seen in the Polytechnic is a lot of bitching between staff. You could see the pushing and pulling and the petty politics that were going on. I didn't expect that, you tend to think of tutors as well established steady knowledgeable people who know where they are at and they are really not at all

I felt like putting them in a bag and shaking them up and saying get a grip on yourselves, its my education, my career, my future that's at risk here yours is alright you can argue all you want between yourselves but you've got a career.

Q. What did you say to them?

Alan: "Well you've got to be careful and diplomatic because these people they mark your work, they can finish me as a social worker if they want. I would, in my second year not be as quick to comment on some of the more touchy issues such as race."

Third interview Diploma in Social Work



Again these comments may reflect a difference of perspective between an ideological belief at the level of the institution and how this is implemented and received in practice. This issue, and that of the availability of staff, illustrated to me how much these students do seem to take in of what goes on around them within their own areas of contact and experience. Whether the picture they build up is 'correct' is not relevant it is how it appears to them that is important for that then becomes the reality as they experience it. Maybe it should, however, be something which is relevant to the policy makers of the institution.

#### **Who Controls the Knowledge?**

Perceptive comments about the politics of the staff, the interactions between them and the heavy demands on some within the institution, would seem to point to an active participation of this group in their Polytechnic careers. But it raises questions about whether it is a two way interaction, whether there is a learning contract between equals - two adults, or is there an element of coercion by the staff; is it the dominant ideology of the institution, the paternalistic - we know what is right for your approach; the dictates of external bodies like CNAA or professional institutions which dictates what is studied during any individual course, or does it come from the students themselves? This final point does not offer an alternative to some of the others, for Keddie, Westwood, Bordieu would argue that any such choice is not without limitations and it raises questions about Knowles' assumptions that adulthood is taking responsibility for ones own life. If this happens outside the Polytechnic why not in the

classroom and with the coursework - is there any evidence of my sample being self directed learners or do they act as willing repositories of knowledge? The expectations before coming into the Polytechnic would have indicated a willingness to be active participants in the learning process. The evidence once they are there showed the reality to be otherwise but is it fair to put all the 'blame' on the staff? A contract involves a two way process how much are the students responsible for perpetuating the system they are critical of? Although we still need to ask whether or not the students have the 'power' to change it?

I once picked up a leaflet about essay deadlines in the Polytechnic showing a sliding scale of marks deducted by days late, deadlines were final - there were no concessions to individual student needs - there were no adult negotiations allowed in that contract.

David gives an insight into aspects of the passive and the active student role in a classroom situation.

David: *"It happened with both mature and younger students .....it was experience that was different.... one or two had some good ideas where they would contribute a lot more, not be afraid of making a fool of themselves which is what we went through in Open College in a seminar situation, the amount of mature students who still wouldn't take on the group in the third year, who still looked at the teacher or the lecturer and not look at the rest of the group, never developed any other skills. I found it a bit embarrassing, I thought you have been here three years mate and you haven't picked up anything, all you've picked up is marks for your essays and they would still go bright red..... halfway through the year one or two of the more voluble mature students including myself....we used to sit together and talk about the seminar situations and say well do you think we are holding court, do you think the lecturer maybe isn't steering the seminar as he perhaps should do, he shouldn't really take a high profile but if someone is*



holding the floor too much then perhaps he could steer it away, some are good at it some are bad at it. On the other hand we took to changing places in the room, we found that people were very happy sitting in their own little spot in the room every week where they could get minimal eye contact, and make them sit in other places. They didn't like it at all, they didn't say anything but you could tell - it wasn't what they expected. I took to asking the person next to me if they had been quiet for twenty minutes or so, "well what do you think?" Eventually I ended up with empty chairs on either side!

Then we thought we are missing out here because while we are giving these people a go and bring them in and asking them to contribute - maybe they hadn't done the reading so they couldn't contribute and even when they did they still had their heads down so in the end we gave up and said we are suffering here so we are going for it and we took the position if they weren't going to chip in ..."

Graduate B.A. Combined Studies

In the end however David's determination to get out of the course what he put into it was nearly the end of him as a student and he felt that he had to give way to his idealism.

Was the end product any different from those in the group who would take part in seminars? Although David felt he had always been able to choose subjects which interested him for his course work his feelings about his performance overall are relevant here:

David: "You ended up being channelled. I don't think you could accuse any one single subject of doing it but the overall effect was that you ended up being channelled into a coping process, a strategy for getting good marks and in the end because you had so much work to do you took the, almost the line of least resistance to get a good mark in something else, you had time to give to something else

I didn't have time to think about what I wanted to do, you just had to keep going, if you missed a couple of days a week you felt like you would be left behind".

This raises the question about the needs of individual students and

again emphasises the difficulty of using self-motivation or self-direction as a characteristic of the age of any learner. If David's comments are to be seen as representative it would appear that each student makes his or her own decision about what they will put into and take out of their courses. The result of those decisions then become the basis of the negotiated teaching/learning contract as far as the staff at the institution will allow.

All this may take place at a level which leaves little evidence of any transformation of perspective in some individuals although for others it is a definitive decision to re-negotiate a pathway through to the end of the course of study. This gives self-direction and perspective transformation different dimensions.

#### **Who Controls the Choice of Coursework?**

This negotiation within the pathways laid down by the Polytechnic would seem to involve the control the students had over the subject matter of their courses.

One direct question asked to all the sample in the third round of interviews was about their coursework. I didn't want to ask leading questions about being self directed learners, having control or negotiating learning areas but I felt by asking about the type of coursework that was set I might ascertain how the group equated the 'always wanting to do something' area of their return to study with the reality of the return in an institutional (and externally validated) setting.



Furthermore, it seemed important within the context of a theory of adult education which stresses that adults become ready to learn things which they need to know in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations and which they can perceive as relevant to their real-life experiences (Knowles 1984.)

I have already shown how important the first piece of coursework or rather its return, was in relation to the passage of the individual through the institution and how this was the turning point for most of the group in that first year. The coursework was the *raison d'être* for the journey through the institution and produced a dichotomy between the rest of life at the Polytechnic. The coursework to some extent recreated the atmosphere of school by virtue of it being an evaluation of performance; it was perceived within the concept of self as a whole. Expectations of what would happen in the teaching/learning situation, although perhaps initially not met in reality were overall open to negotiation. The reality of dealing with coursework on the other hand left feelings of subordination and no negotiation. Clive went so far as to say that he didn't feel embarrassed to ask for help in 'class' but he wouldn't go and discuss what he felt was a poor essay result with the tutor and he certainly would not have introduced any ideas of his work with the staff over lunch.

- Janet: "I felt pretty sore about the result but I didn't want to be seen as complaining". "You just did the essays, after all the staff know from other years what to ask".
- Mavis: "You just have to accept the marking, the staff know what they are doing."

As might have been expected the individuals doing art related subjects had more choice not only of subject area but also method of presentation. John has described earlier how much onus that put on the student, with the tutor as facilitator, perhaps the nearest approximation to a state of andragogy in the Polytechnic.

- John: "The idea wasn't to produce what you thought was in the tutors mind they didn't want that. You had to have your own ideas and stick to that. Even if the staff said they didn't like it provided you could defend your ideas then they went along"

#### Second interview B.A. Graphic Design

Nancy found this too on her foundation course in Art but the problem for her was that she found difficulty in producing her own ideas and very much wanted guidance.

- Nancy: "We were left quite a lot to do what we wanted within certain limits because I think, on this course we are actually being almost - one of the objects is to find out if you can, if you are self-motivated - because a lot of art courses keep you to your own point. We were given projects to do, told we had to use certain materials and draw a certain range of things and we had quite a bit of choice. About half way through the second term I sort of found I couldn't cope with the course we were doing at all, I just couldn't get myself motivated to do any of the things..... I think I find it very difficult to have such a broad brief.....

I was disappointed in myself but it told me a lot about myself and I found it difficult to get going and work on my own".



Q. So actually you would have liked more guidance?

Nancy: "Yes but having said that I'm sure it would not have been a good thing I think probably I had to struggle on my own but maybe art is different"...

"Its probably the sort of person I am. I just found it very difficult when the pressure wasn't on".....

"I think I probably do need some pressure"....

#### Third interview Foundation Art

For the rest of the group, though on a variety of other courses in the Polytechnic, there was pressure of essay deadlines, as there was for the art work above but also there was less negotiation - titles were set, a range of options given and this seems not to have been questioned.

Philip: "The subject of why we weren't able to choose didn't really come up, I think it was sort of accepted as one of these God given facts. The lecturer sets the assignments and that's it, there wasn't really any query".

#### Third interview D.M.S.

The comments were all pretty much on these lines that it was good practice for the exam, there was always a wide range of choice; you had to do them to get through the course, work was set on the lecture areas, and it was necessary to attend lectures to do them.

At one point Brian made a comment which was the feeling expressed by others in the group

Q. What was your coursework?

Brian: "We were given essays".

Q. What choice range was there?

Brian: "No choice range, you did a piece of work in the lecture times and you analysed certain things and then there was a question to which you could bring to bear all the things you had looked up and answer the questions".

Q. How did you feel about that?

Brian: "Fine it didn't bother me at all. I wouldn't like to do something for myself because I would do it far too critical for one thing and I would do far too much. If I find something that interests me I can go and look that up, that's working on my own, for the coursework I want a list of questions, choosing one and then going away and doing it".

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

Both Kate and Janet talked about the wide choice of subjects in the list of essay titles with Kate saying "there was always something of interest. I never thought that I couldn't do any of them".

"We were all given the same examples and had to go away and research it and then they were all marked together. It was normal college procedure we just conformed to what the lecturers wanted". Ken.



## The Need for Feedback

If the work set was accepted - taken for granted - the way it was returned and the amount of discussion about the work was more problematic for the group. However even though they were willing to voice their opinions about the system, again they accepted the inevitability of it.

Q. Were you encouraged to discuss essays when they came back to you?

Philip: "I don't think we were encouraged - no active encouragement - it was passive. If you made the effort to go and ask then invariably they would find time but there was no formal time set aside and few staff actually volunteered, besides the teaching staff are pretty busy at the best of times".

Third interview D.M.S.

There were many comments about disappointments in this area

Barbara: "I didn't like not being able to discuss things, but with the lack of finance and funding and time, being a part-time student there isn't time for a one-to-one.

You could have gone to the lecturer afterwards and had five minutes, it would have been no more really. It was just a lack of contact, if you have got a problem you couldn't sort of sit down for an hour and sort it out, there was no provision for that, none at all".

Third interview Accountancy

Mavis: "Once they had given you the marks that was it, they put the marks against the paragraphs, what they thought you should have put and not put and that was it and you just accepted it and some got better marks than others and some had easier questions than others. I would have felt better if everyone in the class had done the same question - but you couldn't choose your own they wouldn't let you do that".

Q. Would you like to have chosen?

Mavis: "Yes there were quite a few questions that I knew a lot

about. I was well read in it and I could answer more thoroughly than any of the other questions but they wouldn't let you do that, you had to do what they told you to do and the markings were so different, one chap would mark more leniently than another. If I'd produced the paper I did and given it to the other chap I would probably have got better marks so I found the system a bit unfair".

Q. What did you do about it?

Mavis: "I just told them about it, that I thought it was unfair the way the system worked and he just said well that's how it works and we have to accept it, we were very annoyed and we used to discuss it in the coffee bar amongst ourselves. I discussed it with my husband because he saw what a lot of work I had put in and he said talk to the lecturer and I had done and that's the way he wants it and he wants the answers so I just left it at that".

Third interview LLB

I feel it is relevant to point out the backgrounds of these two students. Barbara is a graduate and was manageress of a shop in a large chain of stores before she had her son and returned to study. Mavis is a J.P. and local councillor, Trade Union activist and mother of three grown up children, and yet both accept this situation because "that's the way it is." They both had responsible positions in society and yet within the context of their courses they would not question the decisions of the tutors.

Comments were also made about trying to discuss work in advance and this combined with another point Pam makes (following) about the worries of making a fuss about grades. Pam felt it worked to her advantage - although that may depend on interpretation of what 'careful appreciation' means but others were concerned that it would be detrimental to final grade.

Pam: "I found discussion prior to completion of essays fairly

fruitless. Similarly on return of the work. There was a time when I was quite angry about a particular set of comments. My vocalising this served to result in a more careful 'appreciation' of the next piece of work. I didn't feel sufficiently crusading to insist on re-grading although overall I felt the grading was marginally less than I would have expected. This could be a reflection of my lack of academic expertise or just not sussing the system. It really wasn't very clear".

Second interview Postgraduate C.Q.S.W.

This "sussing the system", "playing the academic marks game" was the issue of the coursework. Not what doing the essays added to knowledge, said about themselves as people, but how it contributed to the final grade.

Brian felt no matter what he did he would get a 2:2 grade even at the beginning of the second year: Alan felt that his project mark was reduced because of his comments in the group over views which conflicted with the tutor "I couldn't even take it to the exam board because she is on that!"

Thomas: "...the problem is that we are in a situation now and we are coming to terms with it, enjoying it and hating some parts of it but in the end how we will be assessed by the outside world is on the class of degree we have got, certainly that's the way I'll be viewing it".

Q. And how do you feel about that?

Thomas: "I have tended not to question that, I've just attempted to get on with it and say this is the way the world is and unfortunately that's the way we've got to face it rather than say isn't it a shame that.... So you go to every seminar and you contribute to the work but at the end of it you don't do too well in one or two exams and you bring your work down and you get a lower second as opposed to a 2:1. So I've steered my plan to the exams whether I like it or not".

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies



(Thomas did, in fact, get a lower second degree that Summer)

The way in which this group were willing to accept the areas of essay work, the way in which, without question, they accepted their grades, the decisions they took not to take an active part in group discussions raised for me serious questions about a separate theory of adult educational provision. This was particularly relevant in respect of Knowle's (1980) claim for andragogy that adults require learning programmes which are relevant to their life experiences and allow them to learn what they feel they need to know at that particular stage of their own competency development. There had been clear evidence that this group felt unhappy when their adult status was undermined and happy when they were able to use their experience, so that these assumptions about adult learners would seem to hold. However, I could find no evidence that this group were willing to challenge what Philip called 'the God-given fact' that lecturers would choose the assignment topics or do anything but accept the grades they were given. When Pam and Alan did challenge that authority they felt that the grades were adjusted (downwards) accordingly. This may reflect the power structure of the institution but it is the fact that for the most part it went unchallenged which is relevant here. It could be, as David was saying, that to try to change a situation causes too many problems in a scenario already causing individual stress and that the 'coping strategy' which is developed includes a line of least resistance. In this respect then the instrumentality is the result of redefining individual positions and self expectations. It is coming to terms with what is possible at an individual level of achievement within the terms of life outside the Polytechnic and the

workings and constraints of the institution itself. In this respect it does involve a complex process of interaction.

Within the situation that these adults find themselves, however, the only real place which gives room for manoeuvre is in their expectations of themselves, what they can put into and take out of their time on their courses. Kate's stories of how she would go home full of enthusiasm to start an essay only to have to deal with the family for six hours before she could begin, showed how often there is little change possible at home to accommodate the extra demands. The relentless pace of the course and the inability to influence coursework or grades - even to the final grade of the degree - meets equal resistance. The only path is to 'play the game', to conform to the norms so that instrumentality becomes a virtue not a vice.

Self-directed learners who might want knowledge of their own choosing create nothing but trouble for themselves and if they perceive the staff are already overworked they are not likely to want to add to that.

## Overall Comments on the Reality of Returning to Study

In both the second and the third interview I asked the group whether or not the reality of returning to study had lived up to their expectations of what it would be like. There is a need to bear in mind that in the first term there were a good many practical problems for most of the group and this is reflected in many of the comments which have been made in areas looked at so far. There is also need to bear in mind that even the third interview for most people was not the end of the course but just the end of the first year. Because of my role I am able to see those who are still at the Polytechnic and their comments at the end of their second year, and during the third, are giving further insights into the reality of studying for a degree. So what is presented here are the reflections at the end of one year and how they feel that they would then build on different expectations for the next year if they were carrying on.

There are some issues which need to be treated as problematic such as whether or not the comments reflect rationalisations of the situation - of having to make the best of the situation because it can't be changed - i.e. whether or not they have adjusted their expectations and therefore are prepared to accept a different reality. What I want to present here though is an overview of what life was like in reality at this Polytechnic and if or how it was different to what the group thought it would be. From the comments emerge elements of how the group have coped and how the institution is. Also they give rise to recommendations about how it might be which will be followed up in the conclusion.



The overall picture is by no means negative, but this is the point about rationalisation for I felt that many of the specific problems which dominated the second round of interviews were forgotten by the third - whether due to the relief of finishing the year successfully, because the problems had been solved or because of a realignment of expectations it is not possible to say. An example may illustrate this.

Kate:       *"Its a pity I didn't speak to you in July or right when we finished, I've been away for so long I feel I've forgotten a lot of what had gone on, I really feel out of it now".*

Third interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

When I saw Janet at the end of the first term I was lost in details about seminars and lectures and different subject areas and lack of feedback on essays and came away with a general feeling of her disappointment - a different Janet from the one I saw before the course flush with the excitement of a place at the Polytechnic and with a fulfilling adult experience at the Open College behind her.

When I went to see Janet for the third interview I still had memories of the second one with all its details and problems but that was clearly not something which she remembered in the span of the year overall. It has ceased to be a problem to her, she had put it into the perspective of the year as a whole, it was now something that she really did have 'knowledge of' - she was part of the culture 'an insider' - she had learnt the rules of the game - maybe not the rules she would have liked but those of the institution and she had managed

to come through the first year. She had seen this in terms of her strengths of coping with the system - not in terms of the system making her cope. This seems to be a long way from a fulfilling, self directed learning experience - but it did get her through the year and the exams!

Janet: "I've really enjoyed it. I wouldn't have missed it for anything and its an experience I think that anybody who has got the chance should do. Its just so different from everything. I think the confidence that it gives you and the knowledge that you've been able to get through and that you've not been kidding yourself that you were good enough to go there and you've got through your exams and you've proved something to yourself, its got to be a morale booster".

It all boils down to if you are prepared to put a lot into it and look positive then you get the positive things out of it".

Third interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

Janet made no reference to the first term problems of organization just to say that up to Christmas she didn't know enough in each subject area - the onus was on her not the Polytechnic, to change - once she knew more after Christmas she was able to cope. The Polytechnic lived up to her expectations because she had been able to cope with its demands.

Others didn't accept the reality in these terms though. To them the complex 'psycho socialdrama' of this Higher Education Institution had taught them something about themselves it was true but it had also taught them something about the institution and about higher education per se.

Alan: "Overall the Poly is what I expected, what I didn't expect was the politics.....

.....I feel a bit indifferent now about higher education I must admit.....you don't expect the petty squabbling. Maybe people did say to me that you tend to put your tutors on pedestals for a while and eventually they will drop off and when they do you feel very very disappointed and I think I've gone through that process.

In the first year you were finding your way around, looking for the quicksand, I found it in issues like race, I'll avoid it next year - keep my mouth shut".

Third interview Diploma in Social Work

Malcolm made similar comments

Malcolm: "I have this attitude to higher education, its a lot more loose than I thought.....its a lot less structured and disciplined than I thought it would be and than I would like. The disorganisation just continues, rooms for seminars are frequently changed and nobody knows anything about it, wrong tutors have come in and given a wrong lecture, the timetable is covered in scribbles and changes - a general air of looseness. Some of the tutors are not as intelligent - some of them are biased in other ways. There's a lot more individuality from tutors than I would have expected a lot more across the board inconsistency.



I think its just me waking up to what its about rather than any failings of the system.

I don't know what my expectations were really. I think now I'm just finding out what its about.

I'm worried about young students coming in with 'A' levels and into some subjects (he felt sociology was very biased) but really I think the place isn't full of bright academic types which I thought, most people are just ordinary people who study. I think my expectations of the tutors and other students were too high. The staff have more fixed views than I thought and most of the students are like me - straightforward intelligent people. There are a surprising number of people who are unintelligent. I've sometime wondered how they have got on the course at all. One chap who I think has got in on a positive discrimination route really struggles to speak English - so the standard has been quite low in relation to my expectations".

Third interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

For Malcolm and Alan this then was the reality of returning to study. They were disappointed in the staff and with the politics of the institution. Disappointed in a way that there was not this divide between 'them and us' to some extent. It was as if, despite their Open College/Pre-degree images of staff which had created their expectations of what the Polytechnic would be like, they wanted more.. It raises interesting questions about the public image of higher education and breaking down barriers to access. It may be necessary to ask whether or not this is what adults want or does a degree, considering the personal cost to get it, have to be worth the effort. This would certainly seem to be substantiated by the fact that adults return at all rather than follow learning projects outside an institutional context. Far from what they told me at the outset, they do very much want their studies to say something about them, to prove something to other people. I would not hesitate to say that to stop

the annual Graduation Ceremony would produce an outcry. Even Philip, who had no 'need for a degree' before his course, saw the Graduation Ceremony as the culmination of his efforts. His story would seem to support my argument here.

Philip used the mission statement and its claim for the ability to benefit by mature students to measure the reality of returning to study against the expectations he had before the course. The situation had not been evaluated in the way he had outlined to me before he began the course; of doing it for what he wanted out of it; of not being able to lose. Instead by the second interview he was having problems with the amount he needed to put into the course and by the end of the year - the end of the one year course for Philip, he surprised me and I think himself by the way he had 'failed in course terms' and allowed this to influence him personally although again he tried hard to rationalise the situation in his own terms.

Philip: *"I felt constrained by the course. I can't bring to mind any answer that required personal experience within the coursework....I feel strongly about a postgraduate course which is dominated by exams.*

*I failed the exams and the results were posted to me at home. I was disappointed but I was more disappointed with the attitude, of the way the results had come out and with the department. The way the whole thing was handled by the department was completely wrong and it was totally in contradiction with the Polytechnic's own Mission Statement on how it proposes to treat students and work with students".*

Q. But when we spoke initially you said you couldn't fail this course, even if you failed the exam it wouldn't matter.

Philip: *"What I said might have been misleading, was I can't fail the course because of the way I am, was if you learned from the course about your ability to manage....I've learned a lot about myself about my strengths and limitations in that area, now if that's what the course is about then I've succeeded there.*



If what I felt when the results were published, that all they felt the course was about was whether you passed or failed the exams and in that sense then I'd failed the course and that's what disappointed me because that was inappropriate to what I understood in the Polytechnic's Mission Statement. Its very clear, that academically I might not have been, as yet as successful as I could have been but in terms of personal development its been of enormous value".

Third interview D.M.S.

These then are the issues of validation, knowledge and control, what is seen by Polytechnic and society to be the valid outcome of a course of study and the fact that Philip did not go into the course intending to give any real relevance to the exam but how at the end it became of great importance. He saw it as a matter of principle but does it not reflect this need for credibility in a known area of achievement? He fought against it: he tells the story of how exam revision was taking over the group; how he tried to keep out of the instrumentality but how in the end he had to give into it and his fight for his certificate and the attendance at Graduation Ceremony became all important. A battle against the system as he saw it but really it was for the system - towards conforming to it. He could leave it at that he 'had learnt a lot about his managerial strengths and weaknesses' but he had to have a piece of paper that proved his success in 'academic terms' as he put it.

Philip: "The group became very fragmented towards the end and a lot of hostility and tension was quite evident a thing not there throughout, it was almost as if the true nature of the group had begun to show itself because for two terms we had gone through what I began to see as a facade of trying to work together as a group and try to do this co-operative team type thing when really underneath everybody's aspirations were whether they were going to get through the exams at the end of the day, it was just each person for themselves".

Third interview DMS



Kate had felt the same situation early on with the position in seminars and her comments reflected the feelings of many people but she felt powerless to do anything about what she saw as a 'barmy' situation - totally out of line with her expectations of what 'college life' would be like.

Kate: *"Its got to the stage where the only one that is benefiting is the person doing the seminar because they have researched it they come back with all this information typed up and duplicated and the rest of us sit back and listen to them reading it. I find it really awful and its in such detail and no one understands it and we sit there and other people say isn't that wonderful, shall we give them a clap and I'm thinking this isn't the idea, they should have some basic ideas which we can discuss, but we are all thinking what on earth are they saying, I don't understand what that means".*

Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

When I asked her what she would do in her seminar she described what she would like to do - to throw in some points for discussion, to act as a catalyst to learn from the group, but she knew that she wouldn't/couldn't - she had to conform and anyway:-

*"the lecturers had said that its the presentation that is important".*

Kate's feelings at her third interview sum up a very powerful point made by many. Even the younger members of my group with no family made the same point and it leads to another reality of life at the Polytechnic. Namely that whilst the staff, academic and administrative may have some idea of the corporate identity of "The Polytechnic" for the students, particularly this group of mature

students, there was no such place, no such identity. This was recognised and was stated as a disappointment but it was a reality which had to be accepted - was it a fact of mature student life or can the Polytechnic do something about it? Can mature students ever expect to become true insiders when they still must fulfil important roles outside the institution?

Third interview B.A. Applied Social Studies:-

Kate: "....its not been a bit like I expected really in as much as, I must say what I was expecting isn't going on there. I don't feel like taking part in it. I don't feel as someone who is married with a family that you are actually able to take part in that unless you get more involvement with college life and that I think is really difficult, you know, any of the social things or you don't get involved, we've not got involved with any other group within the college at all, none of the social activities or anything and I think that's a shame because that must add to it, you would then get a feeling of the whole place really".

The problem of the balance between home life and Polytechnic life is difficult to resolve - this is a problem for the students as individuals but it is something they expect and apart from Kate who had expectations of 'student life' based on what happened to her husband in (a typical) mature student institution in the 1960s this duality of environments seems to be accepted as a price to pay - maybe rationalisation again - but treated realistically. It may be a 'problem' of the institution although practical issues involved like timetables; possible late submission of assignments, provision for child care/creche are addressed to greater and lesser extents by individual courses. Sally felt there was too much coursework for mature students.

Mavis told of not enough consideration if classes were changed or cancelled "its alright for those on the campus but we can't just change our plans and I told them about it". Christine felt that the timetable was "alright on the whole but some twilight classes mean the twins have to let themselves in. That's why I waited until they were a bit older before I came back to study but now its my turn - its Mums turn to do what she wants". Kate felt the special group of mature students timetabled between 10 - 3 gave a distorted view of the student population and she would have liked to be in a mixed group - a case of "the Polytechnic not being able to win"! But on the whole they felt provision for problems with work were adequately covered and staff were approachable when they could be contacted. It was however all reactive - nothing was built into system like my interview in the first term and so it was not prevention but solutions to problems.

Some issues were more concrete like the disappointment of not feeling part of the Polytechnic because of the focus of the courses tending to be in one building, with one group of students and staff coming over to that group. The size of the campus was another problem in that area and the distance (and time) to and from the Library - a workroom in the different buildings may help if there is a need for short periods of study between teaching sessions. On some courses with few mature students the feeling of spatial isolation is also exacerbated by lack of "someone my own age to discuss things with". Nancy, Alison, Philip, Mavis and others felt this. In a building which housed a high proportion of mature students this was not the problem as Mohammed said "we are all mature students so straight away it was not like a feeling of school", but there was a perceived need for more facilities on site.



The group were realistic as to the possible solutions of some of these problems. The rush for library books and the pressure of too many students on the course chasing the same few books was due to lack of finance. Nancy talked about classes being cut and part-time lecturers going because there was no money - a general inability of the Polytechnic to do much for minority groups such as mature students and so something to be endured and added; "I suppose I'm lucky to have a place at all".

But one of the biggest areas where reality did not match expectations was in the whole problem of not knowing what to expect on a full-time course of higher education despite the planning and motivation. This raises important question - do mature students have realistic expectations, do they really give consideration to what life in an institution of higher education on a full-time course will be like, should they be given a better grounding into the reality of returning to study before they are plunged in at the deep end to sink or swim? Time and again there were pleas for better induction "I wish I'd known how to take notes"; "I would have liked more study skills"; "I didn't know that I could go to the student counsellor"; "the holiday before was too long, I could have been doing something"; "I'm keeping my essays to show to someone else - look this is the standard - if I could do it with all my problems so can you".

Brian: "A letter to every mature student, in their pigeon-hole saying "Hi, I'm so and so and if ever you have a problem come and see me on this number, or you can get in touch with me between this time and this time". That would have been better and I think I would certainly have gone.

Third interview B.A. Combined Studies

But it would be wrong to leave this group of students on a pessimistic note. As I have said earlier, all of the group are still on courses or have completed their courses with the Polytechnic. Maybe they have moved their expectations from those about the Polytechnic to those about themselves within the realities of their individual circumstances, but they should have the final words which, in Alan's case, gives a vital reason for providing higher education for mature students as a special group ...

Janet: "Oh I'm enjoying it. I don't think its diminished what I expected. I'm glad I went. I enjoy being a student and I would hate it if I had to give it up because I'm enjoying what I'm doing. No. I think it has. Its hard to say yes I had got expectations of what its going to be like, they have changed slightly but they haven't changed in any way to put me off what I'm doing. I am still as interested and happy doing it as I was when I was contemplating going"

#### Second interview B.A. Applied Social Studies

Alan: "There are tremendous areas of growth in me as a person. I've been challenged, I've had to grow up, I've had to understand a lot more about myself and of other people and I'm very pleased about that.

I think it's evident that I'm enjoying my course and there are hiccups here and there but there are difficulties to overcome and everybody who I've met has commented on how enthusiastic and how much I seem to be enjoying it and I think I am. People often say that did I wish I'd done it ten years ago and what have you, but my answer to that is no I'm not because I was not ready. I think I probably could have done it but I don't think I would have enjoyed it or got as much out of it or developed as much as I have. I wasn't ready 10 years ago. I knew when I was ready and as such it's right for me now."

#### Third interview Diploma in Social Studies

## CONCLUSION

### MATURE STUDENTS - EXPLANATIONS OR RATIONALISATIONS?

This study has attempted to examine the reality of mature students in an institution of public sector higher education. It has done this within the parameters of what is currently happening at the national level, within the institution itself and how those influences are perceived by the individual students. It is often difficult to isolate the three levels and indeed it is evident that it would not be wise to try to do so. What is clear is that what may seem to be an individual decision to enter a course of study at a polytechnic is far from the reality.

What this study has attempted to show is that it should be otherwise. Decisions are being made on behalf of a large group of the student population when evidence would suggest that the choices they would make for themselves may not be the same.

What is also evident, as the introduction showed, is that for the adult wishing to return to study, or rather to take up the opportunity for the first time, this is an appropriate moment in the development of higher education to be able to do so. Colleges of Further Education, Polytechnics, and to a lesser extent, Universities, are all faced with falling numbers of applicants in the normal age groups and so schemes to improve access for non-traditional students are developing daily.



Statistical analysis showed the increase in the number of mature students returning to study but behind the figures are no explanations of why that is the case. It is easy to resort to economic, political and social circumstances which may force the individual institution to review their admissions policies because of demographic changes.

Some educational providers may wish to state less instrumental aims and produce egalitarian reasons for allowing non-traditional groups to take up what should rightfully have been theirs. But what is the reality for the individual, how do they see the passage into an institution of higher education, what is it like once they are there? These have been questions addressed in this study in an attempt to look for explanations for why adults want to study in a polytechnic; whether there really are access policies which allow them to enter a different system than they left at school, whether it is a way of filling places in the institutions or allowing them to fulfil their potential.

It is one thing for the institutions to increase access for non-traditional groups like adult students but if there is no change in the ideology of the institution, its courses, its provision its expectations of its clientelle then there would seem to be little to support any egalitarian claims except in statistical terms. This does beg the question though as to whether or not adults are different, do they have different needs, do they have different expectations should they in fact be treated differently from children or eighteen years olds?

Again, perhaps because of the increasing numbers of adult students in higher education, there are those who may feel that they ought to be different and the work of individuals such as Malcolm Knowles (1980) gives a useful category for a separate 'theory' of adult education. Indeed whilst the debate around the distinction between pedagogy and andragogy has been driven into polemics the latent function of raising awareness about the whole arena of teaching and learning strategies for adults has been evident.

Knowles' assumptions about the needs of adult learners have been woven into teaching technology, learning situations, beliefs, principles and finally into a theory (Knowles 1980) prescribing a process of self determination. The concern of this study was the danger of relying on such a prescriptive set of assumptions about what should happen for adult students in the Polytechnic which may, through their own emphasis on unrealistic (and untested) assumptions about the learners, impose conditions which are as constraining as those they claim to replace.

To subscribe to the view that adults learn differently is to agree to a set of values rather than to have a policy or teaching strategy for such a group. To teach in small groups, to rearrange chairs may be a manifestation of a belief in these values that adults are different

but this in itself is not evidence of a different underlying philosophy that things are in fact any different for adults or conventionally aged students.

It would seem, therefore, that there is a hierarchy of issues involved here - although they are closely interwoven in the social processes of the institution. Firstly, there are policy decisions made by the institution about which it shall admit and the type of provision it aims at. Then there are a set of values - be they andragogy or any concession to the belief that adults are different. Finally, there is the actual practical manifestation of what is available and what students of any age entering this institution will actually find there.

This study then began with the expectations of a group of adults about to take up places in a northern polytechnic. It set out to ask them what they expected it would be like, examined where their expectations had come from and asked why they wanted to study at this particular stage in their lives. Although the institution may be seen to be more open to admitting adults as Chapter One showed this needed to be examined from the receiving end from those who would experience the courses on offer as a reality. It raises the question about the very nature of increasing access itself - is it about going into an institution or should it encompass what happens inside, what happens on the courses, with the subject matter and should it also be concerned with what happens after the course? Aslanian and Brickell



[see 292 overleaf]

"The assertion that if we change education, we will be able to change our society in desired directions isn't realistic. From our experience, these expectations are unlikely to occur because the primary purpose of education is to produce the kind of people that our society desires, as the major way of socializing (Americans) to support the status quo ..... we must continue to ask the question, education for what?

London (1973) (pp 60)

So this study asks the questions education for whom, education for what?

#### **The Role of Interactive Research in Changing Provision for Adults in Public Sector Higher Education**

However carefully I may feel that I have addressed as problematic the collecting and recording of information during this research so that I might wish to claim some success in that area, there still leaves questions about the theoretical debates about qualitative research itself. Even though I am willing to put the research within more of a symbolic interactive framework than a truly phenomenological one, both these approaches lie within a qualitative framework and so are within the debate which surrounds the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative issues. This is not a debate which can be resolved here, but again these are major issues which have been addressed in this research, not to justify the approach, but to point out the importance of qualitative analysis for the generation of experiential material in the field of adult education.

(1981) went so far as to claim that adults learn in order to cope with status transitions in their lives, starting the experience in one status and hoping to leave it in another with the test of learning being the success of the transition.

The focus on increasing numbers of mature students into higher education does not take account of the changes which may take place in individuals. This study raises the question: Should access then be into, through and out of the institution? There is evidence from this sample of how they cope at an individual level once inside the institution should it, in turn, do more to accommodate those change and to help the processes of transition.

This study asks whether or not we take any cogniscence of this claim or are demographic factors more pervasive than higher education would like to admit?

Whilst this research is within the qualitative framework and practical orientation outlined by Glaser and Strauss for the generation or development of theory I would acknowledge the comments made by Hammersley, Scarth and Webb (1985) that this is not without its problems. Grounded theorising may develop theory but it does not test it as it should do. At the same time it may produce what appears to be highly developed theories, but these may be invalid. Critics such as those above compare this with analytical induction methods which allows analysis to facilitate testing of theories but give no advice on how cases were selected for study.

Perhaps more relevant here is the fact that analytical deduction selects cases for study in which the phenomenon to be explained is known to be present, rather than cases where the theory would predict the phenomenon to occur. So in my sample I have only used mature students, I did not have a comparable group of conventional students - such comparative studies would provide wider theories of what it is like to study in Public Sector Higher Education, but then there would also be the need to look at University Higher Education, College of Education, Higher Education etc. (Some of this research is current S Weil at London University and Hibbett (1987) at Luton College). But Robinson (1951) makes the case that selecting the sample as I have done, is only like the physical and statistical control in an experiment and such exercises generate rich comparative data, so that what I have done here is to use the responses from the related cases in my sample to generate data.



Evidence of this sort already presents a wider research community structure by using comparisons in School system - e.g. Ball (1981), Lacey (1970) and Hargreaves (1967) in Comprehensive, Grammar and Secondary Modern Schools.

There are, however, further problems for the researcher in the qualitative field as the data collected needs to be interpreted. Whilst it is possible to see the criticism of those such as Sharp (1980) who point to the collection of masses of notes, transcripts, tapes, films and diaries etc, and the practical problems of not getting lost in the minutiae of situations. It would seem that the case which she puts forward supports that of Althusser (1977) that the superiority of the analysis of theory over empirical investigation is not the solution to social science research.

But, as Andy Hargreaves (1985) points out, how can we know things exist as theorists describe them if there is no empirical research. Workers in the qualitative mode are only too aware of its lack of scientific rigour, but they are not prepared for that to render it of no value. Indeed that is its strength.

"The best empirical work does not, as Althusser contends, use and interpret evidence uncritically, but treats it as constantly problematic".

Hargreaves (1985)

There needs to be a constant dialogue between theory and evidence - testing one against the other and looking at the same time for any internal consistency and coherence. Such a dialogue would lead to a better understanding of the social world and produce valid knowledge. To get lost in either empirical evidence or theory would not allow such knowledge to develop. However, there are two separate issues here - one dealing with the method of collection and means of interpreting the data within certain theoretical frameworks, and the other which points to the use of the 'results' of the research itself. I shall return to the latter point in a moment.

Before that there are philosophical issues at stake about the nature of qualitative research vis a vis quantitative research which influences the methods used to collect data and further issues which need to be addressed about how the data is to be interpreted within this empirical/theoretical dialogue.

Bryman (1984) points to the difference in the epistemological assumptions of the two paradigms. One quoted as positivism is underpinned by the distinctive theory of what should pass as warrantable knowledge. It stresses objectivity and claims social survey methods meet the epistemological belief in a natural science base.

The qualitative paradigm aims to discover novel or unanticipated findings, it wants to see the world from the point of view of the actor. Its philosophical underpinnings are phenomenology, verstehen and symbolic interactionism - so in-depth interviews, life histories, participant observations meet the prior set of epistemological requirements of the qualitative philosophy.

I chose the research method of in-depth unstructured interviews because it was in line with my belief of data emanating from the individuals (because it is based on verstehen) not because it will enable me to see what I want to see. The choice of method is thus sound on Bryman's analysis:-

"If the research problem is one which directly emanates from a particular epistemological position then the question of the appropriateness of a research technique is significant, for the technique must properly reflect the epistemological framework in which the research is embedded."

Bryman (1984)

Because of the differences in epistemology there is no way of clarifying, developing, validating theories which may arise from the research by a recourse to qualitative methods later - the qualitative research methods are a means to their own ends. Any attempt made to create a discourse between theory and empirical research needs to be carried out within the same philosophical background and this gives rise to its own problems - that is how to analyse or to interpret the data collected - but this will not be facilitated (or be logical) by trying to mix the two distinct paradigms.



"The analysis of case study data is essentially concerned with the process of interpretation. That is, the translation of raw data into a coherent portrayal of an institution and of institutional processes. The process of interpretation involves the data coming to stand for and represent a field of reality as the basis for a 'theoretical' (or some other kind of) account of the setting".

Ball 1983(a)

So there is clearly a role for such research in its own terms and the growth of studies in this area illustrate this. Those qualitative researchers who would seem to set such store on the constant validation of data collected in this way may be accused of confusing the two paradigms - almost of 'touching wood' or wanting the best of both worlds. Provided that the data is presented here as it appears to me from the students, and stands as their interpretation of reality it is valid. It is for the reader to then interpret that within his or her own perceptions of reality. To become involved in what are really positivist techniques of verification undermines the value of the contributions of the individuals in the sample, and misses the underlying philosophical point of qualitative research, (Hammersley 1980 for example).

There must come a time, however, when the reflexivity has to stop (Hargreaves 1985) - when decisions have to be made about what is possible and what is not. I have taken on board the concerns and experiences of others doing qualitative research before me, I have acknowledged the trap of taking a theory like that of Schutz's "Stranger" and looking for data to fit the theory. I have refined the methods of collecting the data; (after Patton and SPP for example), I am aware of the danger of collecting information out of context - I

have tried to look at the views of the students within the background of what is happening at the Polytechnic and at a national level in public sector higher education; I am aware that the students may say different things to me than to each other - two students in the same group can tell different stories, but what is important is that the information is relevant to them - how they see it, for the important issue here is that how they see the situation will influence how they behave within it.

The important issue then is to treat all the data as problematic - to see the interaction between theory and practice and put all assumptions to the test. This will also mean seeing the importance of the personal and interpersonal experience of this group of students, but also taking note of the way in which the social structures impinge upon, and partially shape, the organisation of their lives (Mills 1959).

This group of students are a product of their own history and also the history of Polytechnics in general and this Polytechnic in particular. True, it is difficult to know how far to take this analysis or how to evaluate it. The wider context of this study looking at the development of public sector higher education may not take the debate far enough, as the issue may be part of a Freirian analysis of the need for wider adult education as a catalyst for liberating personal development and social action. (Freire 1970).

This group of students inherit a Polytechnic shaped by politics and individual actions past and present - they therefore interpret this institution as they see it within this wider context, and this influence is all part of how this group of students finds the institution at this moment in time also being interpreted by those who currently work and study in it.

These limitations are taken on board in this research knowing that to focus on one area such as this will be restrictive but what is important is not the scope but the validity. This in itself raised a question though of the results of the research - what does the analysis of a small sample such as this show? There is certainly no attempt to produce a general theory but instead an accurate description of this particular group of students at this Polytechnic.

But Lather (1986) in her study 'Research as Praxis' would see this as something of a disappointment in social science research of this kind. She uses praxis to mean the dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice to produce an emancipatory social science for if one is trying to produce a more fair and just society one should find ways to connect research methodology to our theoretical concerns and commitments. It is important for the research methodology to reflect the thoughts and needs of the mature student in this institution, but not only should it reflect the current theory on mature students but it should incorporate this and then move towards a 'transformative agenda'. Lather sees much current research as reflecting the status quo - furthering the research career of the researcher by using alienating and exploitative inquiry methods, but doing little in the way of social reform. Theory which



results from the data as is the case here is not open to forcing research into a theory model. It certainly illuminates the world as it appears to this group - especially because of my involvement in doing research as a mature student in the same institution. To use Eisner's (1985) analogy it is not a concentration on the final score but how the game is played during practice sessions and how rehearsals go before the curtain rises - it is in my context, a focus on the processes of educational practice.

However, whilst I would share the motivations of Lather's claims I would question some of her assumptions. Whilst I accept many of her practical criticisms, for example my lack of allowing my sample more feedback on what they said, I have concerns about the ethnocentrism of much of the research she quotes, particularly in the field of feminism and see the dangers of such an approach for describing how mature students ought to behave.

Finally, I also have concerns about such research producing change and would ask the question - change at what level - the level of the individual, the institution or some form of societal change. I would admit to personal change, my view of the expectations and reality of mature students in higher education have changed, but what about the role of the research in producing change in the individuals themselves. There was repeated evidence that my interaction with the members of this group raised not only awareness of their problems but also of the solutions. It also raised awareness of other issues which were unable to be solved within the context of the institution and that may not be within the best interests of the individuals concerned. At least though it presents the problems as they exist. Is there an obligation on the part of the institution to provide the experiences which fulfil the values held and beliefs it is deemed to hold? Is there an obligation to help those who internalise these values and beliefs as they leave the institution? For if changes are made in the institution without being reflected in the social structure as a whole where is the benefit? Could we ever say it would be better not to have allowed these individuals to change their lives?

This research leaves the way open for further research by presenting a picture of one institution and the experiences of a small group of students in it. It adds another dimension to the picture of mature students returning to higher education. Hopefully this increases awareness of their position at a time when, on the surface, they would appear to be being singled out as a different category of student.

### **The Reality of the Return to Study**

If one conclusion emerges from the study it is the error of trying to classify mature students as a homogeneous group. Right from the outset this group were individuals with different expectations of themselves, the institution and their return to study. This not only undermines any attempt to set a chronological age on the definition of who is a mature student, but it supports one of Knowles' assumptions of the needs of each member of a group to be seen as individuals and the danger of imposing any blanket ideology for the provision for adults as a group of learners. Age itself is not the criteria for defining an adult learner but the way they see themselves is most important. The youngest person in my sample with only one year between college and the Polytechnic although over 21 did not see himself as a mature student and had no wish to take part in the study after the first interview. John who was only 28 and unmarried, living in Halls of Residence felt more of a "student" than Brian who was 26, married and living in his own council house and to whom the polytechnic was "work" not a place to enjoy himself in. The differences need to be seen in terms of responsibilities, experiences and self perception not chronological divisions.



Bearing in mind the differences, the group came to have more in common as they went through their courses and experienced the reality of the Polytechnic. It is this experience of coping with study and life outside the Polytechnic that unites them and how they came to terms with that reality within the existing framework of their lives. It is this convergence that becomes the core of this study, the way in which the experience of the return to study becomes the overriding experience in the life of the individual. We do not expect these adults to pursue their individual aims, we expect them to conform to the requirements of the institution, to become - the sort of students we expect - regardless of age or background. The thing which unites the group is the way in which they accept this reality. There was a transition from what they expected to conforming to what the institution expected which, as London said earlier, may only reflect the needs of a particular society anyway.

Before coming to the Polytechnic each of the group had an individual story to tell, had their own history and experiences of education. Their reasons for returning were different but they did fit into a pattern.

For each there was an intrinsic and extrinsic reason for wanting to return at this moment in time. There was, in all cases, a 'trigger' event - a heart attack, a change in family status, a need for a job and this may or may not have been the stated reason for return. It gave what seemed to be a justification a rationalisation for something less tangible - something always wanted to be done for its own sake but somehow not a valid reason in our society.

These individuals felt that their learning had to take place in an institutional context despite what Tough may claim about individual learning projects. They felt the need to give it credibility because often the opposition from family and friends and the barriers to access within a 'normal' adults experience are great. Those involved in education may not be aware of these barriers being "insiders" in the system but the pressures against a return to education are more than financial. Often too, they may be more imagined than real but the consequences are the same. A throw-away remark at a recruiting fair, a comment on the telephone, pictures in the press of graduation ceremonies with people in gowns and 'hats' can create feelings of inferiority which, although not intended, have the result of putting up a barrier to even asking questions about what it would be like to return to education. Despite this though it became very evident that this group saw these things as legitimate expectations of Higher Education once they began their courses.

It seems that mature returners need to have a trigger event to tip the balance - to allow them to use education as a way of restoring equilibrium to return to a state of homeostasis. There needs to be the possibility of a new job, a change of status, to study for its own sake is not enough. There has to be a qualification to justify the study in terms of ones credibility in our society. In fact, this measurement of self becomes the most important factor for the mature returner in the first term - the marks become the master.

In fact there is evidence to support this view in the work of Charnley and Jones (1979) with regard to basic literacy education. Those who do return to classes are more likely to do so for reasons of self-esteem than for the skills they achieve alone.

There is also a wealth of evidence to show that those adults who return to education tend to be those who have already had previous educational involvement. Johnstone and Rivera (1965). Aslanian and Brickell (1980) in America and the Reports by Alexander (Scottish Education Dept. 1975) and Russell (H M Stationery Office 1973) in the United Kingdom show that the majority of adult learners are young, well-educated, white collar workers with moderate incomes.

One of the beliefs perpetuated by adult educators to explain why it is the case that more adults do not return to study is that they are inhibited by memories of school. It was at school that they were made to feel inferior, they did not know the answer, they were powerless to help themselves. This is an image perpetuated by the pedagogy/andragogy debate which is built upon the model of the didactic paternalistic environment of school and the humanistic self-directed learning of adult educational environments.

My study showed no evidence to support this assumption. In this group when I asked them about school it brought very little response, certainly no negative feelings.



Whilst I certainly would agree to having little information from adults who have not returned to study, this lack of negative feelings against school did cause me to modify my beliefs in this explanation early in the research and to question these assumptions more closely.

To begin with there can be no assumption that those adults who do not return to education or continue from school are not making a positive and indeed a valid decision. One of the people I interviewed, who did not take up a place, said how he had not continued his education from school because he wanted, and got, a good job. He didn't want to study or to be part of whatever ideology went with it. He turned down the offer of a place at this Polytechnic to stay at work and study with the Open University because he felt, although he wanted the qualification now to change jobs, that it kept him within a familiar, unthreatening reference group.

As far as the dichotomy of pedagogy and andragogy is concerned this is a further assumption to be tested. Whereas Knowles may have shifted his prescription of the conditions for andragogy (in the 1980 edition of his text compared to the 1970 one) from the classroom to assumptions about the learners themselves, these are open to debate as the sections on who controls knowledge in this research showed. A walk around the classrooms of a primary school may raise serious exceptions to claims of assumptions about adult learners.

What did become very evident from this research was the impact of most recent study on the expectations of what it would be like at the Polytechnic. Students who had been to night school, Open College of the North West and the Pre-degree at this Polytechnic, mostly spoke of an encouraging and supportive learning experience which they hoped would be continued. This was not only in terms of the subject work, but for the social support it provided in aiding the return to education. There were those who felt that this was given too high a profile. Brian and Malcolm were critical and Kate and Sally felt let down when they began their courses after the Pre-degree, but generally these courses provided a positive attitude toward education as the group began their studies.

The question which then needs to be asked is whether or not this Polytechnic expects this to be the case or do the staff believe that the previous educational experience of its adult students will have been a negative school experience. In which case these students will be willing to accept either a continuation of the classroom situation or any concessions to the adult status. It may be that the staff have a different belief of mature students altogether. One member of staff I spoke to talked about the difficulties of dealing with adults. She claimed they always thought they were right, always asked difficult questions, needed extra time and counselling and generally were not worth the hassle of recruiting them. The question about what was the most recent educational experience just did not arise or enter her thoughts because all her students were either straight from school or on day release.

Differences amongst the staff of the Polytechnic towards mature students and the example Sally gave of the same member of staff in his approach to Pre-degree undergraduate students points to the need for staff development in the institution.

The single most important practical finding which I felt came from these experiences of returning to study did emanate from this transition from preparatory or access course to full-time study. This was that this preparation was not adequate at a practical level. Expectations based on one or two evenings a week created false expectations of how the full-time course would be. This was particularly the case with the Open College and Pre-degree where there was a single supportive tutor, a well integrated well motivated mature group of students and an amount of study which could be assimilated into often already busy lives. Families and friends were willing to rally round to babysit or put up with the inconvenience of a short time away from the home because overall the continuity of life was retained. The students at this stage were in Schutz's terms outsiders still, they were on the periphery and even on the Predegree had no real working knowledge of the Polytechnic.

During my first interviews one or two people did hint it might be different on the full-time course, but there was little that they could do to test the reality of full-time study beforehand because they had no way of knowing what would be involved. The expectation of what it would be like at the Polytechnic became the reality in itself and almost a blind faith that it would be alright took over. Ken did no preparation even though he had not studied for years and it was



this lack of preparation which caused problems. Kate embarked on a major rebuilding programme in her home and without any practical support from her husband suffered from a stress-related illness at the end of the first year. Even those with no families, at least not children, found the relentless activity of the return to study difficult to adjust to and reached the end of the first term in a state of physical, if not mental, exhaustion.

A decision was made in this research to concentrate on full-time students. However, discussions I had during the pilot project and with part-time students I meet emphasised that they may be better able to cope with a return to study possibly because they do not attempt to become part of the system but instead retain the status of their lives outside the Polytechnic. The part-timers retain an instrumental approach, their studies are only part of their whole experience they have other yardsticks against which to assess their performance than the culture of the Polytechnic.

For full-time students the rites-of-passage to their courses is the process of enrolment. This is the actual beginning, the bureaucratic gateway and the start of the reality for the adult student. For many in my sample enrolment was seen as the internalization of inadequacies, *'the damp flannel'*, *'the enobelling suffering'*, *'the need to be made to feel like a student'*, *'the lack of the right number of photographs'*, a time of knowing ones place, or disorientation dependancy, of no longer being in charge of yourself, the manifestation of a change of status. This was the time to suspend what they may have thought was adulthood and this sets the scene for

study at the Polytechnic. It is this experience which determines that they will now be taught in classrooms and yet it is often administrators not the academic staff who perpetuate this image. No Predegree, Open College or previous study prepared the group for enrolment, it was as if it had to be endured in person because it was part of what was expected to become an insider.

The first term then built on this experience - which is not a problem of lack of photographs or being in the wrong place at the wrong time but a feeling of not being in control, of inadequacy of loss of self-esteem, clearly not something which is taken into account by those who administer and therefore understand the system, because the same systems continue year after year. There are clear implications for policy here not only for enrolment itself but for the whole of the first term which continues as a trial as the individuals come to terms with the different levels of meaning and knowledge of what is and is not important to the becoming of an insider in this institution.

This process is particularly difficult in the first term as each individual is forced to reassess their expectations of themselves with the realism of life at the Polytechnic and there is a difference for each background experience. It becomes necessary to reassess the roles outside the Polytechnic in terms of what is expected inside and what the individual feels he or she has now set as a target. For those with fewer commitments there are less problems but even then as David said you have to develop a 'coping strategy' you have to do it for yourself. The staff can't help because they set the standards, you need the value of experience at an individual level. What the institution can do is provide feedback within the context of the new roles. It can ensure early assessment of performance by return of graded coursework.

The important "significant others" in the development of this coping strategy are other mature students who have real empathy and there are important policy implications here too. What is most significant is



that the reassessment, the prospective transformation comes in terms of what happens inside the Polytechnic. It is the return of essays, the grades, the understanding of the system that matters and not any previously held experience or status. It needs to come from the individual in the context of the whole scenario of the learning experience and so to some extent does not support the claim of the value of external experience for the adult learner unless there is the opportunity, as in the case of Marjorie with her nursing experience, to use this on the course. Life experience outside the Polytechnic is not seen as valid. When relevant experience is devalued though, as Ken and Alan illustrated, it does devalue the whole individual. It is experience and ability to cope in this new environment which is the key and a reassessment of what is important to the individuals themselves. Each individual has a different perception of what they expect of the Polytechnic, of the coursework, the staff, the social life and their interaction within it but they also have expectations of themselves and these can only be assessed by personal experience.

It is this coming to terms with oneself, ones expectations and realisations of one's own performance within the total process of returning to a full-time course of study which gives an added dimension to self-directed learning. It is also this new level of 'homeostasis' or a transformation of perspective which gives an optimism and a way out of what may seem an unacceptable situation. After all, despite the problems of that first term the whole of my sample were still on courses at the end of the first year. Not one of them has dropped out and, of those reaching the end of their courses, not one of them has failed. Perhaps the overall view they had in the

third interview was one of post hoc rationalisation but the reality was that they had developed a coping strategy for themselves within the system as it existed. That though, is the question with which the study began and the question of education for whom education for what? Is what higher education is doing by access schemes and mission statements raising false expectations which cannot be met in reality? Is it in fact missing the important question which needs to be answered at a philosophical level away from student numbers, income generation and ask, education for what? Or is this an ideology which will find no place in public sector corporations? Indeed this may only be an extension of the move to prescribe which subjects can legitimately be studied today as institutions face pressure to cut back on humanities and increase science and technology students.

#### **Implication for Policy in the Polytechnic.**

As this study is completed important new developments in the field of access provision are going through the Polytechnic and answers to questions on funding for them will show the level of ideological commitment to the philosophy or reinforce those views of the sceptics to point to more economic/demographic aims of recruiting mature applicants.

Because this has been an interactionist study it has been possible to integrate the views of the students in this sample into all levels of life at the Polytechnic and although there still remain important issues for future policy some of the recommendations I have made from this research are already being implemented.

If a student is following a course in one school then the expectations of that course become the norm. For students on a programme which takes in more than one course there are added problems. This was described at the level of seminar presentation, essay deadlines, type of coursework and expectations of the role of the staff. Even the students in my sample on the same course had different experiences or perceptions that were different and even though I had a sound working knowledge of the institution I found it interesting that often the stories I heard conflicted with what I would have expected - or even the story before.

One of the problems ,however, which was felt by the group, is that although this institution does have a professional corporate image it does not have a corporate identity. There are different buildings, different facilities and schools, different attitudes and different ways of relating to individuals be they staff or students. This institution is no different to any other in this respect, but it poses problems for change and to some extent limits the part individuals can play themselves. There is evidence in the data of the differences in attitudes and practical arrangements for mature students on different courses, in different faculties and different programmes within the Polytechnic.

There was also evidence that these students did not identify with the Polytechnic but with the base of their course - the rooms they were mostly taught in and I was often surprised to find that many of them had not eaten in the main refectory, been to the Arts Centre or know



where the Health Centre was.

This is a time of financial change and constraints in public sector higher education though so that schemes to offer induction courses which increase access provision and allow groups to orientate themselves in the institution are not financially attractive and so not of high priority. Having said that though, there are declining numbers of 18 year old students and a high drop out amongst dissatisfied mature students does little for the institution or the individuals concerned.

Decisions about increasing access for mature students or allowing individuals to fulfil their potential within the institution cannot only be made at a philosophical level. In the same way that to increase the numbers of mature students cannot be made practically without a change in ideology to accommodate this. Changing the layout of a room, interviewing prospective students in the evening are cosmetic changes which do little if there is no supporting change in attitude.

Since I began this research three years ago there have been changes which reflect an increased awareness of the needs of mature students in the Polytechnic and practical changes have been made which gives rise to optimism about egalitarian reform. However, in other areas there is evidence of little change and a reflection of the elitist adherence to paternalistic higher education. This does not refer to the technology of teaching and learning as would be advocated by the proponents of andragogy but to an attitude of mind towards non-

traditional students in higher education.

Clearly in the area of staff development much remains to be done to raise awareness to groups such as mature students, black students, women and students with disabilities. There are important initiatives in this area from the setting up of a Racial Equality unit, the appointment of Welfare and Overseas Student Officers, the development of a new access unit and the initiatives of the Technology Faculty and the School of Public Policy and Administration for a workshop in Teaching and Learning Strategies. These initiatives need more funding on a Polytechnic wide basis to see the implications at times of interview, enrolment, assessment, counselling and guidance and particularly help with leaving as well as entering the Polytechnic. Further study must be done on the effect of the time spent at the Polytechnic on mature students and this is being set up directly as a result of this research and subsequent conversations with mature graduates.

There are policy implications for induction of students and these have already been implemented on a pilot scale. A group of mature students came to the Polytechnic in the week before their courses began to talk to current and graduate students, to hear what would happen during enrolment, to talk to the student welfare officer, the student counsellor and administrators. In this way they knew a good many people before their courses began but more important they had a contact person, a student, the senior tutor, myself to be able to turn to for help. This scheme will be developed on a wider scale in subsequent years using these and other volunteer mature students as

'mentors' for help particularly during that first term.

It is clear that support is very necessary at that time and in recent months a mature student society has been set up to provide the self help needed to develop this self-directedness necessary to cope with the return to study at an individual level. The Polytechnic is also funding the production of a mature student booklet based on the experiences of students in this research, the audio cassette 'It takes all sorts' and the help of the mature student's society and the student welfare officer who contributed to this project.

There is also, as indicated earlier, the development of a Foundation Course to replace the current Predegree. This is an important development because it meets the criticism that these students had of being given unfair expectations of themselves and inadequate preparation. There clearly is a worry about being too heavy handed in a stress on preparation but a guaranteed place at the end of a successfully negotiated learning contract is more likely to allow a student to benefit from a course rather than having to cope with the academic content and practicalities of a new status - a status which is not always viewed with understanding by family and friends.

Ultimately, however, the strength of this research lies in its relation of the importance of how each individual copes with study and how their expectations of themselves are modified in the context of an institution within the public sector of higher education. As the Introduction and Chapter One showed, there is increasing emphasis on the provision of places for mature students in the system. There was,



and is, the belief that Polytechnics would provide a different and more relevant course of study to meet the needs of less traditional students in higher education and statistics show nationally and locally that mature students are taking advantage of the many initiatives to increase access.

However, it takes a study such as this, which questions the expectations of the individual mature students themselves to see what really needs to be done at an ideological level in the provision of courses of higher education to fulfil the promises of such individuals being able to benefit from their learning projects.

This though needs to be seen within the requirements of the mature returners themselves. As the evidence illustrated here, the return to study may be valid for them in instrumental terms rather than to use education to redress any perceptions of social injustice. To suggest that because they are adults they should view education differently is ethnocentric and replaces one form of constraint with another.

The institutional claim of ability to benefit then needs to be seen with respect to each individual and not what it would like to see that benefit to be.

Of this sample of 22 students, the success rate in terms of finishing their courses at the Polytechnic are high but this is at the cost of conforming to the reality of what the institution and the system of higher education has to offer. The first term was a period of reassessment of expectations to bring them in line with the

realisations of what the system had to offer. The resolution came in terms of playing the game by the rules of the institution, a recourse to marks, grades, essay titles, deadlines, accumulating credit in already predetermined areas - a negotiated contract with the odds already fixed against a student. Once the student assimilated this level of meaning they were able to become insiders in the system, the perspective transformation was in terms of individual expectations and realisations, the self-direction was a strategy to cope with the practicalities of studying in an institution with a history which existed before them and a future which would go on long after they leave predetermined by that history.

Many of the problems for my group in that first term were in coming to terms with this readjustment of expectations to realisations often created by schemes which reflect the recruiting of mature students. Sally, Philip, David, Ken, Janet, Mavis, Alison, Alan, and Kate expected to be treated like 'adults' but were disappointed by a process which began at enrolment and continued until the realisation was reached that there was 'them and us'. *'You have to be made to know you are a student'*, said Brian. *'Ultimately I know that whatever I do I'll get a 2:2 degree'*, said Thomas and ultimately he did.

Any theorising which polarises the treatment of adults in education from the way in which they were treated as children such as with the pedagogy/andragogy debate, the setting up of access courses, the practical means of recruiting adults which does not take cognisance of the needs of those adults but concentrates instead on the needs of the institution fails to meet its aims at an ideological level. The

intention of this research is that the institution will examine those needs so that the expectations and realisations of the individuals themselves are reconciled at their own levels and not those enforced on them by an institution within the public sector of higher education. It may be costly in terms of practical implications and certainly in terms of changes in underlying philosophy. Then though it would allow the individuals to say that they had benefitted from their time of study rather than the institution had been allowed to continue because of their integration in an existing framework of the provision of education which meets the needs of a particular society at a particular moment in time.

It is this provision which influences what may seem to be contradicting evidence from this research. The way in which the adults in this study developed a strategy to conform to the requirements of the institution would seem to indicate that they are happy with the situation. It was once they were able to conform to the requirements of the course that they were better able to cope with their return to study. This gave the impression that there was no place for andragogy or self direction within the requirements of their student experiences. I would question these findings, however, within the expectations and realisations of this group within this institution. The fact that there was little evidence that this group were willing to question their essay subject areas, their marks or the grade of their final degree does not indicate a rejection of more humanistic attitudes to them as students. It may be that it was not something that was on offer to them. They had no choice but to



choice but to conform to the system as it was.

Inevitably, life at the Polytechnic became a compromise between expectations and realisations for this group. It is also a compromise for the institution too. However, because of the position of the institution within our society and its own historical position in the education system the balance is tipped in favour of the institution. The power of the individual it seems has little force against the system.

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## MATURE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION - 1975 TO 1986

## Introduction

1. This bulletin presents, for the first time, information on home first year full-time and part-time mature students at publicly funded higher education institutions in Great Britain but excluding the Open University. For the purposes of this bulletin, mature students are students starting higher education courses later than the usual age for such courses: first degree and sub-degree students aged 21 or over and postgraduates aged 25 or over on the first year of their course. Thus they are not identical to mature initial entrants - students entering a course of full-time higher education for the first time - which exclude those starting a second higher education course and all part-time students.

Information is available on the age of all students but as most higher education courses last for a number of years, students would have to be traced through their courses to identify those who were "mature" on entry. At present the data collection system used for polytechnic and college students does not link the records from year to year. It was therefore decided to simplify the information shown in this bulletin and restrict it to first year students.

## Summary

2. The major findings are:

a. The number of first year home mature students increased by 42 per cent between 1979 and 1986: from 131,100 to 186,400.

b. Full-time mature students account for a third of the total, and part-time students two thirds. Since 1979 the increase in the number of part-time students (54 per cent) has been greater than that of full-time students (23 per cent).

c. The numbers of women have increased faster than those for men, with the percentage of women rising from 41 per cent in 1979 to 45 per cent for those on full-time courses and from 27 per cent to 40 per cent for part-time courses.

d. Eighty three per cent of all mature students are in polytechnics and colleges, just higher than the proportion in 1979.

e. Sixty seven per cent of all mature students were studying sub-degree courses in 1986. Only 20 per cent were studying for a first degree.

f. Two thirds of university mature students are postgraduate, compared to 8 per cent in polytechnics and colleges. Conversely 7 per cent of university and two thirds of polytechnic and college students were studying sub-degree courses.

g. Excluding postgraduates, 58 per cent of full-time and 69 per cent of part-time mature students are aged 25 or over.



h. In both the university and in the polytechnic and college sectors, students studying education accounted for less than 5 per cent of those aged 21-24 but almost 30 per cent of those aged 25 or over.

i. Amongst first degree mature students, only 12 per cent of part-timers have the traditional entry qualifications for higher education. The proportion of full-timers with these qualifications is higher: 32 per cent for those aged over 25 and 52 per cent for those aged 21-24.

## Definitions

3. The definitions of terms used in this bulletin are as follows:

a. Student numbers - All figures are based on an annual census of students registered with institutions as at December for universities and November for polytechnics and colleges.

b. First year students - Students on the first year of their course but includes some university students who enter the second or subsequent year of a course. They may have previously undertaken some other higher education course and are therefore not necessarily initial entrants to higher education.

c. Mature students - First degree and sub-degree students aged 21 or over and postgraduates aged 25 or over on the first year of their course (ages as at previous August).

d. Home students - Those whose usual place of domicile/residence is in the United Kingdom.

e. Higher education - All courses provided by universities (excluding the Open University and the independent University of Buckingham), and courses at polytechnics and colleges which lead to qualifications of a standard higher than the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education or Scottish Higher Certificate.

f. Polytechnics and colleges - All polytechnics, Scottish central institutions, institutions of higher education and all other colleges maintained or assisted by local authorities or grant-aided by one of the Education Departments. Cranfield Institute of Technology and the Royal College of Art are included.

g. Full-time students - The term full-time students is taken to include sandwich students throughout this bulletin.

h. Subject classification - A new subject classification was introduced in 1985, with 16 main groups, for students on university courses in order to relate more closely to the subjects studied and to provide more information on combined courses. It will not be introduced for polytechnics and colleges until 1988 where subject classification is still based on 9 groups. Further details of the new university classification are given in "Universities standard classification of academic subjects" and "University statistics, volume one, appendix 11b published by the Universities Statistical Record (USR).



- i. Level of course - Courses are subdivided into three levels:
- i) Postgraduate courses (entry to which is normally confined to graduates regardless of the academic standard of the course).
  - ii) First degree courses.
  - iii) Sub-degree courses (which include some courses of degree equivalent standard).
- j. Traditional qualifications - Two or more GCE A Level passes or 3 or more Scottish Higher Certificates.
- k. Symbols used - . = not applicable  
 .. = not available  
 - = nil or negligible

**Mature students by mode, sex and type of institution - Table 1, Charts 1 and 2**

4. In 1986, there were 186,400 first year mature students, an increase of 11 per cent compared with 1985 and 42 per cent compared with 1979. The numbers of full-time students rose to 60,100, and of part-time students to 126,300, increases of 23 per cent and 54 per cent respectively since 1979. The substantial growth in part-time mature students is accounted for mainly by the increase for women, whose numbers more than doubled.

5. The proportion of women rose steadily between 1979 and 1986 from 41 to 45 per cent for full-time students and from 27 per cent to 40 per cent for part-time students. In 1986, 70 per cent of male mature students were studying part-time compared to 66 per cent of female students.

6. Eighty three per cent of all mature students (70 per cent full-time 90 per cent part-time) are in polytechnics and colleges and this sector expanded most rapidly between 1979 and 1986 (Chart 2).

**Mature students by mode, sex and level of study - Table 2, Chart 3**

**Full-time students**

7. The numbers of full-time sub-degree students have increased by over a third since 1979, reaching 26,000 in 1986 and accounting for 43 per cent of full-time mature students. The numbers of full-time first degree students decreased between 1979 and 1984 but then rose to 20,000 by 1986, accounting for 33 per cent of full-time mature students. Full-time postgraduate numbers increased each year since 1982 to reach 14,100 in 1986, 24 per cent of the total.

**Part-time students**

8. In 1986, 78 per cent of part-time mature students were on sub-degree courses, their number having increased by over 50 per cent since 1979. The number of part-time postgraduates increased by over 70 per cent, accounting for 15 per cent of part-time mature students in 1986. The numbers on part-time first degree courses account for only 7 per cent of all part-time students. The numbers actually fell by nearly 4 per cent between 1985 and 1986.



## Men and women

9. The increase in the number of women mature students has been greater than that for men at all levels and modes of study.

## Mature students by mode, sector, level of course, sex and age - Table 3

10. Excluding postgraduates (where by definition all mature students are over 24), 58 per cent of full-time and 69 per cent of part-time mature students are aged 25 or over. These percentages are even higher for women (65 per cent full-time and 74 per cent part-time). The only category where the numbers of students aged 21-24 are greater than those aged 25 or over is full-time males on first degree courses.

11. There are over twice as many full-time and slightly more part-time postgraduates at universities than at polytechnics and colleges. In contrast there are more first and sub-degree students at polytechnics and colleges, especially studying part-time.

## Mature students by sector, mode, subject, sex and age - Tables 4 and 5, Charts 4 and 5

12. Information on the subject classifications used is given in paragraph 3h. The different subject classification for universities and for polytechnics and colleges greatly limits the extent to which detailed comparisons can be made between sectors (Tables 4 and 5). They have however been aggregated into 6 broad groups in Charts 4 and 5 so that some broad comparisons can be made.

13. In both universities and polytechnics and colleges more women than men study arts, with broadly equal numbers studying social science but very few women study engineering. There are noticeable differences between ages which are shown in Charts 4 and 5. In particular, in both sectors, students studying education accounted for less than 5 per cent of those aged 21-24 but almost 30 per cent of those aged 25 or over. These will include those on Inservice teacher training courses.

14. In universities the distribution of subjects taken by students on full-time courses is similar to that for part-time students. However, in polytechnics and colleges full-time students study arts more and social science less than part-time students.

## Mature students' qualifications on entry by mode, sex and age - Table 6

15. Table 6 provides information on the qualifications on entry of mature undergraduates in universities in Great Britain and mature first degree students in polytechnics and colleges in England. Percentages are given to enable comparisons of the distribution between qualifications, for each sex and age band, to be made more easily.

16. Fifty two per cent of full-time students aged 21-24 have traditional qualifications ( see note j ). For full-time students aged over 25 the proportions are much lower: 38 per cent for universities and 29 per cent for polytechnics and colleges. Similarly, there are higher proportions of students with BTEC or equivalent qualifications aged 21-24 than aged 25 or over. Women starting full-time courses at universities are more likely than men to have 2 or more A levels, but the reverse is true at polytechnics and colleges. Women are much less likely to have BTEC or equivalent qualifications.



17. Both the universities and the polytechnics and colleges recruit large proportions of full-time mature students with "other" qualifications. Although not shown in the table, in universities half of these students have other UK qualifications, mainly professional qualifications, and half have no qualifications. In polytechnics and colleges over a quarter of all first degree entrants aged 25 or over are exceptional admissions or have no known qualifications but less than 10 per cent of those aged 21-24 fall into this category. The remaining students have a variety of other qualifications on entry ranging from degrees and professional qualifications to GCE O level or City & Guilds qualifications.

18. Less than 12 per cent of part-time first degree students in polytechnics and colleges have traditional qualifications on entry but almost half of those aged 21-24 have BTEC or equivalent qualifications. "Other" qualifications account for 28 per cent of those aged 21-24 and 70 per cent of those aged 25 or more. These include less than 10 per cent of those aged 21-24 and just over a quarter of those aged 25 or more who were exceptional admissions or had no known qualifications. The rest had a variety of other qualifications, degrees, teacher training qualifications (for the older students), professional qualifications and GCE O levels.

#### Mature students per thousand of the population - Table 7

19. Participation of mature students is expressed in table 7 as a rate per thousand of the relevant age group. This has been taken as 21-44 for students on first and sub-degree courses, and 25-44 for postgraduates. For postgraduate full-time students there has been a very small increase in recent years while for part-time students there has been an increase from 0.8 in 1979 to 1.2 in 1986.

20. The rate for male full-time first and sub-degree students has fluctuated around 2.5 per thousand. There has been an increase for women in the last two years but participation rates remain below those for men. Between 1979 and 1986, the rate for women on part-time course doubled while that for men increased by 0.5.

#### Comparison of mature and young first year higher education students

21. There are major differences between mature and young higher education students as can be seen by comparing the figures given in this bulletin with those given in Statistical Bulletin 8/88 "Student numbers in Higher Education".

22. Whereas about a third of mature students are on full-time courses the proportion for young students is about two thirds. Two thirds of mature students are on sub-degree courses but only about a third of young students. Most full-time mature students are in the polytechnic and college sector while there are almost equal numbers of young students in universities and public sector institutions. Smaller proportions of mature students than of young students are studying science based courses and smaller proportions enter degree courses with traditional qualifications. The percentage of women is similar amongst young and mature students.



## Further information

23. Figures on students in higher education in Great Britain are published in Statistical Bulletin 8/88. United Kingdom statistics on students in higher education are published annually for the DES by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in "Education Statistics for the United Kingdom". University statistics, other than the Open University and University of Buckingham, are published annually in "University statistics", volumes 1 to 3 by the Universities' Statistical Record, PO Box 130, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, GL50 1JW. English Polytechnic and College Statistics are published annually by the Department in the Further Education Volume of the "Statistics of Education" series. Statistical information on the Open University is available from the Planning Office, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. Information for students studying in Scotland and Wales is published by the Scottish Education Department and the Welsh Office, respectively. Projections of future student numbers for higher education were last published by the DES in "Projections of Demand for Higher Education in Great Britain, 1986-2000". International Comparisons of Higher Education student numbers can be found in Statistical Bulletin 4/87.

24. This bulletin is issued with the agreement of the Scottish Education Department, the Welsh Office, the University Grants Committee and the Universities' Statistical Record. Extra copies can be obtained, free, from the Statistics Branch, Department of Education and Science, Elizabeth House, York Road, London SE1 7PH (Direct line telephone number 01-934 9038). Enquiries about statistics in this bulletin should be addressed to the Statistics Division at the same address. Press enquiries should be addressed to the Departmental Press Office (Direct line telephone number 01-934 9880).

Table 1 Higher education: first year mature home students  
By mode, sex and type of institution  
Great Britain

Great Britain									Thousands	
Academic year beginning in									Percentage change	
	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1979 to 1986	1985 to 1986
Full-time										
Men										
Universities	9.6	9.4	9.1	8.4	8.6	8.9	9.4	10.3	6.8	9.3
Polys and colleges	18.9	18.5	20.7	20.3	21.1	20.8	21.2	23.0	21.3	8.5
Total	28.6	27.9	29.8	28.8	29.7	29.7	30.6	33.3	16.4	8.8
Women										
Universities	6.0	6.1	5.9	5.5	5.8	6.4	6.8	7.4	22.4	9.0
Polys and colleges	14.2	13.9	14.8	15.3	15.5	15.5	17.7	19.4	37.0	9.6
Total	20.2	19.9	20.7	20.8	21.3	21.9	24.5	26.8	32.7	9.4
Men and women										
Universities	15.7	15.5	15.0	13.9	14.5	15.3	16.2	17.7	12.8	9.2
Polys and colleges	33.1	32.4	35.6	35.6	36.6	36.3	38.9	42.4	28.0	9.0
Total	48.8	47.9	50.6	49.5	51.0	51.6	55.1	60.1	23.1	9.1
Part-time										
Men										
Universities	5.0	5.3	6.2	5.9	6.4	6.5	7.1	8.0	58.3	11.7
Polys and colleges	54.8	56.2	56.4	55.5	59.7	59.4	62.7	67.3	22.8	7.2
Total	59.8	61.5	62.5	61.4	66.0	65.9	69.9	75.2	25.8	7.7
Women										
Universities	2.8	3.2	3.7	3.7	4.0	4.5	4.8	5.3	88.0	8.9
Polys and colleges	19.6	21.6	22.9	25.2	28.6	29.2	38.5	45.8	133.0	18.9
Total	22.4	24.7	26.6	28.9	32.6	33.7	43.3	51.0	127.4	17.8
Men and women										
Universities	7.8	8.5	9.9	9.6	10.4	11.0	12.0	13.2	68.9	10.6
Polys and colleges	74.4	77.8	79.2	80.7	88.3	88.6	101.2	113.0	51.9	11.7
Total	82.3	86.3	89.1	90.3	98.7	99.6	113.2	126.3	53.5	11.6
Total										
Men										
Universities	14.7	14.7	15.2	14.3	15.0	15.5	16.6	18.3	24.5	10.3
Polys and colleges	73.7	74.8	77.1	75.8	80.8	80.2	83.9	90.2	22.4	7.6
Total	88.4	89.5	92.3	90.2	95.8	95.6	100.4	108.5	22.7	8.0
Women										
Universities	8.8	9.2	9.6	9.1	9.8	10.9	11.6	12.7	43.2	9.0
Polys and colleges	33.8	35.5	37.7	40.5	44.1	44.7	56.2	65.2	92.7	15.9
Total	42.7	44.7	47.3	49.6	53.9	55.6	67.8	77.9	82.5	14.8
Men and women										
Universities	23.5	23.9	24.8	23.5	24.8	26.4	28.2	30.9	31.5	9.8
Polys and colleges	107.6	110.2	114.8	116.3	124.9	124.9	140.1	155.5	44.5	10.9
Total	131.1	134.1	139.7	139.8	149.7	151.2	168.3	186.4	42.2	10.7



Table 2 Higher education : first year mature home students  
By mode, sex and level of study  
Great Britain

									Thousands	
Academic year beginning in									Percentage change	
	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1979 to 1986	1985 to 1986
<b>FULL-TIME</b>										
<b>Men</b>										
Postgraduate	6.7	6.7	6.8	6.2	6.7	7.0	7.4	8.2	23.2	10.7
First degree	10.5	9.8	10.4	9.8	9.4	9.1	9.9	10.8	2.8	9.8
Sub-degree	11.4	11.4	12.7	12.8	13.5	13.6	13.3	14.2	25.0	7.0
Total	28.6	27.9	29.8	28.8	29.7	29.7	30.6	33.3	16.4	8.8
<b>Women</b>										
Postgraduate	4.3	4.4	4.2	4.0	4.4	4.5	5.1	5.9	36.1	15.9
First degree	8.1	7.4	7.8	7.5	7.3	7.6	8.7	9.1	13.0	4.6
Sub-degree	7.8	8.2	8.7	9.3	9.7	9.8	10.7	11.8	51.1	10.3
Total	20.2	19.9	20.7	20.8	21.3	21.9	24.5	26.8	32.7	9.4
<b>Men and women</b>										
Postgraduate	11.0	11.1	11.0	10.2	11.1	11.5	12.5	14.1	28.3	12.8
First degree	18.6	17.2	18.1	17.2	16.7	16.7	18.6	20.0	7.3	7.3
Sub-degree	19.2	19.6	21.4	22.1	23.2	23.4	24.0	26.0	35.6	8.4
Total	48.8	47.9	50.6	49.5	51.0	51.6	55.1	60.1	23.1	9.1
<b>PART-TIME</b>										
<b>Men</b>										
Postgraduate	8.2	8.5	9.7	9.5	10.1	10.5	11.4	12.3	51.0	8.3
First degree	4.1	4.2	4.4	4.3	4.6	4.5	4.9	4.7	17.2	-3.8
Sub-degree	47.6	48.8	48.4	47.6	51.4	51.0	53.5	58.2	22.2	8.6
Total	59.8	61.5	62.5	61.4	66.0	65.9	69.9	75.2	25.8	7.7
<b>Women</b>										
Postgraduate	2.9	3.2	3.9	4.0	4.6	5.1	5.7	6.5	125.8	13.7
First degree	2.7	2.9	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.6	4.1	4.0	49.1	-3.6
Sub-degree	16.9	18.6	19.4	21.5	24.6	25.1	33.4	40.5	140.1	21.1
Total	22.4	24.7	26.6	28.9	32.6	33.7	43.3	51.0	127.4	17.8
<b>Men and women</b>										
Postgraduate	11.0	11.7	13.6	13.5	14.7	15.5	17.1	18.8	70.6	10.1
First degree	6.7	7.1	7.7	7.6	8.0	8.1	9.1	8.7	29.9	-3.7
Sub-degree	64.5	67.4	67.8	69.1	75.9	76.0	87.0	98.7	53.0	13.4
Total	82.3	86.3	89.1	90.3	98.7	99.6	113.2	126.3	53.5	11.6
<b>TOTAL</b>										
<b>Men</b>										
Postgraduate	14.8	15.3	16.5	15.6	16.9	17.5	18.8	20.5	38.5	9.2
First degree	14.6	14.0	14.8	14.1	14.0	13.6	14.8	15.6	6.8	5.2
Sub-degree	59.0	60.2	61.1	60.5	64.9	64.5	66.8	72.4	22.7	8.3
Total	88.4	89.5	92.3	90.2	95.8	95.6	100.4	108.5	22.7	8.0
<b>Women</b>										
Postgraduate	7.2	7.6	8.2	8.1	9.0	9.5	10.8	12.4	72.0	14.7
First degree	10.8	10.3	11.0	10.8	10.7	11.2	12.9	13.1	22.0	1.9
Sub-degree	24.7	26.7	28.1	30.8	34.3	34.9	44.1	52.3	111.9	18.5
Total	42.7	44.7	47.3	49.6	53.9	55.6	67.8	77.9	82.5	14.8
<b>Men and women</b>										
Postgraduate	22.1	22.9	24.7	23.7	25.8	27.1	29.6	33.0	49.5	11.2
First degree	25.3	24.3	25.8	24.9	24.7	24.8	27.7	28.7	13.3	3.7
Sub-degree	83.7	87.0	89.2	91.3	99.2	99.4	111.0	124.7	49.0	12.4
Total	131.1	134.1	139.7	139.8	149.7	151.2	168.3	186.4	42.2	10.7



Table 3 Higher education : first year mature home students  
By mode, type of institution, level of course, sex and age  
Great Britain

Thousands								
Academic year beginning 1986	Men			Women			Men and women	
	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+ Total
FULL-TIME								
University								
Postgraduate	.	5.8	5.8	.	3.9	3.9	.	9.7 9.7
First degree	2.4	2.0	4.3	1.2	1.9	3.1	3.6	3.8 7.4
Sub-degree	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.4 0.6
Total	2.5	7.8	10.3	1.3	6.1	7.4	3.7	14.0 17.7
Polys and colleges								
Postgraduate	.	2.5	2.5	.	2.0	2.0	.	4.4 4.4
First degree	3.7	2.8	6.5	2.4	3.6	6.1	6.1	6.5 12.6
Sub-degree	5.7	8.3	14.0	3.6	7.8	11.4	9.3	16.1 25.4
Total	9.4	13.5	23.0	6.0	13.4	19.4	15.5	27.0 42.4
Higher education								
Postgraduate	.	8.2	8.2	.	5.9	5.9	.	14.1 14.1
First degree	6.0	4.8	10.8	3.6	5.5	9.1	9.7	10.3 20.0
Sub-degree	5.8	8.4	14.2	3.7	8.1	11.8	9.5	16.5 26.0
Total	11.9	21.4	33.3	7.3	19.5	26.8	19.2	40.9 60.1
PART-TIME								
University								
Postgraduate	.	6.9	6.9	.	3.8	3.8	.	10.7 10.7
First degree	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.1	0.6	0.7	0.1	1.1 1.2
Sub-degree	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.5	0.9 1.3
Total	0.3	7.7	8.0	0.4	4.9	5.3	0.6	12.6 13.2
Polys and colleges								
Postgraduate	.	5.4	5.4	.	2.7	2.7	.	8.2 8.2
First degree	1.2	3.0	4.2	0.5	2.8	3.3	1.7	5.8 7.5
Sub-degree	20.5	37.2	57.6	10.7	28.9	39.7	31.2	66.1 97.3
Total	21.7	45.6	67.3	11.3	34.5	45.8	32.9	80.1 113.0
Higher education								
Postgraduate	.	12.3	12.3	.	6.5	6.5	.	18.8 18.8
First degree	1.3	3.5	4.7	0.6	3.4	4.0	1.9	6.9 8.7
Sub-degree	20.7	37.5	58.2	11.0	29.5	40.5	31.7	67.0 98.7
Total	21.9	53.3	75.2	11.6	39.4	51.0	33.6	92.7 126.3
TOTAL								
University								
Postgraduate	.	12.7	12.7	.	7.7	7.7	.	20.4 20.4
First degree	2.4	2.4	4.8	1.3	2.5	3.7	3.7	4.9 8.6
Sub-degree	0.3	0.5	0.8	0.4	0.8	1.2	0.6	1.3 2.0
Total	2.7	15.5	18.3	1.6	11.0	12.7	4.4	26.6 30.9
Polys and colleges								
Postgraduate	.	7.9	7.9	.	4.7	4.7	.	12.6 12.6
First degree	4.9	5.8	10.7	3.0	6.4	9.4	7.9	12.3 20.1
Sub-degree	26.2	45.4	71.6	14.3	36.8	51.1	40.5	82.2 122.7
Total	31.1	59.1	90.2	17.3	47.9	65.2	48.4	107.1 155.5
Higher education								
Postgraduate	.	20.5	20.5	.	12.4	12.4	.	33.0 33.0
First degree	7.3	8.2	15.6	4.2	8.9	13.1	11.6	17.2 28.7
Sub-degree	26.5	45.9	72.4	14.7	37.6	52.3	41.2	83.5 124.7
Total	33.8	74.7	108.5	18.9	58.9	77.9	52.7	133.6 186.4

university : first year mature home students  
By mode, subject group, sex and age

Great Britain

Academic year beginning 1986	Percentages								
	Men			Women			Men and women		
	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+	Total
<b>FULL-TIME</b>									
Medicine and dentistry	6	4	5	9	3	4	7	4	5
Studies allied to medicine	2	2	2	5	6	6	3	3	3
Biological sciences	6	3	4	9	4	5	7	3	4
Veterinary science, agriculture	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1
Physical sciences	7	4	5	3	1	2	5	3	4
Mathematical sciences	6	6	6	2	3	2	5	4	4
Engineering & technology	25	10	14	2	1	1	17	6	9
Architecture & related studies	4	1	2	2	1	1	3	1	1
Social sciences	12	15	14	20	23	22	15	19	18
Business & financial studies	3	8	7	2	4	3	2	6	5
Librarianship, information science	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Languages & related studies	5	5	5	15	8	9	8	6	7
Humanity	9	6	7	7	6	6	8	6	6
Creative arts	2	1	1	3	1	1	2	1	1
Education	1	26	20	5	31	27	2	29	23
Multi-disciplinary studies	13	5	7	14	6	8	13	6	7
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (ooo's)	2.5	7.8	10.3	1.3	6.1	7.4	3.7	14.0	17.7
<b>PART-TIME</b>									
Medicine and dentistry	1	7	7	1	6	5	1	6	6
Studies allied to medicine	0	2	2	0	4	3	0	3	2
Biological sciences	0	3	3	2	4	4	1	4	3
Veterinary science, agriculture	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Physical sciences	6	3	3	3	1	1	4	2	2
Mathematical sciences	11	4	4	3	2	2	7	3	3
Engineering & technology	0	8	8	1	1	1	0	5	5
Architecture & related studies	4	3	3	0	1	1	2	2	2
Social sciences	5	10	10	7	13	13	6	11	11
Business & financial studies	0	21	20	1	7	7	1	15	15
Librarianship, information science	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Languages & related studies	20	4	4	45	9	11	34	6	7
Humanity	10	6	6	5	8	8	7	7	7
Creative arts	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Education	3	24	23	4	35	33	4	28	27
Multi-disciplinary studies	38	4	5	26	8	9	31	6	7
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (ooo's)	0.3	7.7	8.0	0.4	4.9	5.3	0.6	12.6	13.2
<b>FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME</b>									
Medicine and dentistry	6	6	6	7	4	5	6	5	5
Studies allied to medicine	2	2	2	4	5	5	3	3	3
Biological sciences	5	3	3	7	4	4	6	3	4
Veterinary science, agriculture	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1
Physical sciences	7	4	4	3	1	2	5	3	3
Mathematical sciences	7	5	5	2	2	2	5	4	4
Engineering & technology	23	9	11	2	1	1	15	6	7
Architecture & related studies	4	2	2	1	1	1	3	1	2
Social sciences	11	13	12	17	19	18	13	15	15
Business & financial studies	2	14	12	2	5	5	2	10	9
Librarianship, information science	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1
Languages & related studies	6	4	5	22	9	10	12	6	7
Humanity	9	6	7	6	7	7	8	7	7
Creative arts	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1
Education	1	25	22	5	33	29	2	28	25
Multi-disciplinary studies	15	5	6	16	7	8	16	6	7
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (000'S)	2.7	15.5	18.3	1.6	11.0	12.7	4.4	26.6	30.9



Table 5  
 Polys and colleges : first year mature home students  
 By mode, subject group,sex and age

Great Britain							Percentages		
Academic year beginning 1986	Men			Women			Men and women		
	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+	Total	21-24	25+	Total
FULL-TIME									
Education	4	25	16	10	31	24	6	28	20
Medicine, dentistry & health	1	3	2	8	16	14	4	10	8
Engineering & technology	27	18	22	3	1	2	18	10	13
Agriculture, forestry & veterinary	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Science	15	11	13	9	5	6	13	8	10
Social, administrative & business	28	24	26	37	30	32	32	27	29
Architecture, prof. & voc. studies	8	10	9	7	5	6	8	7	8
Language, literature & area studies	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	1	1
Arts, other than languages	14	8	11	22	10	14	17	9	12
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (ooo's)	9.4	13.5	23.0	6.0	13.4	19.4	15.5	27.0	42.4
PART-TIME									
Education	1	20	14	7	43	34	3	30	22
Medicine, dentistry & health	2	2	2	9	7	7	5	4	4
Engineering & technology	40	21	27	3	1	2	27	13	17
Agriculture, forestry & veterinary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Science	8	6	7	7	4	4	7	5	6
Social, administrative & business	46	45	45	69	39	46	54	42	46
Architecture, prof. & voc. studies	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Language, literature & area studies	0	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1
Arts, other than languages	1	2	1	2	3	3	1	2	2
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (ooo's)	21.7	45.6	67.3	11.3	34.5	45.8	32.9	80.1	113.0
FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME									
Education	2	21	14	8	39	31	4	29	21
Medicine, dentistry & health	2	2	2	8	9	9	4	6	5
Engineering & technology	36	21	26	3	1	2	24	12	16
Agriculture, forestry & veterinary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Science	10	7	8	8	4	5	9	6	7
Social, administrative & business	41	40	40	58	36	42	47	38	41
Architecture, prof. & voc. studies	4	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4
Language, literature & area studies	0	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1
Arts, other than languages	5	3	4	9	5	6	6	4	5
All subjects	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
All subjects (ooo's)	31.1	59.1	90.2	17.3	47.9	65.2	48.4	107.1	155.5



Table 6 Qualifications on entry of first year mature home students on first degree courses  
By mode, type of institution, sex and age Percentages

Academic year beginning 1986	GCE A Level		Scottish Higher		Passes in		GCE A	Other	Total number (ooo's)
	Passes	Grade	Passes	3 or 4	HNC/HND	Level	Total		
					ONC/OND BTBC	1			
-----									
FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATE									
(GB Universities)									
Men									
21-24	34.4	8.2	3.3	2.5	29.8	2.1	19.6	100.0	2.5
25+	17.4	10.6	2.9	4.2	15.8	7.5	41.6	100.0	2.1
Total	26.6	9.3	3.1	3.3	23.4	4.6	29.7	100.0	4.5
Women									
21-24	38.2	13.5	4.6	4.0	11.7	2.9	25.0	100.0	1.3
25+	16.7	16.9	2.1	4.7	5.4	11.1	43.2	100.0	2.2
Total	24.5	15.7	3.0	4.4	7.7	8.1	36.6	100.0	3.5
Men and women									
21-24	35.7	10.0	3.8	3.0	23.7	2.4	21.4	100.0	3.7
25+	17.0	13.8	2.5	4.4	10.5	9.3	42.4	100.0	4.3
Total	25.7	12.1	3.1	3.8	16.6	6.1	32.7	100.0	8.0
-----									
FULL-TIME FIRST DEGREE									
(England Polys & colleges)									
Men									
21-24	23.4	25.9	0.6		25.5	5.7	18.9	100.0	3.3
25+	12.7	13.7	0.7		17.7	7.4	47.8	100.0	2.5
Total	18.7	20.6	0.7		22.1	6.4	31.4	100.0	5.9
Women									
21-24	21.2	32.1	0.7		10.2	8.8	26.9	100.0	2.2
25+	11.9	17.3	0.5		5.3	9.7	55.3	100.0	3.3
Total	15.7	23.2	0.6		7.3	9.3	43.9	100.0	5.6
Men and women									
21-24	22.5	28.4	0.7		19.4	6.9	22.1	100.0	5.6
25+	12.3	15.7	0.6		10.6	8.7	52.1	100.0	5.9
Total	17.2	21.9	0.6		14.9	7.8	37.5	100.0	11.5
-----									
PART-TIME FIRST DEGREE									
(England Polys & colleges)									
Men									
21-24	8.6	7.2	0.2		56.7	3.7	23.6	100.0	1.2
25+	4.4	4.1	0.4		27.7	2.9	60.5	100.0	2.8
Total	5.7	5.0	0.3		36.1	3.2	49.8	100.0	4.0
Women									
21-24	9.5	13.7	0.6		32.1	5.2	38.9	100.0	0.5
25+	4.7	5.4	0.2		5.9	3.6	80.2	100.0	2.6
Total	5.5	6.8	0.2		10.1	3.9	73.6	100.0	3.1
Men and women									
21-24	8.9	9.2	0.3		49.3	4.2	28.2	100.0	1.7
25+	4.6	4.7	0.3		17.2	3.2	69.9	100.0	5.4
Total	5.6	5.8	0.3		24.7	3.5	60.2	100.0	7.1

Table 7 Higher education: first year full-time home students per thousand of the relevant age group  
By mode, sex and level of study

Great Britain

Academic year beginning	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Full-time								
Men								
Postgraduate	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0
First and sub-degree	2.5	2.4	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.4	2.6
Women								
Postgraduate	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8
First and sub-degree	1.8	1.8	1.9	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.1	2.2
Men and women								
Postgraduate	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9
First and sub-degree	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.4
Part-time								
Men								
Postgraduate	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.6
First and sub-degree	5.8	5.9	5.9	5.7	6.0	5.9	6.1	6.4
Women								
Postgraduate	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.8
First and sub-degree	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.8	3.1	3.1	4.0	4.6
Men and women								
Postgraduate	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.0	1.0	1.1	1.2
First and sub-degree	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.6	4.5	5.0	5.6

The relevant age group has been taken as 21-44 for students on first and sub-degree courses, and 25-44 for postgraduates

## APPENDIX 2

### Provision for Mature Applicants to Lancashire Polytechnic

Information about the Polytechnic can be obtained from the Educational Liaison Office. Several of the people in my sample and many more contacts since then have said how helpful the person who answered their initial telephone enquiry was in putting them through to the Educational Liaison Office, to the Continuing Education Service, or to specific Schools in the Polytechnic. Many mature applicants or enquirers find the first steps difficult to take in approaching an institution and a friendly voice or face at a reception desk does make a difference. Certainly this happens with our telephone service but one of the problems with a split campus site is that there is no apparent central building and this may cause problems for enquirers. To try to break down this ivory tower image I produced, with the help of mature students, an audio cassette tape "It Takes All Sorts" which is sent free on request to any enquirer who may want information before setting foot in the building. This is sent out from the Educational Liaison Office or from the Continuing Education Service. If the enquirer wants specific details of courses and an application form that is dealt with by Educational Liaison but any general queries by mature applicants are passed to Continuing Education. The Polytechnic also staged its first Open Days in 1988 to allow the public to familiarise themselves with the facilities and workings on an informal basis.

In the Continuing Education Service there is a Co-ordinator who has a cross polytechnic role to give educational guidance to mature



applicants about possible future courses. This maybe at this Polytechnic or at any of the local Further Education colleges or indeed at any other institution of further and higher education either full or part-time. Applicants are given a half hour advisory interview, usually after they have been sent a copy of the booklet Continuing Education Service: Opportunities for Adults in Education and Training and the cassette tape and as a result of this interview an appointment is made with a course tutor in the Polytechnic or enough information is supplied for the individual to make a considered decision about future action. The interview is of an advisory nature only and last year the Co-ordinator saw in excess of 500 mature enquirers for such interviews. The Continuing Education Service has close links with all the local Further Education Colleges and the nearest university and maintains reciprocal links with other institutions such as the Open University.

The links with the local colleges are particularly strong for the Open College Network of the North West. This was set up as a consortium with local Further Education colleges, this Polytechnic and Lancaster University and provides an alternative entry to higher Education other than 'A' level for mature students. It offers a wide range of subjects at stage 'B' level and Study Skills packages at Stage 'A' to facilitate the return to study. Courses are held in the various colleges, some during the day, some during the evening, designed and taught for mature students (over 21) alone. The Units are recognised "currency" for both University and Polytechnic entry and students in my sample make constant reference to the success of this scheme for them.

For those applicants who may not wish to enter a full course programme at the polytechnic there are a wide variety of subjects available on the Associate Student Scheme. In theory any course at the polytechnic contains units which can be presented as associate units and as the institution moves towards credit accumulation this will become easier. The theory is that individuals can come and 'test the water' or update a piece of knowledge by slotting into the few hours a week that part of the existing course takes. The units can be built up into a Polytechnic Certificate but that was not intended as the main purpose of the scheme although with credit accumulation it becomes more possible. In practice however there has not been a large take up of the scheme often due to problems of timetabling and administration of the student and the units.

Two schemes which are very successful are within the Combined Studies

Programme although with a cross polytechnic input by subject area.

These are the Pre degree course and the L.I.N.C.S. scheme.

The Pre degree course with its course tutor who is herself an ex pre degree student, runs on one evening a week for two terms offering study skills and course specific programmes. The emphasis is on self-diagnosis by the student but there is a good deal of help and guidance on hand for future course choice at a variety of levels in a variety of different institutions. There are a high number of mature students who start the course (over 130 in 1988) and although the drop out rate is quite high - over 40% in the first term this is not a negative reflection of the course but an indication of the considerations being made by the individuals. Of those who do reach the end of the two terms a high proportion go on to further study either at this Polytechnic or else where although there is no "qualification" as such for entry to other institutions such as Lancaster University.

In 1988 60 of the 138 who started the course were recommended to proceed to higher education if they so wished, as a result of work they submitted on the predegree programme.

The Lancashire Integrated Colleges Scheme (L.I.N.C.S) is not strictly an access course but rather the provision of first year subjects on a part-time basis in eight local colleges in the North West area. The student is free to choose the place, pace and level of study to suit their own needs and interests. It has many elements of flexibility built into it with Level One subjects available at a variety of colleges, mixing with Polytechnic level or Open University study and also a combination involving another Higher Education College in the area. On completion of Level One there is a transcript of completion



for each subject and when all three subjects are completed an advanced certificate is awarded. After that further study towards a DipHE or Degree involves transfer to the Polytechnic for full-time or part-time study. There is a wide range of subjects available on the scheme at Level One and subsequent levels but added together they can be used towards a variety of awards.

Advanced Certificate (34 credits)

Diploma in Higher Education (66 credits)

BSc/BA. Unclassified Degree (94 credits)

BSc/BA. Honours Degree (104 credits)

There are access courses which are subject and course specific, one of these is the Polytechnic Certificate in Social and Administrative Studies (Access). This is a one year full-time course leading to a certificate for those intending to pursue a career in the general area of Social Studies and Social Work. No formal qualifications are required for the course which is aimed particularly with the need and interests of ethnic minorities in mind. Because of this it considers applicants from ethnic minority groups most favourably and links into specific courses in the social work area. There is no guarantee of places on a quota system but successful completion of the access course gives the possibility to proceed to the BA (Hons) in Applied Social Studies, BA/Bsc Combined Studies, BTEC HND in Public Administration or Diploma in social work (CQSW). There are a limited number of grants available for this access course.

This is also the case with the foundation course in the technology Faculty - The Polytechnic Certificate in Technology. This is a one year full-time course for women with funding from the European social fund. It has been designed to meet the needs of women returners with female staff where possible 10:00 am-3:00 pm as teaching timetable, creche places, reading weeks and a mixture of course and exam work. This is an Access course in that a pass gives admission to HND course and a credit to the Degree course in any area in the Technology faculty. In the first year of the course in 1988 of the 12 students, 5 gained a pass. Two of those went on to a degree course, 1 to HND and one was referred.

The technology faculty also offers a conversion course Polytechnic Certificate in Technology (HITECC Diploma). This is a one year full-time course with NAB and MSc funding to allow women with the "wrong" 'A' levels to enter technology degree and diploma courses. In 1987/88, of 26 enrolled - 14 finished the course. 6 went on to degree courses; 3 to HND, 2 were referred and 3 failed.

There are also New Opportunities for Women Courses some short term, a one year 2 days a week course with the aim of helping women to feel more confident to seek employment. These have ability to benefit as the criteria for entry and the emphasis is on individual guidance and counselling.

1988 also saw the introduction of a Women into Enterprise course aimed to help women to start their own business.

Although these final examples are not specifically designed for entry into education they have often given women the confidence to begin courses both at the Polytechnic and in further education.

There are other Foundation Courses in other Faculties at this Polytechnic, in Art and Design; Accountancy for example but they are not designed with any concessions for mature students although two of the students in my sample did do the Art Foundation course, one particularly did feel the 'isolation' of being the only mature student.



## APPENDIX 3

### INDIVIDUAL BIOGRAPHIES

#### Alan: Diploma in Social Studies: Two Year CQSW Course

Alan is a single man, in his late 30s, a fact which did cause him some concern because he will be forty years old when he completes his current course and he would ultimately like to get a degree ,however, he feels time is passing by and he needs to get a job with this shorter C.Q.S.W. course. Alan spent most of his early life in various child care institutions and has gradually, through various voluntary jobs, come to the decision that he now wants to help people in the same position that he was and so his reason for doing the course was to get a job although there were others maybe more important factors.

I first met Alan in fact at a local social services home for young people. Although he presented as a rather brash, 'rough diamond' sort of person our conversation showed clearly that he was an 'education convert' and that even though he felt he had already changed a great deal because of what he had learned it was probable this was only the start. I did come away from our first meeting a little concerned about several things, his basic approach to life, his almost aggressive presentation of his views and the high expectations and reverence with which he held academic learning as a result of his Open College of the North West experiences. Many of these concerns did actually turn out to be quite problematic.

Alan had always been next to the bottom at school and made no effort

to change that. He took a job as an apprentice plumber and served his time gaining advanced qualifications "which is about as far as you can go without entering full-time education". This gave him a good trade with a steady income which supported the life style of the single man which he happily followed. Then out of interest he started doing voluntary work and things began to change.

"I was going through life with blinkers on and although I was doing voluntary work, I said I am a plumber and I'm never going to change. My group of friends started to change. It was as if the blinkers started to fall off and I could see where I wanted to go and I didn't have enough faith in myself to do it..... I couldn't even spell. Four years ago at a friends house I remarked that I had to do something about my English. He picked up the phone, dialled a number and said "Here Alan speak to this chap. It was the course Co-ordinator for the local Open College..... He said come along and see me tomorrow. I thought I was going along there to learn to spell, but I ended up on a course, Sociology, Criminology, Methods of Enquiry and Study Techniques, all sorts of things. It was wonderful. That's basically how I got started again".

Alan's self perception prior to his Open College course would seem at odds with his over confident behaviour but illustrates what is often the link between educational performance and the school system. Also there were problems for me in listening to his description of himself because it was tied in with a certain amount of terminology and conceptual thinking he had gleaned from his Open College subjects and the language and concepts of his life before that. As the year went on he told me more about how he felt he had changed and by the third time we met I felt more convinced. I still am not sure though how knowing more information actually changed 'him as a person'.

This raises the question about where will he now 'fit' in our society after he leaves the Polytechnic - what does the Polytechnic do to help

mature students cope with any change they make or others make towards them because of perceived differences? Alan tells the story of his brother and sister how they have reacted to his studies - he has gained a sister and lost a brother and it might be useful to ask how representative this story is.

Q. "This is more than doing a qualification isn't it?"

A. "Yes. The obvious reason is to get a qualification so that I would be employable that is first and foremost. It's also lots of other things. Personal achievements. Relationships have changed. My sister, who I didn't get on with for years is very supportive to me but my brother, who was my mate, is now very distant from me.

Q. "Is it something you've done?"

A. "It's just that I've moved as a person. Perhaps it is me. I think that I may have frightened my brother with my new found knowledge at some point".

Q. "So perhaps he feels inferior even though you haven't tried to make him feel this way?"

A. "Yes", (silence.)

Q. "Have you ever been able to talk about it?"

A. "I think we have to rebuild that relationship. I have to let him know that I'm not a threat. I don't feel superior to him. I think that will come in time... he thinks education is important. His children are immaculate when they go to school. He was the same as me, a non-achiever".

Q. "Have you changed your friends since doing this course? Are you now in a different group?"

A. "I'm very lonely, I know that. I used to be a fair old boozier. I was out every night of the week and no matter where I went there would be somebody that I knew, landlord, bar staff, some of the lads. All that's changed, I just don't go into pubs any more and I've only stayed friendly with one or two, not close friends. I've completely changed my friends."

Q. "You haven't made any new friends from Open college?"

A. "Apart from the tutor no, so the change in my life style has been dramatic. I'm glad it happened."



I asked Alan at this point if he was married or with a girl friend and his 'descriptive' answer was in the negative. By our second meeting however a 'girl friend' had 'moved back' to live with him but he was not particularly willing to discuss the relationship although from what he did say it also supported the transformation from his pre to post education status.

Q. "So are you doing this course to get qualifications to help you to work at the job you want to do?"

A. "That is one of the reasons. The other is that no doubt I'll gain a lot academically in understanding different aspects of social work. I'm expecting to be moved quite a lot as a person. I'm only Mr Average so I would expect to come out a different person."

Q. "Having done the Open college do you feel you have started to become a different person?"

A. "I have changed so dramatically. I was a plank. I couldn't enter into discussions because I knew nothing. Put me into that same situation now and I'll battle with anybody. I really enjoyed Sociology, tremendous subject. I was certainly racist and sexist. Doing the youth work course was a tremendous experience I came out of two residential weekends an emotional wreck. I thought you're not going to get anything out unless you put something in and I put everything in. The only way I was going to learn anything was by getting in there. I took a load of slagging."

(It would have been wrong here to ask what slagging was because clearly Alan wasn't particularly at ease in the interview situation although he was very confident and wanted to tell all. He smoked constantly and nervously and was virtually shouting some of the answers. So I asked him why he got a load of slagging and his answer at this first stage was later to become significant).

"Because I was prepared to put myself on the line and be counted. I had become aware I was bigoted. There were a lot of people around me who were being false - saying one thing and meaning another. I thought the only way for me was to be totally honest, this is me, you tell me about it. I got some stick, but I grew and expanded from that."

I was sure in many ways Alan had grown and expanded but as I wrote notes after the interview I reflected on his determination - giving up a well paid job to return to study on a grant and his thirst for knowledge but at the same time I felt it was not an easy interview - more I had been talked to and I made a note perhaps unwisely that "I suspect he will have trouble with relationships and the course". One of his comments came to mind that maybe precipitated this.

*"We'll be learning off each other..... its about relationships."*

Q. "Will you be disappointed if you are taught in rows and not allowed to express an opinion?"

A. *"They couldn't stop me expressing an opinion. It would be like trying to stop a tidal wave. I'm looking forward to role play because you can swear, slag each other off, we'll have a great time in role play."*

By the time we met for our second interview in November Alan was seven weeks into the course and up to his neck in trouble because of these relationships and his determination to make his honest opinions known to staff and students alike. The aggressive tone from our first interview was still apparent and had also been perceived by the group (often as left wing tendencies) but the excitement about continuing his studies had gone. Much of the difficulties I suspect were due to the early organizational pressures of a full-time course - Alan said he had never been so tired in his life and if this was also the case for all the other group members any small irritation was likely to get blown up out of proportion.

Alan told a long story about the injustice of a placement visit which revolved around a female group member he could not tolerate. This had brought him into some heated dispute with the Head of the School and the telling of this and other group dynamics involved many references to left-wing and right-wing views. It all seemed to be the group testing each other and weighing each other up but Alan felt very strongly about not really fitting in.

"I seem to come across quite a lot to my fellow students as being rather aggressive, primarily because I expressed a point of view in a group-work exercise where we had to sort out a very irate violent young man at a youth club and my experience told me to make sure that he doesn't get close enough to do any damage and that meant to make sure that he hit the deck before me. I expressed this view and quite a lot of people were horrified that I should adopt this attitude..... it seemed to gain sympathy with some of the more right wingers in the group but for the wrong reasons, it certainly wasn't (pause) I certainly don't subscribe to most right wing views anyway."

"I think they have mistaken aggression for violence which I'm not a violent person. I may be aggressive yes, but we reward aggression in all walks of life. In football players, Falkland heroes get medals, business men get fat salaries for being aggressive. I think I tend to be an aggressive sort of person but that doesn't mean to say I am violent and I think that's misinterpretation."

Q. "Do you think that's how the other students see it?"

A. "Some of them, not all of them. I come across as a rather aggressive person but that doesn't bother me (long pause)."



But it clearly did bother Alan he wanted to be part of the group and he wanted it to gel. He had expectations from his previous course that were not being realised and basically he was disappointed. He was disappointed in the staff too.

"(What happens in the classroom) "is very much down to the individual tutors and if they come down to earth long enough to recognize that you are there then (pause) some of them are just in academic cuckoo land. Its as if they have got a face there and they are talking away, its almost as if they are in another world".

He was disappointed in the other members of the group, he felt the selection procedures were wrong and he was disappointed in the level of work. All this he admitted were in early days yet but if he hadn't been so old he would have been happier on a degree course. He was also increasingly aware of the way he felt he was being bombarded by racism on his course and if he, by the end of the course, had to come to terms with many of his own shortcomings and re-evaluate his expectations his feelings on that did not change and in fact became part of his playing the academic mark game.

"This polytechnic is paranoid about it (racism), we literally got bombarded from every angle about his, about racism and there were times when we detected a heated note of annoyance in the tutors voices. In fact one girl actually complained that she was victimised because of her quite right-wing views but also she didn't understand what he (the lecturer) was on about and we had a good long talk about it and it came down to the fact that he speaks very very quickly, he's also got a very difficult accent which is difficult for us to understand. Quite honestly his explanation wasn't very acceptable in my eyes. Like most tutors and social workers they can find amazing ways of covering their bums when they know they are wrong, but at this stage the tutors are still up there and we are still down here and no doubt at some point in the course that will reach some sort of equilibrium."

As Alan left our second interview he told me that they had just been

given a title for their first piece of written work and he felt that doing that maybe would restore some faith in study for him - "shift the emphasis from the social to the academic" - "Maybe that will jack me up a bit, add a bit of lustre to it."

He was having problems seeing the course as a whole - he had become focused on the one building he spent most of his time in - rather than the Polytechnic and he had become lost in the day to day happenings of the group rather than why he had returned to study in the first place. He actually said that he had been looking forward to talking to me as someone outside the course so that he could "chat about things in general" and that our conversation had helped in that respect.

After this rather stormy interview with Alan I happened to sit alongside his tutor the next day and was unable to stop myself commenting that if Alan would agree I would like a chat about how he was doing and if there were any problems - obviously I did not elaborate on what Alan had said but I felt that there seemed to be aggravation in the group. The reply I got from the tutor was to say that Alan was doing very well, he was pleased with how he had settled in and really he did not wish to discuss the matter further - I left the conversation there and did not follow it up. However, I had to see the tutor again before the third interview as Alan had moved house and the Poly for some reason had not updated their computer records. Again the tutor told me how pleased he had been with Alan's continued progress and personal growth during the first year.

As I have indicated I did have some problems locating Alan for our

third interview but eventually one of my requests reached him and he called me from a residential home he was employed in over the Summer. He was pleased to arrange an interview and called into the Polytechnic the next week in fact very much wanting to talk.

When he arrived clearly there were many of the characteristics of the 'first person' I had interviewed but I certainly felt that it was a very changed Alan who walked into the room. This may have been partly influenced by the fact that the visual image he presented was different because he was wearing a smart suit as he was going out for the day but also he was much less aggressive, more self assured and gave much more considered and articulate answers to my questions. He had lost his feeling of excitement about education because of a growing disrespect for the academic staff and he had reached the decision that to get through the course he would need to "keep his head down and his mouth closed and just do the work that was set" - he would "play the game."

It seems that this had grown up from the issue on racism which I illustrated earlier but involves personalities and Alan's perception of the influence of one of the tutors in the external validation of the course. It is a reflection of the change in Alan's behaviour that he did not get into an argument about it but at the same time it questions Knowles assumptions about lecturers using the students experience because Alan did have a good deal of practical experience and valid arguments to put forward about the issue. These were disregarded but clearly figured in his interpretation of the situation. His perception of it though influenced the reality and he would not discuss the situation.



- Q. "Did you think all the results you got were pretty fair?"
- A. "Oh no. I think in my project, I felt very disappointed about that."
- Q. "The group project was it?"
- A. "Yes. We got a low mark, we only got 40% and everybody in my group agreed that it was worthy of a better mark. There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that we were victims of prejudice by a tutor because I did not support her views of the way we treat black children in care. We almost came to a row, her manner was awful and it was a question of if you don't support my views I hate you and she let everybody know it."
- Q. "Well come on, I mean this was a bit strong!"
- A. "No this was criticism not just from myself but from probably 70% of my course. We have actually gone to the Head of Faculty with a complaint with regard to this particular tutor and the way (pause) and we think if they take notice of us they will teach racism in a different manner next year, there is no two ways about it, I felt sorry for the rest of my group because I had spoken very frankly on a subject dear to my heart which is, black kids in care, and found it just completely disagreed with her view and it was obvious that she didn't like it."
- Q. "What sort of thing made you think that she didn't like it?"
- A. "Her response to me when I gave my opinion, bearing in mind that this was a discussion group and we had watched a video and we were asked to comment on it, her response was nothing less than hostile, she did not like my view, and she let me know it and let everybody else know it in a manner that I thought "oops you've slipped up here Alan". Really I should have kept my mouth shut or gone along with it but that's not me."
- Q. "But were you speaking from your experiences?"
- A. "That didn't matter, this college is so caught up in developing its own little left wing element, its going to destroy itself if it isn't careful."
- Q. "Presumably you weren't putting forward any anti-racist.....?"

- A. "About ploughing funds into providing black kids with an identity, you know their own cultural identities.... (pause) now I don't disagree with that at all but what I did say about the video was that I think with regard to children in care we should be stepping back and looking at kids in care in greater depth and at a wider range because wherever you go, if you go to North Wales there are also Italian kids in care, no doubt that is reflected throughout the country, no doubt Blackburn has got a higher proportion of Pakistani or Indian kids in care.

Now to plough funds purely into one sector is to deprive kids as a whole and that's my argument. I'm not disagreeing with providing funds to allow them their own cultural identity but I think we ought to do it on a broader basis. She went up the wall, she went through the roof and she was on the marking panel, I told her at the time that I thought her marks were harsh."

- Q. "And you told this to other people, you told it to the course leader did you?"

A. "I certainly did".

- Q. "And did anything happen to the result of the project?"

A. "Well the thing about it is that we were told they didn't agree with me but it is a pass mark. Now we could have when they went for external marking written a letter and we could have objected and no doubt if we had failed we would have done as a group but it was a pass mark, we were also first year and feelings were running very, very high and I think the issue would have gone out of proportion I think, so after some discussion with my colleagues we settled for a pass mark, however meagre."

Within the same group there is another of my sample who is Asian and in fact he does make a similar comment about the way he felt embarrassed about the almost over compensation on racist issues and how he had discussed this with his wife who had been a student on the Black Access course the year before.

Mohammed:

"There was some discussion on ethnic minorities but some part of lectures were on ethnic minorities but some people did not like that so there was discussion about that, there were discussions about racism and some students did not like that, they felt they were being labelled as racist people so they had to keep it very limited and then for the next year there was one option for ethnic minorities and they did not get enough students who wanted that option so they had to drop it".



Q. "How do you feel about that?"

A. "I don't really know. I do feel that people should know the facts but you can do only that much that people could accept, you can't always give them too much to discuss if they don't want to know about this. I actually want more work with ethnic minorities so that I could work with ethnic minorities when I finish their course but I think that we should get all round training on a wider scale so that we could work with everybody not just the ethnic minorities."

Q. "So do you feel that it was the other students really that didn't want it rather than the staff?"

A. "No the staff wanted it but the students, some students didn't some students even stopped coming to lectures on this."

When I had finished talking to Mohammed's wife and turned off the tape they both returned to this issue and said that it was a problem. There had been misunderstandings but one of the problems was a simple practical one that the group found the black tutor difficult to understand, actually to hear and this in itself created feeling of animosity and does support the point made by Alan earlier.

Another student, Mal in the same school made similar comments about the left wing, over anti-racist views of the same group of staff, commenting that he would not dare let his sociology tutor know he had been in the Falklands or it would influence his marks in assignments and Clive also found his contextual studies course difficult to cope with because of similar biases.

Although Alan had been in a state of some distress about full-time study when we met for our second interview it was not until February or March that he reached a crisis point and asked himself why he was doing the course and creating such a feeling of anxiety in himself.



A. ".....they were starting to push us for essays and I knew I was already late and I had developed an argument and I think at the time I had bitten off more than I could chew. I knew what I wanted to say but I couldn't find the material."

"Law essays in particular I found extremely difficult and I sat there sometimes in the Library and thought 'Oh God, what I'd give to be a plumber again, just no responsibility, just go to work, do your graft, pick your wages up, you're making life so complicated For yourself."

Q. "Tell me what you felt like at that time?"

A. "I saw lots of people when I was on my placement suffering from very real anxiety and I don't say for a moment that I was anything like as bad as them but I did feel on a couple of occasions something that was out of control in my.... I'd reached anxiety levels that had become obvious to my tutor, to my friends, its not just being worried its a difficult feeling to describe these anxieties but you think, you are panicking and fidgeting and you think or you are of the belief that things are not going to come right, that you are not actually getting anywhere but the thing is that its a burden and its weighing you down and its frightening you because your whole career rests on you getting this piece of work in and passed. To fail it is to fail your course, you are out, you are finished."

Q. "So what did you do?"

A. "It was a horrible feeling. I tried to get in touch with.... I remember what people said about supporting each other and what have you so I actually tried ringing some of my colleagues and for some reason or other I just happened to pick one of the worst nights, I couldn't get in touch with anybody."

- Q. "This was a specific night was it?"
- A. "Well it's happened on a couple of occasions but one particular occasion I was really bad and I tried to get in touch with a few of my colleagues but couldn't and I went..... I rang a friend up, Tom who is a social worker and a very dear friend of mine and I said, "Look I'm really getting worried, let's go and have a pint and a chat", we went to the pub and I sort of had about half a dozen pints and a good chat with Tom and..... I felt better initially , now whether it was the chat or the pint, I didn't have this over-powering anxiety when I went home but I was still very worried but with a new resolve for the following day but it was..... I can understand something of what those people in hospital felt like.....
- Q. "Did you not think of getting in touch with somebody at the Poly, what about somebody in Student Services?"
- A. "Well no I felt that I could go if things really got bad, I felt I could go to my tutor anyway but I also felt, I kept telling myself that if you cannot cope with this sort of anxiety and pressure you will never cope as a social worker so get a grip and that's the way I was talking to myself about it. I'm not going to cope very well with other people's problems and situations that have gone wrong if I can't deal with my own adequately so it was a question of keeping a grip of myself and sharing it with a friend."
- Q. "The student counsellor would have probably been a big help as well, to go over there."
- A. "I must admit I didn't consider it at the time. The approach I had worked anyway."
- Q. "What about at home, you were living with your girlfriend again or something when I spoke to you last time, was that not on when you are feeling like this?"
- A. "No I don't seem to share. .... ,I'm still with the girlfriend, she's fine. When it comes to my college work we seem to live quite independent lives even though we share the same roof and what have you. We do live quite independent lives and I didn't want..... I don't think she would have understood anyway."
- Q. "So you didn't discuss it with her at all?"
- A. "No."



- Q. "But she noticed that you were different did she?"
- A. "She got out of my way a few times yes because I don't lose my temper, I just get.....not bad tempered but just grumpy and I really don't want to know when I get like that. I start looking inward if you will, being very inward on my own little problem and beaver away at it. I don't think Jackie would have understood anyway really."
- Q. "And you say your friends noticed you were different as well?"
- A. "My friends did notice that I was under a lot of pressure and also my tutor, he got hold of my arm quite a few times and said come on let's have a chat. It was over a period of probably six weeks that I was really under it but my tutor was very good."
- Q. "When you said you couldn't discuss it with Jackie, what about your friends as well, would you not discuss it with them?"
- A. "Yes I talked to my tutor, I also talked quite a lot with Jim who is a very close friend and Sarah as well who originally qualified as a social worker so she could identify what I was talking about anyway so yes I did talk to my friends quite a lot."
- Q. "But you got out of it?"
- A. "Yes I got my first piece of work back and I got 64% and that sort of tended to go whew.....that's OK. Once you get one under your belt I wouldn't say its easier, people say it gets easier as you go on but it doesn't, I think you are more able to cope with any sort of pressure or..... you also become more familiar with things like to find research material in the library, when you first start you can spend hours just looking for one article to substantiate an argument or send you off in a direction, now I can walk around that library and I can virtually go to anything I want."

Alan had expectations of education, the subjects the staff and other students because of his early Open College experience. This though had built up a false consciousness an image in his mind that was not a reality. Again it did not allow him to become an insider at the Polytechnic in the way he thought it would and he had to learn the nuances of the Polytechnic game before he felt a part of that environment despite the fact that he had been so highly motivated at the outset.



Much of his ideals about education had been knocked down but he was determined now that he would pass the course because he knew now what was expected.

Q. "Would you have liked more help with study skills at the beginning?"

A. "I think probably one of the most important areas..... If I was starting all over again I would like a week to just so and play in the library, to go and look at books and to thumb through the index cards, to go and find articles, set tasks if you will to find some obscure article, the refilling of Dracula's teeth or something, something really obscure so that you find your way around the library so that you can go and just do it instead of spending hours and then having spent two hours finding the article is no good to you."

Q. "Will you do anything differently this year to stop yourself getting in the same situation again do you think?"

A. "Yes one years experience and I won't make the same mistakes in the Library. I don't think I will rush off like I did at a tangent into essays, I think I will plan a bit more. One of the things that I didn't do even though I was told by my tutors to do it and I'd always been taught to do it and didn't, was to sit down and plan."

Q. "You had had a lot of background work with Open College and so on hadn't you so it wasn't as if you weren't prepared?"

A. "A bit of panic station set in and I just started writing. I had to see something for my efforts regardless that I didn't plan properly. When I went on my placement my supervisor he was brilliant, when I had to do my two pieces of written work he just sat down and said "right come on let's have a look at this, lets make a plan". We made an overall plan and then small plans for particular sections and he worked, well he supervised me in that procedure and it really worked because I got really good marks for both my pieces of work. I got a B and an A so I was quite pleased about it."

Q. "So overall was the Polytechnic last year what you expected it would be or was it different?"

A. "I think the Polytechnic itself was what I expected because obviously I've talked to a lot of people, I know a lot of people who have done the courses at this college and..... I mean the Polytechnic itself was what I expected it to be, what I didn't expect was the politics, the almost bitchy relationships there are a natural enough process I think but I think everybody would like things to be ideal. You come into a group and you

take to some people and you don't like other people and as your course develops you suddenly find that you have actually grown away from a particular group of people and you've got more in common with someone else and that's a process that's going on all the while but what I have seen of the Polytechnic is lots of bitching between staff. I saw a stand-up row in the corridor one day between two tutors, pushing and pulling for..... On my course (A) who was the course leader and he is no longer that course leader, that was very upsetting at the time, he's been taken over. You could see the pushing and pulling and the petty politics that were going on. I didn't expect that, you tend to think of tutors as well established steady knowledgeable people who know where they are at and they are really not at all."

Q. "So how did you feel about that?"

A. "I felt like putting them in a bag and shaking them up and saying get a grip of yourselves, it's my education, my future, my career that's at risk here not yours you are alright you can argue all you want between yourselves but you've got a career."

Q. "What did you say to them?"

A. "Well you've got to be careful and diplomatic because these people they mark your work."

- Q. "You felt very much it was that relationship did you that they marked your work?"
- A. "Oh yes they mark your work, they can finish me as a social worker if they want. I would in my second year not be as quick to comment on some of the more touchy issues such as race."
- Q. "Even though you feel you have a lot of experience to offer in that area?"
- A. "I just wouldn't risk it. I'm not risking that again."
- Q. "Do you feel that you have changed over this year Alan?"
- A. "Yes tremendously there are tremendous areas of growth in me as a person, I've been challenged, I've had to grow up. I've had to understand a lot more about myself and of other people and I'm very pleased about that. I also feel a bit indifferent now about higher education I must admit I look at some of these tutors and I think God....."
- Q. "When I first spoke to you in the summer it was your big aim in life wasn't it higher Education and a BA?"
- A. "That's still with me ... it's just this petty squabbling that's been going on and its..... you just don't expect it" Maybe people did say to me that you tend to put your tutors on pedestals for a while and eventually they will drop off and when they do that you feel very very disappointed and I think I have gone through that process although I still think my tutor is wonderful."
- Q. "Any other way you think you've changed, what about your life outside the Poly, do you think that's been influenced? Does your girlfriend think you've changed?"
- A. "Yes she says often that she wished I'd stayed a plumber because I have become a far more complex person. I've also changed in another way that I can't stand television any more, its rubbish. At one time I watched television to the dot, I do not watch television at all except the odd documentary or survival programme or something like that, the news but I just cannot abide television its rubbish."



- Q. "So what do you do instead?"
- A. "I like to read or I like to get out in my garden or I'm doing my house up and I'll paint, that's if I've not got any essays to write or stuff like that. Again, newspapers, I used to get the Sun every day..... Sunday, where I'm working at the moment somebody has the Sun..... I just have no time for it at all."
- Q. "Do your friends think you've changed in that way?"
- A. "Yes, Jim in particular who is a very close friend, he's a social worker, he's said that hes seen the confidence grow and knowledge basic expanded tremendously. He actually pushed me quite a lot and I don't know whether its good or bad but there are times I can, in discussion, one time he could floor me but he can't any more I can....."
- Q. "How do you feel about that?"
- A. "I love giving him a good thrashing every now and again especially if he picks a topic or we happen to be discussing something that I've gained the knowledge in and read quite a lot about."
- Q. "So what are your feelings about being a plumber are you glad or not?"
- A. "Oh no no. People often say to me, I think its evident that I'm enjoying my course and there are hiccups here and there but there are difficulties to overcome and everybody who I've met has commented on how enthusiastic and how much I seem to be enjoying it and I think I am.
- People will often say that I wished I'd done that ten years ago and what have you but my answer to that is that no I'm not because I was not ready. I think I probably could have done it but I don't think I would have enjoyed it or not as much out of it or developed a much as I have, I wasn't ready ten years ago. I knew when I was ready and as such its right for me now."
- Q. "So you're not going to fail the course in any way?"
- A. "So long as I keep my mouth shut on issues like race then that's it."
- Q. "And you really genuinely believe this?"
- A. "This lot are more biased than the National Front, they are wicked, they will pay for it."
- Q. "But overall you are enjoying the course?"
- A. "Oh yes thoroughly enjoying it."

## **Clive: BSc Psychology: Three Year Degree Course**

Clive was sixty when he came to see me for our first interview and had just taken early retirement to begin his degree course in Psychology. He had been a journalist for forty years and when he left was advertising Features Editor of a local town newspaper. He is an avuncular sort of character and the first thing he told me was that he was an accredited counsellor and marriage guidance counsellor and that seemed to support his visual image. Through his counselling experience he had long maintained an interest in psychology, sometimes feeling out of his depth in counselling workshop situations because of his lack of a theoretical background. So six years ago he decided to look at some part-time routes to improve his qualifications and fill in on his missing academic background.

As a boy he had left grammar school to go into the RAF during the war and after the war had gone into journalism. Marrying and having a family created the need to maintain an income and it seems to me that the family lived a "middle class existence."

Clive is a member of Rotary and various other such organizations and his wife, who does not work outside the home was very much part of that lifestyle.

Clive took an Open college course in Psychology and on passing the 'A' unit in that began an Open University Social Science Foundation course. Three months into the course Clive had a serious heart attack

and when he recovered had enough to do coping with his employment and so let his Open University studies lapse. He continued his counselling work until one day he went to a particular course meeting and he found himself struggling with the underlying theory he decided to begin to study psychology again. This time studying an Open College 'B' unit. During this course, fired by the enthusiasm, and what he often felt to be too lavish praise of a sympathetic tutor, he began to consider the possibility of a full-time degree course. His health was not what it had been and there were so many changes in the newspaper industry that he felt he was not prepared to get involved in them.

*"I thought about taking early retirement, it had been suggested that I return to the Open University or do a part-time Polytechnic course but I didn't really want the pressure of a job as well. I didn't really want to work until I was sixty five with all the new technology coming in. If I've got to learn something new I'd rather learn something that I want to."*

So Clive went to make enquiries at the nearest University to his home and the seeds of early retirement began to grow. Indeed they came to fruition after a chance meeting with the admissions tutor and Clive completed an application form, was interviewed by the Professor and the admissions tutor and was offered a place on the full-time course on the condition that he gained a 'B' pass on his Open College course. In the meantime he carefully considered the structure of the course at university and compared it with this Polytechnic. He arranged to see the Dean through a friend and called into the Polytechnic during the summer. It was apparent that the orientation of the psychology in the course was of more interest to him, but also the whole atmosphere in the building seemed more welcoming to mature students and when offered



a place at this Polytechnic he accepted.

Accepting the place on a three year full-time degree course at this Polytechnic on a subject specific course with no idea or intention of what he wanted to do with it and even if he graduated being 63 years of age by then caused all manner of difficulties for Clive which are all too familiar for mature students. As far as his marriage is concerned Clive's case is probably extreme but the reaction of his family, workmates and friends are typical.

At work there was a reaction of disbelief. Why on earth should someone in a senior position want to give it all up and go to college on a grant?

Presumably if the heart attack had directly caused him to take early retirement that would have been different - this was something he was choosing to do. Why did he want to do the course at all, what use would it be? There seemed to be no mileage in doing something for its own sake. Most important did he not feel guilty taking up the place of an 18 year old who might then be able to do something useful with the qualification, why in fact should he have a grant to do something out of interest, not of necessity? The fact that Clive felt the war had put an end to his academic career and that he had paid his contributions to the state all his life carried no weight. There was also something of a cynicism that he would not be able to cope with student life and that he would miss but especially because of a reduction in income and all that went with his work and status.

It was this latter fear which influenced his wife's reaction although I did not learn until later on just how much she resented Clive's decision. He had made sure that his early retirement and student role did not affect his wife financially in anyway and that his being at the Polytechnic would be like 9 - 5 job. She could not accept it and I doubt for this reason. To her, being a student at 60, giving up a lucrative job, being at home more and most important doing something that you had always wanted to do and actually liked - was not "normal". None of their friends did it, no one they knew had done it, why did he have to subject her to the ridicule of it all? As I got to know Clive better it was clear that there had been problems all their marriage and this was just another issue although I suspect the first time that Clive had done what he wanted to do regardless.

There were many times during the first year at the Polytechnic when I would see Clive around the buildings and he would tell me the latest abuse he had been subjected to because of his so called "abnormal activities". His books were thrown out, his word-processor tampered with, a refusal to talk about any aspect of the Polytechnic, a constant attack on his lack of time to do anything around the house and when Clive took part in a venture for mature students with me, forbidding him to come to a meeting with our group and the Director because she had arranged something with their son and needed taking there in the car. Although as I say this had gone on for most of their married life as I found out later, it was not really part of my research project and I urged Clive to see our student counsellor. He was somewhat reluctant to do this being a marriage guidance counsellor himself but then one evening just before the end of the first year

exams he had another heart attack. A few days before had had moved his mother's television for her which may have been the cause but both Clive and the family doctor who was well aware of the problems at home put it down to stress.

Clive was now unable to take the exam and that meant that until he did the resit in September he would not know if he was able to continue with the course or not. At this stage he called me to say he would see our counsellor and was in fact then able to go to the department and be given a pass on the year so that he did not have to resit in September. Clive was delighted. I doubt that was the feeling at home. His health was still not good at that stage and moves were made to explore the possibility of more heart surgery. (The first time he was in hospital for two weeks his wife went away and didn't go to see him at all).

The reaction of his son to Clive's decision to become a student is also relevant. Initially he was supportive being a graduate himself and encouraged Clive to go to the local University. When it became apparent that instead it would be the Polytechnic as first choice the attitude changed.

*"My son is thirty. ... my son is rather critical that I chose the Polytechnic rather than (the local) University. ... his view based on the time he spent at (the same) University that there you are given the facilities and you acquire knowledge yourself, his view was that the Poly is like going back to school. You are just lectured at and take notes."*

Q. "How has he arrived at that view?"

A. "Well he has got experience of (two universities) but he's never had any experience of a Polytechnic. A bit of snob value."



Despite these obvious negative reactions to Clive's return to study he left after the first interview full of enthusiasm and anxious to get started on the course. He had already enrolled in the library as an external borrower and had bought a good many of the books. He intended to be an "active mature student" too - perhaps not the discos but anything else that he could fit in even the sports programme in the hall worked out for heart attack victims.

During the first term I did see Clive around the buildings quite frequently and often having lunch with the psychology staff and one of the other mature students. He was elected as the first year student representative on the Faculty Board and despite his health problems he did not miss any lectures or indeed a day at the Polytechnic. He was given a parking space next to the Psychology building which was a big help to him and apart from a real dislike of one of his options - Contextual Studies - he was very much 'a student'. Life was not easy at home though and a major criticism was that he had mislead his wife that study at the Polytechnic would be a 9 - 5 job - having an afternoon at home to work was not 'normal' and I suspect that this had the effect of keeping Clive on the Polytechnic premises more than would otherwise be the case.

Clearly the whole atmosphere of the Polytechnic, his relationships with the staff and the students and his academic course work lived up to Clive's expectations. If anything did disappoint him it was the take it or leave it attitude of some students and certainly this attitude to a member of staff who taught them a minor subject. He was

very much in awe of the teaching staff, treating them with a great deal of respect but at the same time revelling in the way he could sit and talk with them at lunch times and often be mistaken for a professor because he was clearly the oldest person present. He made a point of asking staff what he should call them and told me with almost schoolboy delight that "we're on first name terms with all the lecturers". Having said this though he was at pains to point out that he could ask for help from any of the staff and would not feel embarrassed or reticent at all about doing that.

As the year progressed the problems at home built up for Clive. His first term "crisis" with his social context course which really was growing out of proportion was solved by a new member of staff becoming involved but his home life and the lack of interest in what he was doing was becoming more stressful. He was not able to discuss any aspect of the Poly at home and even a throw away line like - "I must have this essay in by tomorrow" brought comments like "well you chose to do it" and "if I say I'm tired she'll say 'you're doing something you enjoy'".

- Q. "Its a pity isn't it because you obviously enjoy being here?"
- A. "I do enjoy it but if I say look I've got to get this done she say 'Yes but you enjoy doing this and I don't see what benefit I get from something you enjoy."
- Q. "Did she think that you didn't enjoy doing your work?"
- A. "Yes part of the job I did enjoy, part I didn't. I think the fact that I'm enjoying this so much devalues it. Work if you don't like it is alright but this is rather like going to the cinema or any other form of entertainment, that's how she sees it."
- Q. "So its not the education itself she is against?"
- A. "She just sees it as useless at my age."
- Q. "What does she do all day Clive?"
- A. "She does the housework and she goes with friends and may go to a coffee morning. .... Study is a waste of time, this is for young people. There has to be an end product. Having chosen psychology as well, it's quote 'an odd subject' normal people don't behave like this. why can't you be normal like other men, none of my friends husbands would be reading books like this."

Clive gave all sorts of examples to illustrate this and as I said at the outset this is probably an extreme case. Other students I have met over the years on a variety of courses though tell similar stories of animosity by relatives, friends and workmates. Clive made an audio tape for mature students with me during the first year, she didn't want to see it or listen to it. Clive got a good result at Open College, she didn't ask what and felt no embarrassment when a friend stopped them in the street to congratulate him and she didn't even know how he had done. Making matters worse was that Clive's



particular friend at the Poly was another mature student, an attractive lady in her mid 30s who was as keen and interested as Clive and a catalyst to his learning and enjoyment. If she called round to his home the animosity increased which would almost be amusing considering the two people involved if it wasn't quite so tragic for Clive's enjoyment of his course and peace of mind.

One example of adjusting to Higher Education came to light during our meetings which would seem to illustrate a frequent reaction amongst mature students but even at the time of asking Clive about it I was concerned about it being my interpretation of the situation and not his but his answers added further illumination. Knowles claims that during our school careers we are taught how to be taught. There is a dependence on the teachers they are authority figures - this in fact is important in the pedagogy/andragogy debate. Returning to Higher Education invokes memories of school, happy ones in Clive's case but of an old fashioned Grammar School, in which the teachers 'knew the answers and were treated with respect'. To start a course at the Poly one has to go through a complicated process of enrolment and this then and us barrier is created from the outset. So to some extent Clive treated the teaching staff with a reverence with a respect for what they know and indeed although he felt they were approachable he would not argue about a particular essay with one academic even though Clive felt he was aggrieved at the mark and that his experience had been down graded.

And yet Clive had what seemed a close personal relationship with the staff outside of the academic areas of his course. He would eat with

them, share a coffee and a joke and felt that through his illness he had been treated with great concern. All these things he felt was a product of his age and experience, it was people to people, not student to teacher, that was separate and needed to be kept so.

*"Yes I can talk to them as friends, being older than most of them its easy to talk to them because I'm used to talking to people of that age and probably people in senior positions so I can talk very very freely."*

Q. *"But yet you couldn't go and discuss your battle essay?"*

A. *"No I wish I had been able to."*

Q. *"Its almost as if there was a role distance isn't it?"*

A. *"In fact, when I see my doctor if we are talking about social activities then we are on first name terms and he stays on first name terms all through the consultation but when I'm talking about health matters then I address him as doctor and it seems perhaps artificial."*

Q. *"Perhaps that's what you do with the staff here as well?"*

A. *"Yes I'm seeing the two situations because I've never been in higher education before its never occurred to me to challenge them."*

Q. *"Perhaps this is back to your school days and the image you had of what it was going to be like here?"*

A. *"I don't know whether (the lecturer) would have been prepared to discuss the mark. I would have enjoyed arguing the point with him but I feel they haven't got time really to do that."*

Clive felt so strongly about his battle essay that he brought it in to show me but it was not an area I felt able to talk about and urged him to talk to the tutor, why not over a lunch time. That was not a valid suggestion, those were social occasions and so this segregation of roles continued.

Clive returned for the second year but his health was not good and

further surgery was imminent. He tried to arrange it for the summer between the second and third year but in the end had four bypass operations immediately after Christmas. The operations as I write have been a success and Clive is about to go home. He has decided to repeat the whole of the second year but already he is asking his friend to drive him in so that he can catch up. A really remarkable fellow.



**Janet: Applied Social Studies: Four Year Degree Course**

Jan is a divorced lady who had three children living at home when I first went to see her. Her husband had remarried and lived in the same town. She began her studies in a quiet way sometime ago whilst still married, night school 'O' levels, then Open College. The fact that she did start to study was not the reason for the breakdown of the marriage but it did widen the rift between them and she became a different person. As she moved into the Open College and found more companionship and like minded people there she felt that her husband would not have tolerated this if they had still been together. He had very strong views on the role of women and his wife, although interestingly enough, the woman he has now married is a career woman with very little in common with the person he had wanted Janet to be.

The whole package of studying with the Open College and the desire to get a degree became the way of life of Jan although she had to work at whatever jobs she could to support her family. I suspect that the divorce gave her a very much reduced life style but she was determined to support herself and her family and the more she did so the more her self concept improved. She did very much enjoy the study itself but did not feel that she could afford to indulge that totally. This was reflected in her choice of degree. She was offered a place on Combined Studies as well as Applied Social Studies but took the latter because she saw better job prospects there. All through the divorce and setting up her own home was the feeling of doing what she wanted to do for herself and for her family in economic terms.

Even the grant was allowing her economic independence with money for the first time to choose what to do. Janet was able to supplement the grant by part-time jobs and she was really pleased with the way things were working out when I saw her before she came to the Poly. Study really was giving her a meaning to life; it was an alternative to soap operas on the telly it was her form of escapism because it allowed her to meet people and to learn as well. It also allowed her to prove to herself that she was capable of achieving in this way. She had not been able to carry on with her studies after school as her parents could not afford it and then she had married young and had children quickly. The whole culture she was involved with then did not include study and indeed until she began with the Open College she did not think that there would be a place for mature students at the Poly. She hadn't seen any details and simply presumed that it was for 18 year olds. To get a place on a degree course was something really special and the culmination of a great deal of slow, hard work. It was something too that now she had reached she would not give up lightly whatever happened.

However, once she embarked on the course 'things did happen' and when I saw her at the end of the first term she was in a different frame of mind than the summer. At Christmas she felt that the organisation of the Poly was not what she had expected but that she would cope because she would not give up her studies. It was strange knowing what happened after Christmas how well at that time she felt the fitting together of family life and study was going and that the real problems then had been with the administration and day to day running of the course.

As far as the home situation was concerned Janet felt being at the Poly gave her more time for the children. Her classes finished at a time when she could be at home for them and she was doing courses that would help with her elder daughter's homework. She did not study in the evening and her weekends were left pretty free because the children went to see their father. She really felt no conflict in this respect and there was even time for alterations to be done in the house - the back room was being rebuilt around her (and us) as we sat there for the interview.

Maybe it was something of a calm before the storm - easy to say this with the benefit of knowing what then happened after Christmas in this respect.

As far as the problems at the Poly itself were concerned it appeared to be one of information overload. As Jan said herself, at the Open College it was one night a week, one subject, one tutor, same group. They were taken care of, treated like adults, knew what they were



doing. At the Poly it was straight in at the deep end. The introduction had been a large scale presentation and nothing really was explained - or at least at a level of comprehension. Seminars, lectures, tutorials all seemed to get interwoven and I lost track of who was taking what and when. Added to this were different subjects, split groups, split sites - distances to Library and sites for lectures and altogether a feeling of "The stranger". From the outset Jan needed a contact person and had quickly become involved with another mature lady who was in a different group. They had met at the interview and found each other on the first day. This lady had a very different attitude to Janet but was to be important to her and so she decided to change groups.

She saw her Psychology seminar tutor for support and the Student Services counsellor to ratify her decision. The changing of groups was important to her and I feel helped her to cope with the other problems of organisation.

As I said the other lady had a very different outlook on returning to study and a very negative view of the Poly. She obviously had a great deal of difficulties in her life - with a handicapped daughter to support and everything else on top of this was causing problems. She talked about lack of facilities, photocopying, rooms and poor presentation and preparation by staff. Janet was more forgiving and felt that the mishmash would be sorted out although obviously coming to terms with it practically had taken its toll on her physically if not emotionally. However she still had this feeling of privilege of being part of something special of finding out about things she never

would have thought existed and even if she does not get a job at the end of it she would not have missed that.

However, soon after that Christmas interview the situation changed on the family front and the Poly work became very much the 'escape situation' that she had described to me at our first meeting. Through all that happened Jan felt that it gave her a touchstone, a constant, a place to forget what was happening at home and for this reason she clung on to it. Only once did she say that if she thought it was the real cause of the problems she would stop doing it but time showed that she had been right to stick to her resolve. Briefly, after Christmas her eldest daughter decided that she wanted to go and live with her father and as far as I can gather to more or less sever ties with her mother. Jan was obviously upset but the girl was old enough to make her own decisions but visits to court were needed to sort the situation out legally.

That was only just resolved when problems arose with the second daughter. The girl claimed it was to do with her mother being at college but due to the speedy intervention of an enlightened family doctor she received psychiatric help and the root of the problem turned out to be feelings of rejection by the father and a wish not to be involved with the stepmother. This has now led to the father totally 'disowning' the girl. It seems though that mother and daughter have now come through this together and as I said apart from initial feelings of guilt Janet is happy to continue her studies. She has had her own problems in coping with these traumas, pains in her legs, overeating as a form of comfort but again her G.P. seems to

have offered incredible practical and moral support and she now looks very well.

By the time I saw her in the summer after the first year she was more settled and able to look back with satisfaction on the year. She said she wouldn't have missed it for the world and that it was something that anyone who got the chance should do.

"I've really enjoyed it, I wouldn't have missed it for anything and its an experience I think that anybody has got to chance to do should have. Its just so different from everything, I think the confidence that it gives you and the knowledge that you've been able to get through and that you've not just been kidding yourself that you were good enough to go there, and you've actually got there and you've got through your exams and you've proved something to yourself, its got to be a morale booster."

Q. "So you see it in terms of yourself do you that this is what you yourself have done, its your self concept that you think has improved?"

A. "I think so yes. Its something that if I hadn't put everything into it I wouldn't have got out of it what I have done. It all boils down to if you are prepared to put a lot into it and look positive then you get the positive things out of it.

"I've enjoyed it and I'd do it again, I certainly think I made the right decision."

"...the hardest part is up to Christmas, there were so many new subjects, the initial approach demands a lot of concentration, it seems very very heavy going, but once you get past that and you get to the stage when you have a little bit of knowledge and you can start inputting things because you do have this little bit of knowledge and you've time to read up and you understand a bit more of what you're reading, once the Christmas holiday was over and we got back to applying it then there was no regrets after that."



## **Kate: Applied Social Studies: Four Year Degree Course**

I first went to see Kate one Saturday morning in August when she told me the shopping would be done and her husband would have the children and we could have peace to talk. When I arrived peace was the last word I would have used and looking back I should have guessed that her life was in perpetual turmoil. She is obviously the "lynch pin" of all that happens in the family, and to return to study to do a full-time degree course for her own satisfaction was certain to cause problems. Whilst I set up the tape Kate cleaned out the fire place, dealt with an argument between her young son and a friend who was staying with them, comforted her son who eventually got very upset and finally persuaded her husband to take them out for a short time after providing us with a cup of coffee.

In comparative peace Kate talked about her excitement at coming to do a full-time degree course at the Polytechnic. She had over the past eight years done 'O' levels and 'A' levels and recently had completed the Pre degree. She had just received a package of general information about the Polytechnic which she spread out in front of herself and took a great delight in reading out some of the activities on offer. She had clearly been doing the same to the family partly because she was so interested herself and also to try and create something of the same feeling in her elder son who had just taken 'O' levels and was awaiting, with no great hopes, for his results. During the time she had been doing her previous qualifications she had worked at several part-time jobs which were low paid and meaningless but which fit in

with her husband and children's commitments and were the only ones available to her because of her lack of qualifications. The family also needed the income from her part-time jobs but the night-school study had showed her what she was missing and now she was finally able to do a full-time course for her own satisfaction and to show that she could do it.

*"I'm so excited at the thought of doing it full-time and without having to worry about other things. I feel sure it will be a pleasurable thing - I feel sure it will be. It just seems great, thoroughly enjoyable instead of doing something that you hate doing as a job".*

Little did Kate or I know just how far from the truth this was at that stage although when I got home I made a note and remarked to my husband that I only hoped Kate was not let down because she was so high about beginning the course

Kate had not arrived at her expectations of the Poly without hard work and background experiences which were not always good along the way.

Her husband had taken the opportunity of teacher training at a local college in the mid 1860s which provided two year courses for adults and Kate had supported him and taken the burden of the growing family during that time. The experience had clearly been valuable for her husband in that he is now a headmaster and he had benefited and enjoyed to the full all aspects of college life. It was only during one of our later conversations that I began to think about how much Kate had done to allow her husband to 'enjoy' his course and how little help she was getting during hers. I was obviously not in a position to say this to Kate but after one of her later visits to the student counsellor at the Polytechnic this began to become evident to her and she said to me herself, *"I think I need a marriage guidance counsellor not a student counsellor, there are lots of things we really will have to sort out"*.

During her husband's training she had taken an interest in what he was



doing, she had met his colleagues and joined them at social functions.

"... the people at college with him seemed no different to me..... they sometimes lacked common sense and seemed stupid so during his final year I gave 'O' levels a try. I got a real sense of achievement coming out with one 'O' level it was wonderful so the next year I did two 'A' levels and got one. I was working part-time, the children were 4 and 5, I missed half a dozen lessons and it was a very hard couple of hours week but if you're interested you work hard and I thoroughly enjoyed it".

Through this time Kate worked at various jobs and the thought of a qualification to get better employment was uppermost in her mind. Then it changed she found that she enjoyed the study for its own sake something which surprised her considering how hostile she had been to her secondary modern schooling. Her night school tutor had shown her that there was a way of helping her to learn, by treating the group as individuals and fired her enthusiasm to go further with her studies.

At this stage it would have seemed to be the time when she set out to apply to the Polytechnic. Kate went along to an exhibition about returning to study and approached the Polytechnic stand to talk to the person manning it.

"He said you don't have the necessary qualifications. He said you need more 'A' levels. The fellow assumed by just looking at me that I couldn't have any 'A' levels. It really put me off - I took a prospectus, I felt put off - I would have done something with a bit of encouragement. You see I do sort of feel nervous, that your not doing things in the right sort of order, or a mysterious area - as if you need qualifications just to get through the initial asking of people and you need the right sort of things - but as I've now found out its all so easy - its not like that - its all so welcoming.

That experience stopped me for two years but last year I decided that this would be the year. I went to the Polytechnic for an interview and was accepted conditionally on passing the Pre degree. When I actually got down to it I found it was all so easy - nothing to be frightened of and yet there was this fear

of contact. I think it's back to childhood. I still hold tutors in awe".

To some extent the Pre degree course did much to confirm the view of education, study and staff that she had gained from her night school teacher and to break down the awe she had from her school days.

However in another way it gave her an unreal picture of what full-time study would be like and probably laid the foundations not of how to cope with the first year but of the problems coping with it would bring for her. It lulled Kate into a false sense of security so that when I first saw her in the summer she was excited at the idea of study and was ill prepared for the practicalities. So much so that in the first few weeks of the course she and her husband began major alterations to their already unfinished home.

For Kate the Pre degree was something of a relaxation and it would seem to fit well into Houle's typology of study for studyings sake.

"It was all very enjoyable. Every area we touched even learning about the library - learning so much - isn't all this clever - would have liked more on this - found that difficult - everything interesting except things I know about which were boring. It was a pleasant night a week - mixing with people - some different some the same. A couple of hours out of the awful pressures from outside. The staff were interested, they made thing easy for you. It wasn't like school it was all on a personal basis, friendly and I didn't expect it. The staff seemed to have different personalities, genuine interest, didn't seem to be treating it like work or they didn't seem to be to me".

Q. "Not them and us?"

A. "No very approachable, they made it clear that they were there to help. They were easy and welcoming".

Q. "So what do you expect on you course?"

A. "I don't know. I've had this package from the students and the



*Director telling you the whole thing I thought isn't this great an invitation to having a good time".*

Q. *"But what will it be like in the classroom?"*

A. *"Like the Pre degree but I have been told that they have been nurturing us and that not the same interest is shown and that you'll be lucky if you can find your tutor - I've heard other people say that".*

At the time of our first conversation doubts like this were pushed aside, the expectation was one in which everything would fall into place. During the Pre degree Kate had had problems finding time to do essays and was cross that her husband did not help. She meant at that stage help with the essay but in the end when he didn't help she was glad she had done it herself to show she could. The problem was not seen in terms of needing some practical help with the three children and the house but because she was unhappy with her job. Being on a full-time course at the Polytechnic would solve that -

*"It is going to affect the family - in some ways it will be happier here. I will be happier. I'm looking forward to studying, getting into different areas I've only just found out how enjoyable study is - it doesn't have to be only sitting listening and learning facts its an enquiring thing - it takes a lot more thinking about - being presented with information and digesting it and thinking about it - opens new horizons".*

She also had a feeling that everyone would work together, She had found some problems with different personalities in the Pre degree groups but even these would be solved when the groups were smaller. Many of the discussions one wanted to continue would take place in the pub afterwards and this became as important as the timetabled session and was "more natural ".



Looking back at the first conversation there were pointers for most of the problem areas of Kate's first full-time year of study and what was the great pity was that it reached 20th November before we got together for our second meeting and by this stage Kate's life had reached a real crisis point. From being excited and enthusiastic she was demoralised and at times incoherent - after a time it was clear that our interview had become a counselling session and indeed she came back a few weeks later to say that it had caused her to think about many things and had been a turning point because she had been able to talk about so many things that were worrying her.

Basically Kate had based her expectations on one or two nights a week at the Polytechnic and although there were problems at essay times she had been able to fit into an already busy life. Then in October nothing changed in her life except that the house was being rebuilt around her and she had to fit full-time study into that. There was no time for long discussions, no interaction with staff in the pub, no help at home just a relentless time-table and a group of people who were not of her own choosing.

*"I came here with bags of confidence and I feel that's really been undermined in lots of different ways. I felt really insecure in as much, after the first week feeling that I wasn't happy here. I wasn't enjoying any part of it. It was all like a trial, so much to take in and I wasn't really relating to any of the other people in the group.*

*A lot of them seemed rather ridiculous and I was thinking well, whatever are these people expecting, the stupid comments that are being made and it was as if they were undermining the value of it being on a degree course and expecting to have everything said to them in plain simple language. Little things like that I found annoying. It sounds ridiculous doesn't it..... that was seeming to make me feel so insecure, to be holding me back from enjoying any..... well from taking anything in".*

Kate went on to say she had no right to feel so superior that it was a problem she would have to cope with and that she was sure they were all special in their own way. At the time she said that it was not at all convincing but later in the year and at the beginning of the second year she became very close to many of the group and indeed it was their different backgrounds and problems which helped her to put her own in perspective. It led her to volunteer to me in our third interview that she would have greatly valued talking to someone like herself before she began and seeing just what was involved in a full-time course. She was saving all her essays and would love to talk to people before they come to say look I did it - so can you!

At the time of her second interview though the problem with the group seemed to involve self perception. Kate saw herself as a student, an undergraduate, she wanted to play the role, maybe not as an 18 year old but certainly as she had seen her husband do his full-time course in the heady days of the mid sixties when she had allowed him to take his books into the park to study while she put the children to bed".

Instead Kate sums it up so well :

*"...they are all parents and they have been put into that group so that any people with responsibilities - we don't start until 10 o'clock everyday and we don't have any lectures late on so that we can get children to school and get home in time for them so that means that we aren't having any (pause), there are no young people in the group..... only one male and there are twelve others. These are things that are a disadvantage, you are not getting a younger viewpoint to our particular group and you're not getting the male viewpoint put over and these are important.*

*There are two different ways of looking at everything really,*



different experiences and I do think that having younger people would have helped us just as we would have helped them but apparently the course has been divided into groups like that to make it easier for us with our families and they do apparently realise the disadvantages. Another thing with the group is with people having responsibility and tending to come into the lectures and seminars and then going straight home.

There has been no involvement in any social side to any social activities at all. I did imagine that there would be more going on and I find I am not able to take advantage of this or even get involved".

This stream of consciousness was delivered almost as a cry from the heart. It was how Kate would like being a student to be whereas the reality came a few moments later.

"...there is so much to do all the time its a question of not wasting time, get on with all this work that's piling up that I feel I have to do".

The situation at home was exacerbating the other problems. The builder doing the alterations had made a mess and some legal action was slowing the process down. There was no kitchen, no water, nowhere to wash clothes but still this was expected to happen. The little son had to be picked up at 3.30 pm so there was no chance of working late in the library and the two elder children arrive in half an hour later. Kate's husband gets back about six at the earliest.

"I go home knowing and wanting to get on with it (an essay), thinking as soon as I get in I'll do it and if I get in at half past three most days its..... (pause)..... I've counted to six hours later before I can say right now I'm ready to sit down. Once all the problems have been sorted out and then its absolute sheer frustration thinking I wanted to do this then and I'm tired now and I'm panicking now and I can't think straight".

It was the first two or three weeks which started the lack of



orientation and things seemed to go from bad to worse. The lack of practical help or induction, the overload of information, the difficulty of linking home and Poly; mother, wife and student roles became an impossibility for Kate. At one stage her brother was also ill and she had to leave everything and go to Liverpool, she worried about the upheaval of the house and her studies on her son and on one occasion was devastated to find that he had walked home from school because she had forgotten to pick him up thinking it was someone else's day. In her 'saner moments' she felt she was getting to grips with the work but the other pressures were just too great no matter what she tried. She was not going to be able to fit her expectations of "the undergraduate student" with the reality. She wanted maximum input and maximum output, by that second interview she had not learnt to compromise and that was not happening.

This situation continued and again when I look back Kate was having very little support practically or emotionally. Her husband said he was happy for her to be doing the course but provided there was no cost to him. Kate wanted to talk, to him, to a friend to someone and it didn't happen. It was at that stage she should have seen the student counselling service, she did make an appointment and cancelled it because she had spoken to me but I was not able to help in terms of what was happening in her relationship at home. A mature students common room might have helped, somewhere to go during the day to talk to people with similar problems, but basically Kate had too much to do.

The pressure continued increased by the need to do extra work to

follow the social work branch through the course and then the end of term exams. Clearly Kate's husband had his own problems too. He is headmaster of a special school which carries a good deal of emotional as well as practical strain and evenings are important times of relaxation for him. The house was a problem, they were stripping and varnishing every piece of woodwork as well as rebuilding it, but he seemed to take this in his stride.

When I contacted Kate for our third interview I could tell straight away even over the phone that all was not well. In fact she had had a 'nervous breakdown' and had been advised by her doctor to go away for a few weeks without the family. She and her husband did manage a few days in the Lakes and then all the family went camping in France. This just caused the anxieties to return and they had to come home early. When I called she was seriously considering why she was returning to the Poly, was delighted that we could talk and promised to make an appointment with the student counsellor (which she did do this time). She was emphatic though that she was not going to drop out.

Her own words sum her feeling up better than I could and may reflect the feeling of many mature students and of working mothers in general when I pointed out the fact that she had passed the coursework and the exam at the end of the first year.

*"I don't know, because of all the stress and strain I don't feel any great deal of satisfaction out of what I've done. I would have thought I would have come out thinking well haven't you done well, you've completed this year, look at what you've done but in a way its just been an anti-climax because I've left that and I've come home here and we then have to get cracking trying to start on this place".*



"I think it's been one long feeling that I wasn't in control, I sort of turned up there all the time. It got better after I had spoken to you last time and it was an escape really as well and I enjoyed that. I don't think I spent my time very well , (pause), you' ve got to be terribly organized, avoid temptation, sort out what you can before you go, it was like relaxing while I was there and enjoying it and then rush back home and get cracking again, whereas if the breaks that you had in between time that should have been spent doing some work because I come home here, sort this place out, meals, all the emergencies that were cropping up with the building and I spent an awful lot of time of a night here. I think really I should try to set the work out of the way in the daytime and perhaps, yes, maybe a few times during the week sit down for an hour because I think really you should be able to organise it so that you are not spending every minute (pause)....

Q. "Why do you think it got better?"

A. "I think I realised that people were saying I was getting so het up about it in the group, gradually getting to know them, that they all had something to offer even though they weren't initially my cup of tea. You realised you were all in the same boat and as different as we all were, I surprised myself actually to find out how awful I was at working with that group and not wanting anything to do with them at all. I'd never thought that but its true, I can't say anything else because I've come out of the year liking everyone of them and admiring them all thinking aren't you doing well all that you've got to put up with and yet you are managing to do it and you' re determined to do this and you're determined to do that. Its amazing, common (pause) the people were working for how it can (pause) it gives you something in common then doesn't it whereas there wasn't anything initially".

Q. "Was there a time during the year when you felt you wanted to drop out?"

A. "No. I came home after the holiday and I had been thinking am I doing the right thing, why was I going into doing this, has being at college contributed to my state at the moment? I had come to the conclusion that really its an accumulation of things obviously, it wouldn't have been easy if everything had been smooth running here that still would have been new".

Q. "But you had such high ideals hadn't you when I spoke to you in the summer?"

A. "Yes but its not been a bit like I expected in as much, I must say that what I was expecting isn't going on there, I don't feel I'm taking part in it, I don't feel as someone who is married with a family that you are actually able to take part in that unless you (long pause) get more involved with college life and that I think is very difficult really, you know, any of the social things or you don't set involved, we've not got involved



with any other group within the college at all, none of the social activities or anything and I think that a shame because I think that must add to it, you would get a feeling of the whole place really".

The two strands running through this are those I outlined earlier of the whole image of the student life and the false expectations created by the Pre degree. There is also the thread of the role of women in a patriarchal society but this is also interwoven with the expectations Kate had because of the time her husband had 'enjoyed' as a mature student at college - to the extent that she always refers to the Poly as 'college'.

When her husband joined the conversation he was quick to say what a good idea it had been for her to go to the Poly and that she had changed for the better in being able to consider things more. The problem had been a lack of social organisation at the Poly; too much emphasis on too much work too early on. There was not enough time for the group to get to know each other before they had to bare their souls in seminars. Many of the problems he saw in terms of lack of tact by the staff and not understanding group dynamics but his answers to my questions underlined a chauvinistic attitude that I felt it was not up to me to push but which obviously became apparent to Kate after I left and as she later told me were developed further with the student counsellor.

Q. "How do you feel she's been over the year?"

Kate's Husband;

"It's been up and down (pause) some high spots, some good times when you've got through, sorted out essays and got some reasonable marks and there were other times when Kate was under

a lot of pressure trying to sort some new things out, when things coincided in a terrifying way with times of maximum stress with my job you know, all things seemed to be downward, when its been a real struggle because obviously with the best will in the world you cannot switch off entirely from other things you have done as routine for most of your life and suddenly start switching off and say I'm not going to bother with the washing or I'm not going to win with this sort of thing.....

Q. "Has it involved you in a lot more?"

Kates Husband:

"No I wouldn't say so, no I don't think it has."

Q. "What did you think about Kate doing it in the first place?"

Kates Husband:

"Delighted I mean as far as I can see it's a good way for all. that (pause) needed at some stage, we need to go through anyway (pause)... "

Q. "Did you think it would have the impact on her it had?"

Kates Husband:

"No. I thought it would be slightly easier, slightly more straightforward. I think partly there was a certain amount of hype at the beginning that got everybody in a bit of a state and it was a question of deadlines and amount of work to be done and sort of depth you were intended to work at..... They try to draw parallels from the college I was at. They were all mature students and it wasn't the same sort of reliance or pressure on students to 'produce a lot in the first year. There was pressure for us to produce quite a lot in the third year and a hell of a lot in the fourth year and certainly there wasn't a great deal of pressure, it was mainly social and you gradually built up a good social life."

Q. "For Kate one of the problems was sorting out what had gone on here and what was going on at the Poly. When you were at (the local ) College you didn't have the house being rebuilt?"

Kates Husband:

"We did."

Kate:

"He used to sit on the recreation ground and study while I was here coping with the little ones and no floors in, it came at the time of your final exams but you could go out and come back when you wanted you weren't rushing about picking up from school and that sort of pressure".

After the interview we had a coffee and talked about the house so that it was quite late when I left. Kate promised to contact the Counsellor which she did and call me afterwards which she didn't. I saw her during the first week of term and said I was pleased to see her back



on course. She said the panic had come back again and that she needed to talk. We both had a class then and I gave her my home number to get in touch and fix something. I didn't hear from her but continued to see her around when she at times said that she was working on her counselling advice and coming to terms with the fact that she could not do everything for everyone. After Christmas she looked more cheerful when we met and said they had spent the holiday completing the house so that pressure no longer existed. Whenever I see her she is locked in animated conversation with someone but I doubt her undergraduate role will ever live up to her expectations or her life will ever be free from some trauma. There is so much always happening in her life but I think I shall always equate her with a little story she told me describing a time in the first year when she was at her lowest ebb - no kitchen, no bedroom for her son who was sleeping on a mattress on the floor, having rushed to Liverpool to sort out a problem with her brother and the interview for the social work option of her course due in the week.

*"The washing hadn't been done, there wasn't any clothes ready for Monday morning, back to school, everything needed doing, there is always questions, checking if everyone has got everything ( long pause) Ben didn't have all his stuff you know, coming back at midnight and then finding he's asleep on the bedroom floor. The social work interview was on the Wednesday and hes still sleeping there because it was all panic stations, no wonder the Poly (pause)..."*

*We had a sort of saga with his homework book at school that's been missing for five months and five months later he is still saying "Do you know where my homework book is ? I thought we'd sorted this out months a go and they are still on about his homework book. I just went down and I said "Look I'm lucky to find him never mind his homework book, the state we' re living in. Just tell me if you want it instead of constantly giving him this aggravation about it". My husband takes no responsibility for that..... I say to him I've never known anything like it I'm going down there (to the school) and say to them look all the rest of these people must be totally boring sending these*

notes signed, back the next day with trip money and photograph money dead on time, look we will never do it we will always be at the last minute don't take it out on him".

## Philip: DMS: One Year Postgraduate Diploma

From the first time I met Philip there was an air of mystery and intrigue. This is I'm sure what he would want and is carefully calculated to 'rouse the interest or curiosity.' In actual fact this somewhat backfired on him during the year of his course as the impact of the Polytechnic and the further study was probably very different than he ever would have anticipated and he did change considerably.

Philip is divorced, in his forties and with a teenage son who lives in the south with his ex-wife but who comes to stay with Philip each holiday. The visual image he presents I would best describe as "bohemian" and this probably is a reflection of his age and background. It is also something he tried to perpetuate when we first met. (There is obviously a reflection of my age and background in that choice of word too for it was carefully chosen to encompass what seemed to be attitude as well as appearance). His first contact with me was to return my request for an interview in person to arrange a time but he had put on the reply:-

*"I am willing to take part. .... on the basis on an initial discussion only and with no further obligation to participate unless willing.*

*I would not be willing to be contacted about my reasons if deciding not to take up the place."*

At the time he came to see me he had not finally decided what to do because he was having problems with a grant for the one year post graduate course in Management Studies. He had already used up his



grant allocation for his first degree some years ago and so he needed a fourth year as it were. He had also been unemployed for the past two and a half years so this was causing added complications. However he was adamant that it was bad administration by the Poly which was causing the hold up with the funding body.

It came as little surprise to me to hear that his first degree was in Philosophy (and religion related studies) because from his very first answer he introduced a depth of reflection I hadn't come across before.

Q. "Why particularly do you want to do this course?"

A. "That's a complicated question - well the question is simple but the answer is complicated."

And complicated it indeed was, in fact to the extent that I don't think Philip has worked out the answer for himself yet eighteen months later after embarking on a series of counselling interviews at the Polytechnic which began as a result of what happened to him on this course.

He began by telling me about his fascinating CV but which did very little to actually get him employment. In fact he described his first degree as "a passport to unemployment". So he had decided to do this Diploma in Management partly to get a job in the short term but then this was to aid in his long term plan which did not include being employed. He wanted to ultimately look for alternative forms of employment in areas like co-operative work in craft ventures. The qualification would help those groups which were high on idealism but short on management skills.

So whilst this course had a certain instrumentality it also was part of Philip's self development - his spiritual development was not balanced by practical skills and this was to be remedied by this year. He also saw it as a way of developing some social skills by working with people 'whose aims and aspirations I don't share'. Over the year it was noticeable how Philip did fluctuate in his need to identify or distance himself with the aims and aspirations of the course, the staff and the other students. All this was part of this complication

that I mentioned at the outset which gave rise to a sort of duality of purpose about the reason for doing the course and what happened during the year.

He had attended a Grammar School and described himself as "intellectually quite bright". During his school career he changed between the classics and the sciences, even won a scholarship for a year in a public school, but in the end left school after 'O' levels, "not doing too well". He then went to work in a large chain of bookshops for three years and during that time decided he needed some qualifications. So he returned to a Further Education College to do 'A' levels and more 'O' levels as a mature student. After this he went to an Art College to do a Foundation course in Photography and from there to a job in America in Photography and Graphic Design. It was after returning from this, married and with a son that he went to University as a mature student. This caused several problems and little wonder since he was commuting backwards and forwards between Surrey and Lancaster and during that time his marriage split up. Philip said that he had sacrificed his marriage and a good wife, to follow his needs for education.



So in effect Philip had a wide variety of educational experiences on which to base his expectations of this Polytechnic. It seems that the only time he had really been happy within education was at Art College in London during the 1960s and this could explain my initial description of him. He had not experienced such enjoyment of University life finding it too prescriptive, didactic and constraining on the development of self. Clearly he had a part of himself that wanted his time at the Poly to transport him back to those Art College days but that was restricted by the realities of his financial situation. He talked about the luxury of living alone, the type of society he might belong to as a student and he had many of the problems of 18 year olds so that he did not want any special help as a mature student. On the other hand he wanted to be able to make a realistic income to follow his plans to ultimately set up a private press, printing limited editions of fine art books - everything hand made and that would necessitate having to do things on this course that he would prefer not to do. Even in this acceptance of "playing the game" for the qualification and knowledge though there was a dichotomy in his responses. Philip expected a post graduate course to be different to an undergraduate one, he would prefer a "socratic approach" to teaching and learning and he felt that there would be opportunities for input by the students. However ...

*"...have to bear in mind at the back of my head a certain scepticism because at the end of the day all Poly courses are under scrutiny and what is going to count to let this course gain credibility in educational terms is the number of people who sail out in July and by August or September are in full-time paid managerial type positions and they are obviously going to orientate the course to those aspects for their own survival".*

Q. "And you understand that in your mind that you might have to

capitulate somewhat?"

A. *"I don't know, there always has to be a joker in every pack!"*

If Philip's opening remarks created an image of intrigue his closing ones of the first interview left me with a picture of someone who couldn't fail this course because he was only going to *"play the game and if I'm going to learn anything in the next year it's perhaps to come down and play the game more than I have done in the past."*

It was a great surprise then to find Philip in the state of mind he was when we got together for the second interview. He began by saying that he was overwhelmed by the amount of work that was involved in the course and it became very clear that he was having difficulty with study skills such as the preparation and writing of essays. (It was a pity that I had not acted on this at the time because by the third interview this had become a major problem and indeed had virtually caused him to fail the course). It also became very clear that his approach to the course had changed and although he claimed:-

*"I think my objectives over the year are slightly different"*, he appeared to me to have shifted his ground a good deal. He still maintained a sort of bravado that he would get out of the course what he wanted but he had become much more instrumental in his attitude.

*"I may have surprised myself to the degree to which I have put into it but that was a conscious decision."*

The course was clearly more difficult than he expected it would be.

It was more assessment led and didactically taught and more

qualification orientated. However, instead of opting out and taking what he could from the course he had by this stage been caught up in it and although he claimed to have made the decision to be committed to the course he was now playing by "its rules" - the game was not the same. Far from being the deliberate self-directed philosophical outsider of the first interview Philip had now 'conformed' in this first term. Maybe he was different from some students who go through this crisis almost without reflection but he had reached the same state of instrumentality in the search for extrinsic goals. He had become an "insider".

Q. "Did you decide to "conform "after you started the course or before? I didn't notice that when I spoke to you in the summer."

A. "Ah! there was still some hesitation in the summer about whether I would actually come. Once I made the decision to come and enrol part of the decision to involve myself was there, I thought if I'm going to go then I'm going to do it properly, there was a very bad week two or three weeks back when I reneged on that and really couldn't understand why I was on it at all - why I was getting involved."

Q. "What caused that?"

A. "I don't know, it may just have been an unfortunate series of coincidences when some of the material imparted during the week contained quite a lot of implicit moral value laden ideas that I just could not agree with at all. I began to think that I didn't know whether I could follow a course which was so antithetical to my way of thinking. I may have resolved it to some extent."

Q. "You have resolved it not just washed it away?"

A. "No I couldn't do that which is quite interesting, no I am in the process of resolving it which is probably truer or coming to terms with it."

As Philip left the interview he agreed that he had taken on a much more instrumental approach than he would have expected and that he was



concerned about the examinations at the beginning of the next month. At this stage I misjudged how much he had become involved in the "Poly game" and also how much help he needed with study skills. He felt that the induction week had let the group down and that the staff only played lip service to the needs of students treating them as post graduates in that respect alone and presuming these skills were already known. I asked Philip to let me know how he got on. In the event he failed the exams and unfortunately he did not get back to me as I would almost certainly have sent him to the Student Counsellor - a step he then had to take months later after considerable personal trauma and failing the final examinations.

By the time we got together in August for the third interview Philip was more like the individual who came to see me the first time. We had met briefly once or twice to fix up the meeting and he said he wanted to bring some lady friend from a long-standing relationship along to tell me how he had coped with the year and then when that was not possible to ask if he could bring a different lady friend he had "known for years and who knew him very well indeed."

He had in fact failed all three of his final exams - walking out of one early and getting 38% + 36% on the others when the pass mark was 40%.

The interview was a little strained at the outset because it was not clear why Philip had chosen this particular lady and I did not intend to probe the relationship too far but once she left for a while Philip talked at length about the year in a way which again reflected this

dichotomy of doing the course for intrinsic satisfaction and gains at a qualitative development of self and the extrinsic/instrumental reasons of gaining a paper qualification. Philip's background and interests had allowed him to take this into a wider context than his own dilemma and he had begun to examine the situation within the claims of the Polytechnic's recently published "mission statement" and the constraints of the department and external validators of his particular course.

It wasn't particularly easy to get at the 'story' of what happened because it was all tied up with the emotional situation Philip was currently in but basically it still resolved round this conflict of self direction and the external (and internal) constraints of the course.

When the group resumed after Easter it was in a different 'frame of mind'. It had changed from the situation being one of all getting on quite well as Philip outlined in the second interview to becoming exam and competition orientated and he could not cope with that partly, I suspect, because he found himself being caught up in the examination fever too. Having had no extra help since failing the first exams in December he knew the problem would arise again and this added to the panic. It was at this stage that he felt he was losing control of the course and he considered dropping out. From the things that he had said during the first interview the surprising thing is that he did carry on but clearly he was under a great deal of strain and this was supported by Jean, his friend who returned to the room at this point.



" ...all the other students were becoming preoccupied with exams. ... I became preoccupied with the exams and with the marks and there were two people on the course particularly who were actually creating a lot of fuss about marks they got within one or two % so they had some sort of competition going on between themselves which spilled over into the rest of the group. Now I found that very hard to take, partly because it began to build up my own anxieties about the exam and partly because I didn't think it was in keeping with a post-graduate course that people should actually be asking questions, in an almost 'O' level type learning situation with people actually saying can you give us a hint as to what will be on the exam paper. To my mind that had nothing to do with post-graduate management and I became, or allowed myself to become very badly affected by other people's attitudes and my response to that was to withdraw very much from what was happening on the course and from the other students who. .... a number of whom began to exasperate me quite considerably because I felt their approach was not very mature, it was not very responsible. I accepted that they had their own kind of ideas mapped out about where they want to go and the number of them that involved getting pass marks as high as possible because they wanted to go on to other academic courses but there's a balance that can be maintained between having those kind of aspirations and letting them skim off into the rest of the group.

The group became very fragmented towards the end and a lot of hostility and tension was quite evident a thing throughout. It was almost as if the true nature of the group had begun to show itself because for two terms we had gone through what I began to see as a facade of trying to work together as a group and try to do this co-operative team type thing when really underneath everybody's aspirations was were they going to get through the exams at the end of the day. It was just each person for themselves".

"But what really brought me down in the third term was. .... I started becoming exactly what I was criticising in other people, preoccupied with just my approach, my assessments, my assignments and that sort of thing so in that sense I became more withdrawn. I withdrew again".

Q. "Did you think about dropping out?"

A. "I thought about dropping out, I could see this coming at the end of the second term and I thought about, again about dropping out at Easter. Yes I did think about dropping out, I thought about not bothering to sit the exams, finishing the course but not bothering to sit the exams and effectively dropping out. There were a couple of things that militated against that, one was the obvious practical thing that technically I would have been liable to repay my bursary had I dropped out and the other thing was would I be regarded as yet another failure, another



*blot on my CV! So there was a sort of perverse thing of "I'll see this through and I think that's the way I approached the exams, it wasn't that I had the right attitude".*

There are several relevant points here encapsulated in Philips detailed reflections of this situation and of the points Jean made about how she felt he changed during the year. At the outset Philip presented himself as a stereotype of a self directed learner. He had experience of higher education and life but his period of unemployment gave him time for reflection and he had chosen a course which he felt he could dip into and take from it what would be necessary for his own plans for his future. It was 'take it or leave it, I'm an adult, I know where I'm going'.

The course began and Philip got involved in work, more than that he began to play by the rules of the course, he got into the group activities and from what Jean said:

Jean: *"He began to walk tall again. .... there was this getting up in the morning and actually getting out and doing it, he may not have liked what he was doing but he was away and he was smarter, his brain was working, he knew that this wasn't right but he knew he was getting to grips with what was right and what he should do".*

Then he failed the first term exams and in fact he failed the resit too and was allowed to carry on because of his high standard of course work. He did carry on too and it would seem within the constraints of the course. He didn't ask for an help with exams, he didn't see a counsellor, he had changed from getting out of the course what he wanted to putting in what the course wanted and as he said himself he allowed himself to be affected by the course - he suspended his needs

and adulthood.

Jean expressed it by saying:

*"His whole physical appearance and mental attitude was different right to the end of the course and there were a lot of problems with the course. Then it was as if there was a reversal. ... he's just going back a bit now, he's slipping back along the road to what was there before."*

But tied into this failing the exam but at the same time finishing the course was a process of self discovery in another area which may have determined him to finish the

course too. He was going for interviews for jobs about the time of the exams and during one of the interviews realised that he didn't like himself very much in so far as he probably was a good talker in any situation but had never been able to deliver practically. Hence his lack of employment, frequency of job change and forays into different areas of higher education. This course was to be the turning point - he was going to finish it and if that meant the exams too then he would do them. The course had become some sort of catalyst in a personal change but it was hard to use it as that and not conform to its rules - because to fail it now would be a personal failure too and that was a significant change in Philip from our first meeting. Then I doubt if he would have done the exams in the first place, now he was doing a resit. This was personal change not as a result of the material he had learnt on the course but as a result of what he had learnt about himself. To a large extent then this was what he had been aiming at when he said at the beginning he might not get out of the course what the course intended but he couldn't fail because he would take what he wanted. I doubt if he had perceived



that in the way it actually happened.

"I don't see myself going back to what I was before. ... manifestly I've gone back to the old trainers and cord trousers and whatever but some of the positiveness I think is still there. There is much more urge to get up, get out and get things done and there is a desire to get these resits out of the way and go out and start putting into practice, I don't want to do any more of the academic approach at the moment. I've had to learn some very hard home-truths about the way I have done things before but will have to change."

Q. "Could you give me one for-instance?"

A. "I began to realise as a result of the course. .... where from a very early age, probably very early, six or seven, that I have quite an ability to be articulate, that can be quite a good thing but it can also be quite bad and I think what I've done over the years is perhaps very often to avoid actually carrying the things out because I've known ... (pause) ... because to do something usually involves sacrifice and there is an element of truth in the fact that I'm darn right lazy. I actually don't like stretching myself and I don't like pushing myself. Over the years because I could always justify why I didn't do things, was very articulate, with justification and people would accept excuses and they would always come and bow down to them and say he knows what he's talking about and this happened on the course, it happened a number of times and I began to realise just the game I'd been playing". (Actually part of this exam thing is that I've never had to sit down and do them because I've always got out of them)."

"In that sense the course has been very successful and I've learnt a lot about myself, about my limitations about my own abilities, the areas in which I have strengths and weaknesses, now if that is what the course was about then I've succeeded in the course. If what I felt when the results were published that all they felt the course was about was whether you passed or failed the exams then in that sense then I'd failed the course and that's what disappointed me because that was inappropriate to what I understood in the Polytechnic Mission Statement."

"It's very clear, academically I might not, as yet, have been as successful as I could have been but in terms of personal development its been enormous."

Philip could not leave it there though, he could not accept this personal change as his course result. He was drawn into the academic areas of the course and he had to take the resit - the qualification



was a goal whether he liked it or not, whether he looked at it in terms of the mission statement - and the ability to benefit from a course in personal terms - or not.

During the summer Philip became involved in a long series of bureaucratic appeals, meetings for courses reviews, meetings with course leaders, the Dean and the student counsellor because of the appeal. (This is standard procedure in the Poly at finals stage but not for the December exam). The results became important although Philip was also very disappointed with the impersonal way his results had been transmitted by being posted on a notice board rather than sent or given in person. The results influenced his summer with his son in that it tied them to the town and the fact that he had no diploma prevented him from applying for jobs. He left our third interview in a state of some despondency although he was continuing with the counselling over the summer.

I asked Philip to let me know his result in September but didn't hear from him. I had no reason to think he had not got through - his narrow margin of fail on two papers, his high course work marks and his changed attitude were in his favour.

It was with some surprise then one Saturday evening early in December that I received a phone call from him at my home. I had sent out the letter of thanks to my sample and in it mentioned writing up the research. Philip's opening remarks were that he didn't want me to write anything up until I spoke to him and could we get together. The phone call lasted some time however as clearly Philip was in something

of a distressed state and he agreed to call me the next week to fix up an appointment.

Basically he had failed the resits in September and his case had then gone to the external body who validates the course for a special appeal. This in itself was problematic for him and something of a contradiction to his early reasons for doing the course but even more strange was the fact that the panel was meeting to decide his case two days before the graduation ceremony and if he did pass it would be too late to include him in the ceremony.

Bearing in mind my initial description of Philip and the many comments he has made about what the course meant to him I found this instrumentality and need for public verification of the actual qualification difficulty to equate. However he was obviously very serious about it having spoken to the Registry, the Dean and whoever he could. He was also considering approaching the Director of the Polytechnic.

By chance on the following Monday before I had the opportunity to do anything I met the Dean of his Faculty and mentioned how concerned Philip was. He was well aware of the case and that the panel met that afternoon. He undertook to get the result and if Philip had been successful to get his result to the Registry to include him in Graduation.

I waited for the call from Philip the next weekend but none came. I rang him at frequent intervals over Christmas but with no reply and

eventually dropped him a note in the first post after the holiday. In a bright and cheerful mood he called into my office the next day. He passed the course, went to graduation and was now on another part-time management course at the Polytechnic.

The story of Philip actually being given a pass grade on his course and going to the Graduation ceremony is long and complex and in Philip's perception of the event involves not only the relationships between himself and the staff but also the Polytechnic and the external validators of the course. Whatever the real explanation is it has manifest itself to Philip to cause several outcomes.

The experience of the course has made Philip stop and think about himself in a much wider context than what he wanted to do this course for and indeed the effect of what he has seen in himself has necessitated him in having continued counselling with one of the student counsellors at the Poly. It has caused him to change his attitude to the needs of mature students returning to study and shifted his stance from thinking that there is no real need to treat them differently to 18yr olds to wanting to set up some special facility for mature returners. The whole assumption that mature students are able to look after themselves, a view which he held at our first interview, is a false one and he feels that if there had been someone not related to the course that he could have explained his problems so that he might not have failed the first time. The problem with having a personal tutor who also marks the work or maybe even at the interview stage asks questions which probe ones capabilities to do a course generates bravado answers which mask the



truth. The Open University took this on board when they first introduced the separate tutor and counsellor roles although they have had to combine them now in the needs of economy. However the first year with the O. U. is a Foundation year and much stress is placed on study skills leading to the Independent learner developing for second and subsequent level courses. The problem with the course that Philip was on was that it was a postgraduate course something which he wanted reflecting in the way the group were treated but this only masked his particular difficulties further.

Much of this Philip now feels could have been sorted out with a full induction programme which included help with study skills and this is even more important at the undergraduate level. He has been to discuss this and the way he, as a mature student was treated, with the Director and feels so strongly of the need for help that he wants me to set up some project to consider a package probably on a mentor type scheme for the weeks before a course begins.

As well as now perceiving the need for a full introduction to a course for mature students Phil feels that the Polytechnic does not do anything to prepare the student for leaving it. There is the course, the exams, the results and then nothing! There were particular problems in Philip's case because he failed the exams but he is now left as a very different person than the one who came to see me that first time and to some extent he does not know how to cope with that. Because he lives near he is able to continue seeing the counsellor, and maybe his self perception shift is more acute because he lives alone with more time to reflect but the point is made that if adults

are in transition when they enter higher education they also make a transition on leaving it. On both occasions could more be done to help?

Philip now has a temporary administrative job at the Polytechnic and is looking for further work in the area.

#### APPENDIX 4

#### DES Project: Student Potential Programme

#### The Interview Procedure: (as outlined by McBer and Company 1982)

The interview component of the proposed new approach to the admissions process is a semi-structured procedure used by McBer during the last ten years to discover the qualities that distinguish outstanding performers from less effective ones in work roles. The behavioral event interview technique was developed by David McClelland (1976) and his associates at McBer and Company to discover what effective individuals actually do in specific job situations, and then to consider these data as evidence for competencies that distinguish good performers from less effective ones. Strictly speaking, the behavioral event interview is not a measure, but simply a means of gathering information about a person's past experience. The goal of the process is to get the individual talking in as much detail as possible about specific situations in which he or she felt particularly effective. The information desired includes the events that led up to each situation; a description of the other people involved; what the individual was thinking about, feeling or wanting to accomplish; what the individual actually did; what happened; and the ultimate outcome. From this information, the thoughts, feelings, and actions demonstrated by the individual are documented in the context of situational demands.

The behavioral event interview technique is different from other interview procedures. First, it involves a focused probe strategy instead of a list of specific questions. Rather than directing the interview toward areas that may or may not be of interest to the interviewee, such as asking the interviewee for "a time when you solved a problem," the interview typically begins with a question that is more non-directive such as, "Can you tell me about a time when you felt effective?" Another feature of the behavioral event interview is that it presses for actual behaviour and thought, not theory or conclusions about what the interviewee did that was thought to be effective. The interviewee is asked to recount what happened and what he or she did during critical parts of the stories, including the dialogue, observations, and thoughts, feelings, and intentions that occurred. In addition, the interviewer does not summarize or draw conclusions about what the interviewee has recalled, but only goes after the facts of the situation. In this way, the behavioral event interview differs from the clinical or counselling interview (cf., Sullivan, 1954; Rogers, 1951), in which the interviewer reflects summary statements to the interviewee. The goal of the behavioral event interview is to generate stories in such detail that the interviewer can re-create the situations exactly as they happened.

A standard behavioral event interview requires about an hour, and is either tape-recorded for later review or conducted in the presence of an observer, who also serves as a note taker. The interview covers the interviewee's current status, his or her objectives in applying to the institution, four "behavioral events," which include a mix of high



points (times when the individual felt effective or frustrated), and a discussion of the interviewee's strengths and weaknesses.

To provide an idea of how much information is generated, a transcription of the interview would comprise 20 pages of single-spaced type - a text that is rich with information on the interviewee's past performance.

The advantages of the behavioral event interview technique first include its properties as an open-ended assessment procedure: the interviewee takes total direction of the content, while the interviewer's role is to aid recall and to keep the person talking in specifics. Second, the interview technique generates information about the person's actual thoughts and activities rather than interpretations or conclusions regarding what he or she accomplished in particular situations. Third, the technique is very difficult to fake, as the interviewee must be able to relate a great deal of very specific information about his or her behavior and the behavior of others. Finally, the technique provides information which can be examined for the presence of competencies.