Access to What?
Converting Educational Opportunity into Employment Opportunity

FINAL REPORT
By John Brennan and Tarla Shah

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John Brennan
Tarla Shah

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The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) provides research, intelligence and analysis to policy makers at institutional, national and international levels. The focus of much of CHERI’s work is upon the changing relationships between higher education and society. Projects have covered widening participation, graduate employment, quality assurance and evaluation and the roles played by universities in societies experiencing ‘transformative’ changes.

For more information about its work, visit the CHERI website at www.open.ac.uk/cheri. CHERI is part of the UK Open University.

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Foreword

Quite rightly, the question of widening participation in higher education has become a major policy issue. Most of the policy focus has been on the need to widen the social composition of those in higher education, and ensure that more young people from the most deprived sections of society achieve entry. However, thinking and policy development has moved on recently, and the student experience while at university, along with the outcomes that students achieve -- and in particular employment outcomes -- are regarded as matters of perhaps equal importance, when widening participation is considered.

This important study breaks new ground by considering in the context of widening participation the experience of students as they leave university. Disturbingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, it finds that earlier disadvantage is not entirely removed and that students from the most deprived backgrounds tend to go on to jobs with less prestige and lower pay than their peers. Although some element of disadvantage remains, it is notable that the differences reduce sharply when factors like entry qualifications and degree class are allowed for. This shows the importance of ensuring that disadvantaged young people have the best possible school experience prior to coming on to higher education. Not only will their relative disadvantage in securing entry be addressed, but their experience while in higher education will be improved.

Increasingly, there is doubt about the efficacy of ‘employability’ skills training in enhancing the performance of students when in employment. But there is no doubt that such activity can make a significant difference to the likelihood of success in the application for employment. It is therefore particularly disturbing to learn that where universities provide such assistance to students, it is generally the least deprived students who take advantage of it. The report concludes that "The well-known lack of social equity at the point of admission to higher education is matched by a further lack of equity at the point of exit from higher education". The lessons here for higher education are important. It may be true that higher education institutions are only second order players in bringing more students from disadvantaged backgrounds into higher education - where schools, and civil society more widely, are the main protagonists – but they are directly and primarily responsible for the experience of such students while in higher education, and for the advice that they obtain. The knowledge that this report provides of the continuing disadvantage that already disadvantaged students suffer furnishes important information to universities as they plan and develop their careers and other student services, to ensure that those who in the past have been the least likely to succeed, as well as their more privileged colleagues, have better prospects in the future.

Bahram Bekhradnia
Director, Higher Education Policy Institute
Chair of the Project Steering Group
Executive Summary

Aims and methods of the study

1. For well over a decade, successive British governments have encouraged higher education institutions to extend access and to widen participation for under-represented groups. At the same time they have emphasised the importance of ensuring that graduates are properly prepared for entry to their subsequent employment. A considerable amount of research and development work has been undertaken to support these objectives. However, most of this work has treated the issues of access and employability separately. The focus of this report is on their interconnectedness. Does extending opportunity to enter higher education necessarily extend opportunities in the labour market? Or do social factors such as class, ethnicity and gender work to limit the employment benefits to be obtained from higher education qualifications and experience?

2. The aim of the project on which this report is based was 'to improve the employment prospects of students from socially disadvantaged groups'. It was organised into two distinct phases. The first was an analysis of the factors associated with successful employment outcomes among graduates, with particular attention to the interaction between social factors – social class, ethnicity and age were the factors considered – and educational factors – subject studied, institution attended, entry qualifications and class of degree. The second phase was to look at the ways in which higher education institutions might be able to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their employment prospects after their graduation. In other words, we were interested in the extent to which there was social equity at the point of exit from higher education and whether there were aspects of the higher education experience that were serving as either facilitators or barriers to the achievement of equity.

3. The first phase of the project took the form of a re-analysis of a large dataset of a nationally representative sample of UK graduates collected in 1998/9, almost four years after their graduation in 1994/5. The sample was drawn from 27 universities from different parts of the UK and was stratified by size and type of institution. 4,340 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 34%. For the purposes of this report, analyses are based on 2,997 graduates from full-time and sandwich courses. The second phase of the study entailed interviews with staff and students in four UK universities plus more limited discussions in three other universities.

4. In asking ‘access to what?’ the project was seeking especially to examine the relationships between higher education and employability. Yet, in practice, we found it impossible to separate these relationships from fundamental questions concerning the changing nature of the student experience of higher education and the changing organisational and cultural characteristics of higher education institutions.

5. The students who are the subject of this report are less successful in the labour market on average, according to a wide range of measures, than other students. In other words, they are disadvantaged in terms of outcomes, i.e. in their access to the economic and other longer-term benefits of higher education. However, the notion of employment success is complex and problematic. It is not only multidimensional – meaning that even the various ‘objective’ measures of success might be only loosely correlated – but it also carries a considerable element of subjectivity.

The social and educational determinants of graduate employment

6. In general, the findings support those of other studies which indicate that graduate success in the labour market is to some extent associated with the background characteristics of the graduates. However, there are differences according to the various dimensions of employment success. There are also gender differences in the effects of the various background characteristics.
The effects of social class

7. Both men and women graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds received lower average salaries than graduates from more advantaged backgrounds; £1,500 a year in the case of men and £1,000 a year in the case of women. They were also less likely to expect salary increases. Middle class graduates were more likely than working class graduates to be in graduate jobs and not to feel overqualified. In addition, working-class men were far more likely to experience a period of unemployment than their middle-class counterparts although the same was not true for working-class women.

The effects of ethnicity and age

8. It was again men rather than women who experienced disadvantages in terms of the likelihood of unemployment, both in comparison with women and in comparison with other male ethnic and age groups. Older men, again not women, were at a salary disadvantage compared with younger male graduates whereas it was Asian women and not men who were at a salary disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. With regards to level of job, Asian graduates were actually doing better than white graduates, irrespective of gender. Older graduates were at a disadvantage in these respects compared with younger graduates.

9. Thus, background characteristics of graduates do seem to influence employment success on several measures although the differences tended not to be huge and gender differences were frequently important. The figures give absolutely no support for suggestions that expanding educational opportunities had not also expanded employment opportunities. Around 70% of working class graduates were in graduate level jobs a few years after graduation, i.e. jobs they would not have obtained if they had not been to higher education. Even if their successes are not always as great as their middle class counterparts, they are still considerable. After some early difficulties in obtaining a job, Asian graduates were actually doing better than their white counterparts. And whilst older than average graduates fared less well in the labour market than younger graduates, the overwhelming majority of them were ending up in good jobs. There may not be social equity in the graduate labour market but most graduates appear to be doing well.

Institutional and subject effects

10. The differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities were not great although there was a clear salary disadvantage for ‘new’ university graduates well in excess of £1,000 per annum coupled with a greater likelihood of feeling overqualified for one’s job. Graduates from vocational courses, whether arts or science, were much less likely to experience a period of unemployment following their graduation. Overall, one can conclude that to maximise employment prospects it is better to have studied sciences than arts and better to have studied explicitly vocational subjects.

11. According to your social and ethnic background and your age, the institution you attend and the subject you study will have different implications for your prospects in the labour market. And the various background factors are themselves inter-related. Graduates from working-class backgrounds were more likely to have entered higher education after the age of 25 and Asian graduates were more likely to have been aged between 21 and 24.

12. Compared with younger students, mature students enjoyed fewer employment advantages from studying in an ‘old’ university. The employment of male graduates who started their studies after the age of 24 was hardly influenced by the type of institution attended. And graduates who had entered higher education between the age of 20 and 24 could even experience advantages from not going to an ‘old’ university. Women who studied as mature students experienced smaller benefits from studying at an ‘old’ university than younger students, although there were some, especially in terms of getting a graduate job.
The effects of entry qualifications and degree results

13. The possession of high entry qualifications and a good degree classification give an advantage in the labour market. Graduates from working class backgrounds might have been disadvantaged in the labour market from their slightly lower entry qualifications but they faced no disadvantage from their degree classifications which were just as good as those of other graduates (suggesting, incidentally, higher ‘value added’ for these groups).

14. Mature students (over the age of 25 when entering higher education) seemed to have been disadvantaged by their lack of traditional entry qualifications but were at an advantage from their better than average degree classifications.

The effects of a student’s background when educational factors have been controlled for

15. When the type of institution attended and subject studied along with factors such as entry qualifications and class of degree are taken into account, background characteristics had a more limited impact on employment. However, while more limited, the effects could still be crucial to the future lives of the graduates affected by them.

16. Controlling for the effects of institution, subject, entry qualifications and degree results, the following could be attributed directly to the influence of the graduate’s age or background:

- For male graduates, there was a relationship between their income and the level of education achieved by their parents (nearly a 10% difference according to whether both parents were graduates or had left school at the minimum leaving age).
- First generation female graduates were only half as likely to feel that their qualifications were necessary for their jobs (compared with graduates who had graduate parents).
- Asian male graduates with Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian origins were more likely to remain unemployed for at least a six month period after graduation. The same was true for male graduates from black African, black Caribbean and ‘other’ black backgrounds.
- Black female graduates were less satisfied with their jobs than other female graduates; and six months after graduation female graduates from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, black African, black Caribbean and ‘other’ black and Asian backgrounds were all more likely to be unemployed than graduates from the ethnic majority.
- Entering higher education after the age of 24 appeared to have a series of negative effects for both male and female graduates: increased risk of unemployment, poorer career prospects, less likely to achieve a ‘graduate level’ job.

The picture was not entirely negative. Graduates who entered higher education between the ages of 21 and 24 appeared to be doing quite well in the labour market. Asian women were doing better in terms of level of job than their white British counterparts. But overall, the somewhat negative picture remains. Background disadvantages still seem to give rise to employment disadvantages, relative to other groups of graduates, even when the effects of institution, subject, entry qualifications and degree class have been taken into account.

17. In fact, our analysis found that background factors (socio-economic background, ethnic background, age) interact with educational factors (subject studied, institution attended) to create distinctive patterns of disadvantage. For example, going to a pre-1992 university gave labour market advantages to most types of graduate except for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. To take another example, studying a vocational subject generally provided advantages in the labour market but we also found that graduates (especially male graduates) with non-vocational degrees were able to compensate for their subject disadvantage if they were from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In other words, factors such as type of institution and subject of study act as intervening variables with a differential effect upon the employment prospects of graduates from different types of background.
18. Undoubtedly, employment prospects for some graduates would be improved by studying a different subject at a different institution. But, whether or not such a course of action is a realistic option, there are other less dramatic factors which can also have a positive effect upon employment outcomes.

Interventions in the cycle of disadvantage

19. We looked at the effects upon employment outcomes of a set of features of the higher education experience, of approaches to the job-seeking process, and of characteristics of the graduate’s employer. These are all factors that might be expected to make a positive impact on a graduate’s employment prospects and, moreover, they are all areas where policy interventions are in principle possible. The main intervening factors which we examined were: work experience and term-time working, extra-curricular activities, overseas experiences while in higher education, job-search techniques (the timing and the techniques used) and employer characteristics (large/small, public/private).

20. For graduates as a whole, there were measurable employment benefits to be gained from undertaking a substantial period of work experience during higher education (placements, vacation work, other forms of work experience), especially if the graduate had been taking a non-vocational course. On the other hand, working during term-time appears of itself to have mainly a small negative relationship to employment. Involvement in extra-curricular activities was related to successful employment outcomes (especially for women) as was some kind of overseas study or work.

21. An early start to the job search appears to be associated with employment success. But it also appears better to leave it until well after graduation rather than to start it at the same time as studying for finals. Job search techniques especially associated with successful employment outcomes were (in rank order): using contacts established through employment undertaken during the course of study; contacting employers without knowing about a vacancy; seeking assistance from teaching staff (numerous benefits but only for women); using the institution’s careers service; using personal connections; applying for an advertised vacancy; being approached by an employer.

22. As far as employer characteristics are concerned, positive employment outcomes were associated with working for medium- or large-sized employers. Although private employers were likely to provide higher salaries, other employment features – e.g. level of job and job satisfaction – appeared to be more favourable in the public sector.

23. These advantages were experienced by all graduates but to a lesser extent by graduates from working class backgrounds, ethnic minorities or by older graduates. This was because such students appeared to have fewer opportunities to experience these potentially beneficial factors. Thus, through their greater likelihood of benefiting from some of these employment-enhancing factors, already advantaged groups of students appear to be piling up additional advantages at the further expense of disadvantaged groups. And actions taken by higher education institutions to enhance the employability of all of their students might inadvertently be adding to the disadvantages faced by some of their students.

Institutional perspectives

24. We made repeat visits to four universities and single visits to a further three. The purpose of the visits was two-fold: first, to enable us to test out the findings of the survey data and to seek interpretations of their significance from people who had day-to-day contact with students and were knowledgeable about their attempts to get jobs; second, to learn about efforts being made within these universities to enhance the employment prospects of potentially disadvantaged groups of students.

25. We distinguished between factors relevant to getting a job and factors relevant to doing a job. Regarding the former, we attempted to identify the reasons why some people get better jobs than others: a combination of competency factors, attitudinal factors, status factors and luck. It is on the first two of these that higher education institutions can intervene to enhance the employment prospects of their students.
Policies and practices

26. All the universities in the study were committed both to widening participation and to enhancing the employability of their graduates although there were relatively few examples of these two aspects of institutional policy being brought together in a systematic way.

27. In terms of institutional practice, it was virtually impossible to separate out equity and employability issues from a range of other institutional matters, ranging from the design of curricula to student retention rates and including matters as diverse as assessment strategies, how student services were organised and the physical location of the careers centre.

28. The idea that institutions can compensate for earlier disadvantages among some of their students by targeting certain support services on particular student groups seemed to be largely impractical. But the consequence of treating people equally in a context where considerable inequality already exists is to reinforce that inequality.

29. Students who are already relatively ‘advantaged’ in employability terms were more likely to take advantage of the various opportunities available in their institutions to enhance their employability.

A changing student experience

30. Students are increasingly busy people, many of whom combine study with paid employment and a variety of domestic commitments. The time available to do more than meet the essential requirements of university life – meeting coursework deadlines, etc – is extremely limited. And students from working class backgrounds are more likely to have paid jobs than others. Mature students are more likely to have domestic commitments. Both are more likely to live at home. For such students, the ‘here and now’ was complicated enough without adding worries about getting a job two or three years down the line.

31. For many students, the experience of higher education was increasingly anonymous. Modular programmes and large classes combined with the pressures of life outside the university to make student life quite isolated. There were few opportunities to discuss with fellow students, to learn from them, to help each other, to obtain contacts, to begin to change one’s ‘identity’ – all central features of the student experience for previous generations. Some students remained ‘strangers’ in the university community, did not believe that they fully belonged and, we might surmise, did not fully recognise themselves as ‘graduates’ in quite the same way as their peers.

32. But much depends on where you study. In some universities, term-time work is less common, there may be better facilities for study on campus and the patterns of experience described above apply only to a minority. However, for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these more favourable conditions may not be an option.

Organisational issues within institutions

33. There was frequently a lack of clarity about where institutional responsibility lay for issues of equality and employability. Central student services differed in their resources and in their capacity to adopt pro-active strategies to reach students. Academic departments differed both in their interest in employability issues and in the expertise they could bring to bear on them. Yet most people in careers and student services felt that their academic colleagues had an essential contribution to make in addressing these issues.

34. Targeting of additional resources at institutions with high proportions of students from disadvantaged groups is likely to be more successful than attempting to target support within institutions.

35. There may be a tension between mission statements concerned with widening access and statements concerned with enhancing employability.
36. Institutional relationships with other organisations, both at the point of student admissions and at graduation, appeared to be important in providing students with information and advice on both educational and employment matters. A contentious issue raised was whether careers services could assist employers who wished to target their recruitment on particular social groups.

37. Special initiatives, for example mentoring schemes or volunteering, appeared to be valuable to those participating in them, but generally they involved only small numbers of students.

38. As employers’ graduate recruitment strategies become ever more elaborate, so too do the techniques that institutions devise to help students to get round them. It is a bit like an elaborate game, hardly relevant to enhancing the productivity of the future worker but, for those students who lack the time and opportunity to play, it is a game which further damages their employment prospects.

Educational issues within institutions

39. In the universities we visited, issues of self-confidence, awareness, clarity of purpose, identity and ambition were emphasised more than skills and competencies by the staff and students we met. The part played by the non-academic parts of students’ lives, and the relevance of the learning achieved through them, to acquiring these qualities was being given serious consideration in several departments and institutions.

40. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from the greater flexibility provided by modular structures but they may also be disadvantaged by a more anonymous student experience.

41. An important issue concerns the recognition of work-based learning. Several institutions contained people who were exploring ways of making use of a wide variety of types of work experience to enhance both academic and employment success among students. It may be possible to use personal development planning to demonstrate – to both students themselves and to their potential employers – that important learning has taken place about which they might not otherwise have been aware.

42. For students who are juggling complex lives and commitments, periods of ‘drop-out’ might be quite sensible and deserving of support. In a few places, there was an attempt to try to reduce the stigma of ‘drop out’ and to accompany it with opportunities to ‘drop back’ or to ‘drop in’.

43. For students with fragmented lives, higher education may touch only small parts of the person. It was suggested at one institution that what was needed was nothing less than a re-thinking of the idea of a liberal education to embrace a notion of ‘whole person’ development relevant to a context of mass higher education and a multi-cultural society.

Some institutional initiatives

44. All of the four case study institutions had introduced elements of careers education into the curriculum although very different approaches were taken. While apparently popular with the students who had taken them, their impact on employability had not yet been evaluated.

45. A few departments had introduced, or were in the process of introducing, Personal Development Planning (part of national policy on the introduction of student progress files). Once again, very different approaches were being taken. Amongst other things, these differed in the emphasis that was placed upon career – as opposed to academic – development.

46. Other initiatives being taken within institutions included mentoring schemes and volunteering, often using earmarked funding from national development programmes. Such initiatives tended to reach relatively small numbers of students and the future of the schemes was not secured beyond the existing funding.

47. Initiatives differed according to whether they were optional ‘add-on’ experiences available to those students who saw their relevance or whether they were compulsory parts of the experiences of all
students. Only in the latter case was there any certainty that they would reach those students who would have most to gain from them in terms of helping to overcome previous disadvantages.

**Conclusion**

48. The well-known lack of social equity at the point of admission to higher education is matched by a further lack of equity at the point of exit from higher education. However, to point to the continued influence of a person’s social or ethnic background on employment prospects after graduation is not to deny the considerable employment benefits that higher education bestows on the vast majority of graduates.

49. This project has found a lack of connection between policies on widening participation and policies on enhancing employability but, at the same time, a considerable inter-connectedness at the level of practice and experience within institutions. At the level of practice, the effects of widening participation connect not only to issues of employability but also to issues of curriculum and assessment, of organisational structures and cultures within institutions, to the changing role of the academic and the developing role of central student services.

50. We have asked: ‘Access to what?’ A simple answer would say ‘to a set of experiences and achievements that will enhance considerably a person’s employment prospects’. But an elaboration of the answer would add ‘to a set of experiences and achievements that will not completely remove the detrimental effects of prior social and educational backgrounds, ethnicity and age’.

51. In the process of asking ‘Access to what?’ we have found ourselves posing another set of questions that go beyond the scope of this project to answer. These include the following:

- What are the implications of a radically changing student experience for the ways in which courses and student services are organised?
- What are the new expectations being placed on academic staff and their colleagues in careers and other student services and how are they to be met?
- What are the appropriate relationships between knowledge that is formally acquired and assessed within the boundaries of a higher education institution and knowledge acquired from work and other social settings?
- Can diversity and flexibility be reconciled with equity in the educational experiences and employment opportunities available to students?
- Have higher education institutions changed sufficiently to accommodate the needs of students from a wider variety of backgrounds and living increasingly complex and varied lifestyles?
- Do traditional goals of personal development through higher education have to be sacrificed in order to achieve the more instrumental goal of obtaining a good job?

52. Given that it seems probable that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will always be more likely to find themselves in the lower status parts of the higher education system, greater social equity is therefore likely to be achieved by reducing status differences between institutions rather than strengthening them.

53. Policy implications from this study include the need for some students to ‘stretch’ their courses over a longer period of time, the blurring of the distinction between full-time and part-time study, the need to provide opportunities for students to build upon initial higher education at all stages of the life course, the importance of maintaining high minimum standards and hence the credibility of all higher education qualifications, and the need for higher education to recognise the diversity of sources of knowledge and learning.

54. Widening participation in higher education offers individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds probably their best available ‘escape route’ from these backgrounds towards something better. But widening participation in higher education does not of itself contribute towards the creation of a fairer society. This requires not only equal opportunities to get into higher education, but equal opportunities within higher education for students to make the most of the experience.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims and context

For well over a decade, successive British governments have encouraged higher education institutions to enhance the employability of their graduates and to extend access and widen participation for under-represented groups. The 2003 Government white paper on The Future of Higher Education emphasised the importance of higher education to ‘the economic and social well-being of the nation’. The contribution to economic well-being comes in large part from ‘equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills’, and to social well-being by ‘providing a vital gateway to opportunity and fulfilment for young people’.

As the white paper noted, the ‘social class gap among those entering higher education is unacceptably wide’ and, indeed, according to some recent research it has been growing wider (Machin, 2003). The economic advantages of possessing a degree are well-known (e.g. Walker and Zhu, 2003, Chevalier and Conlon, 2002, McIntosh, 2002) both to the individual’s earning power and, more debatably, to society through improved labour productivity; hence, the Government’s decision to extend participation in higher education to 50% of the 18 to 30 age group and the emphasis it has given to achieving greater social equity in that participation.

The above aims are not new and have given rise to considerable research and development work in recent years. However, most of this work has treated the issues of access and employability separately. The focus of this report is upon their interconnectedness. Does extending opportunity to enter higher education necessarily extend opportunities in the labour market? Or do social factors such as class, ethnicity and gender work to limit the employment benefits to be obtained from higher education qualifications and experience?

The aim of the project on which this report is based was ‘to improve the employment prospects of students from socially disadvantaged groups’. It was organised into two distinct phases. The first was to analyse the factors associated with successful employment outcomes among graduates, with particular attention to the interaction between social factors – social class, ethnicity and age were the factors considered – and educational factors – subject studied, institution attended, entry qualifications and class of degree. The second phase was to look at the ways in which higher education institutions might be able to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve employment success after their graduation. In other words, we were interested in the extent to which there was social equity at the point of exit from higher education and whether there were aspects of the higher education experience that were serving as either facilitators or barriers to the achievement of equity.

In asking ‘access to what?’ the project was seeking especially to examine the relationships between higher education and employability. Yet, in practice, we found it impossible to separate these relationships from fundamental questions concerning the changing nature of the student experience of higher education in Britain at the start of the twenty-first century. These questions are elaborated – if not altogether answered – in later sections of this report. In parallel to our own study, a group of researchers at Stanford University in the United States had been asking similar questions. Their formulations seem so appropriate to the issues to be raised later in this report that we reproduce them here.

Thus, the fundamental question facing higher education researchers becomes, “Access to what?” By asking higher education research to address this question, our aim is to spur a compelling set of inquiries about higher education’s practices and settings: What are the programs, teachers, and teaching to which students are gaining access? What are the attributes of learning venues that offer the greatest promise for successfully educating students from diverse cultural backgrounds and different levels of academic preparation? What are the obstacles institutions encounter in seeking to provide the best possible academic programs and learning opportunities for students of all social and economic backgrounds, and how do institutions overcome those obstacles? What is
the role of technology in extending access and opportunity? How does higher education become more actively engaged in solving the issues that confront primary through secondary schools, to help ensure that students come to college with an adequate preparation for and understanding of what is expected of them in college-level study?

(Patricia J Gumport, et al, 2002)

These were not the questions we started out with on the UK ‘Access to what?’ project. But they were the questions we found ourselves increasingly asking as we met with staff and students in the four universities that participated in the second phase of the project. They were questions also being asked by the staff themselves as they confronted new kinds of students living a variety of different kinds of lives while they studied at university. As the US report states, ‘the focus on access places inordinate weight on the front end of the equation….without considering the content and quality of education provided or the subsequent institutional impact on students’ learning and later achievements’. It is upon these latter kinds of question that this report attempts to focus.

The original objectives of the project were the following:

(i) to identify the educational factors associated with employment success for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (characteristics of study programmes, mode and timing of study, work experience, counselling and careers advice and information, expectations and attainment levels);

(ii) to identify the employment factors associated with employment success for such students (e.g. size and type of employer, public or private sector);

(iii) to identify the transitional factors associated with employment success for such students (e.g. timing of job search, further training or study, temporary work);

(iv) to identify the national policy implications of the above (e.g. for institutional funding and student support arrangements);

(v) to identify the institutional policy implications of the above (e.g. for admissions, guidance and counselling, careers advice, curriculum and planning);

(vi) to identify the implications for employers of the above (e.g. for recruitment strategies, induction and training procedures);

(vii) to disseminate the results.

In practice, the project has given only limited attention to the role of employers. This was in part because a separate project was already addressing this (Brennan et al, 2001, Purcell et al, 2002) and in part because the institutional aspects of the project proved to be so complex. Nevertheless, at several points in this report, implications for employers in the recruitment and utilisation of graduates will be considered.

1.2 Methods

The first phase of the project was the re-analysis of a large dataset of a nationally representative sample of UK graduates collected in 1998/9, almost four years after their graduation in 1994/5. The dataset was part of a larger study of graduate employment in Europe funded by the European Commission. The UK sample was drawn from 27 universities from different parts of the UK and was stratified by size and type of institution. 4,340 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 34%. For the purposes of this report, analyses are based on 2,997 graduates from full-time and sandwich courses. In addition, some analyses of data gathered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency were undertaken. The purpose of this phase of the project was to investigate the effects of various educational and social factors upon the success of graduates in the labour market. A detailed report of the statistical analyses undertaken is available on the HEFCE website (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/rdreports/Downloads/report16.htm).

The second phase of the study entailed interviews with staff and students in four UK universities plus more limited discussions in three other universities. In this phase of the project, we wanted to learn about the actions these institutions were taking to enhance the employment prospects of socially disadvantaged students. Each of the four main institutions was visited several times and interviews held with senior
managers, administrative staff with responsibilities for student and careers services, academic staff from different departments, some students and some graduates. Around 80 staff were interviewed in all and seminar discussions held with more than 140 staff across the seven institutions that participated in phase 2.

1.3 Key concepts

1.3.1 The notion of social disadvantage

The students who are the subject of this report do less well in the labour market on average, according to a wide range of measures, than other students. In other words, they are disadvantaged in terms of outcomes, i.e. in their access to the economic and other long term benefits of higher education.

They may of course have experienced many other kinds of disadvantage. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will lack material resources and access to the ‘best’ secondary schools, for example. Students from ethnic minorities are likely to have encountered prejudice and discrimination. Age is not of itself a disadvantage, except in this specific case of seeking entry into the more desirable end of the graduate labour market. Thus, the three categories of ‘disadvantage’ with which this report is concerned are quite different from each other. Perhaps the most important thing such students share in common is that they are not ‘advantaged’ or privileged. The three types of disadvantage differ in other ways. Age, by definition, is always changing. Social class can be denied, faked or escaped (mobility is possible). Only ethnicity is a permanent feature of the individual. Individual students, of course, possess all three characteristics: they have an age, a race and a social class. For some, a favourable feature in one - especially class – will be sufficient to outweigh the unfavourable features of the others. For other students, two or more unfavourable features may reinforce each other – a kind of double or even triple disadvantage.

Thus, we acknowledge that the notion of a ‘disadvantaged’ student or group or background is problematic. Perhaps the fairest thing to say about the notion of ‘disadvantage’ is that it occurs in respect of certain aspects of people’s lives at certain times of their lives. We must also acknowledge that it is frequently mediated by gender.

1.3.2 The notion of employment success

While graduates may no longer be considered to constitute an elite in the labour market, there is no doubt about the high rates of financial return from attending higher education. Salary, however, is only one aspect of employment.

The notion of employment success is complex and problematic. It is not only multidimensional – meaning that even the various ‘objective’ measures of success might be only loosely correlated – but it also carries a considerable element of subjectivity.

One fairly obvious measure of employment success is the ability to find a job, i.e. the absence of any experience of unemployment. What the job is like, however, is a more complex question and one that can be answered in different ways. It entails notions of ‘level’ which itself can be measured in many ways. Having a managerial or professional job, or a job that has traditionally been done by graduates, or is reported by graduates themselves as requiring a degree to perform, could all be taken as indicative of an appropriate level of job. Use of knowledge and skills obtained in higher education, personal autonomy, a sense of social worth or value, security and/or good career prospects are other possible features of job quality.

The relative importance to be attached to these various features is dependent on the value-system, aspirations and preferences of the individual. The above success criteria will be differently ‘weighted’ by different graduates. There are however also the different and perhaps more clear-cut values underpinning social and educational policy which equate educational investment with economic investment and which
therefore will tend to equate certain kinds of employment outcomes as a waste of talent (and public investment). Thus, employment outcomes are multi-dimensional and need consideration from both individual and societal perspectives.

1.4 The social and educational determinants of graduate success in the labour market

Figure 1 summarises the relationships to be explored in the following pages. Employment success, variously defined and measured, can be related both to differences in educational experience and achievement and to differences in social and biographical background. Of course, we know that social and educational factors are themselves related. Social background is a pretty good predictor of educational achievement. Thus, arrows 1 and 2 in Figure 1 show an *indirect* process whereby social factors influence employment outcomes by their intermediate influence upon educational outcomes. However, arrow 3 in Figure 1 suggests a possible *direct* process whereby social factors influence employment outcomes even when educational outcomes are held constant.

The final arrow, arrow 4, indicates a set of additional factors that might *intervene* in the relationship between social and educational factors and employment. These are important because they represent factors over which higher education institutions have some degree of control.

Figure 1: The social and educational determinants of labour market success

The next section of this report summarises the nature of these relationships using the graduate survey data collected by the European study referred to earlier.
2 THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

2.1 Previous studies

Several recent studies have compared the employment experiences of graduates from different backgrounds.

A study for the then Department of Education and Employment (DfEE, 1999) looked at the likelihood of unemployment among different graduate groups. It indicated that there was a greater than average risk of unemployment among graduates whose parents were unemployed themselves and among several ethnic minority groups, e.g. Pakistanis, Chinese, Bangladeshis and Black Africans. The same study found indications of direct effects of graduate background characteristics, i.e. when the effects of educational factors such as type of institution and subject of study have been controlled. Using multivariate models they showed that graduates who entered higher education at the age of 26-29, and those with parents in partly skilled occupations or with parents unemployed, were more likely than others to work in a non-graduate job 18 months after graduation. Being a mature student could mean an increase of this risk by around 4%, whereas having parents in partly skilled jobs could increase it by over 30%, having no parent in work by almost 80%. Another finding was that three and a half years after graduation graduates from lower social class backgrounds tended to earn less.

Another study, (Smith et al, 2000) reported that, from the cohort of 1993 university leavers, those from lower social classes were *ceteris paribus* around 2% more likely than others to be unemployed six months after graduation. Mature students also had a higher risk of unemployment in this period. The same study also showed that social class affected the likelihood of working in a graduate level occupation six months after graduation. Compared to graduates from social class II, graduates from social class V were around 5-6 percentage points less likely to work in a job considered as a graduate one.

Two research papers based on the General Household Survey (Egerton, 2001 (a) and (b)) have explored the relationship between social class background and age in terms of graduate employment outcomes. While finding that mature students overall were less successful in the labour market than younger graduates, the author found that working class mature students were further disadvantaged, being less successful than middle class mature students.

A HEFCE report in 2001 (HEFCE, 2001) suggested that social class, age of entry and ethnicity all had some influence on the likelihood of being employed six months after graduation. Further data on the effects of ethnicity are available in a recent Cabinet Office report that concluded that ‘after taking account of the key variables that can be quantified, all ethnic minorities remain disadvantaged in terms of employment and occupational attainment’ (Cabinet Office, 2002).

As this brief summary shows, evidence from various studies suggests that there are links between the socio-biographical background of graduates and their subsequent success in employment. However, many of the reported differences are in fact relatively small and, in some cases, are based on rather limited notions of employment success. These findings from previous work should also be set alongside the overwhelming evidence of the overall benefits of a degree in the labour market. Studies from the mid-eighties onwards (Brennan and McGeevor, 1988, Brennan et al, 1993, Belfield et al, 1997, DfEE, 1999, Brennan et al, 2001) have all shown that most graduates are successful in the labour market in the long run. A recent report summarises the data on graduate earnings as representing a rate of return between 14% and 23% for men and between 16% and 26% for women (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). That said, some graduates are more successful than others and for reasons that may not be related to their ability and achievements. The next section considers the main factors that affect graduates’ success in employment.
2.2 Overall relationships between graduates’ backgrounds and their success in the labour market

We were fortunate in having a range of measures of employment success in our survey data which covered the first four years after graduation. Thus, in the following pages we are able to look at the effects of graduates’ backgrounds upon the likelihood of unemployment, income, and ‘level’ of job according to both objective and subjective measures. Readers are referred to the earlier CHERI report of this project (HEFCE, 2003) for further details on these and other measures employed in the analysis. As the numbers of graduates from different ethnic minorities in the sample were rather small, we have also reported on national data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the same graduating cohort.

Table 1 indicates the relationship between various employment measures and the social class, ethnicity and age of the graduate. Perhaps the first thing to note is that gender influences many of these relationships. Thus although working class men are far more likely to experience a period of unemployment than their middle class counterparts, the same is hardly true for working class women. Both working class men and women experience an average salary gap of around £1,000 per annum compared with middle class graduates. However, the table suggests that it is a bigger disadvantage in salary terms to be a woman than it is to be working class with salary differences of around £3,000 reported between men and women. Regarding ethnicity and age, it is again men rather than women who experience disadvantages in terms of the likelihood of unemployment, both in comparison with women and in comparison with other male ethnic and age groups. Older men, again not women, are at a salary disadvantage compared with younger male graduates whereas it is Asian women and not men who are at a salary disadvantage compared to their white counterparts. With regards to the level of job, Asian graduates are actually doing better than white graduates, irrespective of gender. Middle class graduates are more likely than working class graduates to be in graduate jobs and not to feel overqualified although the differences are not great. Older graduates are at a disadvantage in these respects compared with younger graduates although it should be noted that on these, as on other measures, graduates in the intermediate age group (21 to 24 at entry to higher education) appear to do rather well.

Table 1: The relationship between graduates’ background and selected indicators of employment success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unemployed once (%)</th>
<th>In ‘graduate job’ (%)</th>
<th>Don’t feel overqualified (%)</th>
<th>Salary (£k)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/manual</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/managerial</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of entry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 21</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Numbers</strong></td>
<td>1167</td>
<td>1667</td>
<td>1092</td>
<td>1499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we looked at the much larger and representative HESA dataset for evidence of ethnic differences in employment outcomes (see Table 2 below), we found a similar pattern, i.e. early problems in terms of getting a job in the first six months after graduation but levels of job obtained being quite high. Although there are differences between ethnic minority groups, none of them comes anywhere near to matching the percentage of white graduates who are in employment six months after graduation whereas several of the minority groups are doing better than white graduates in terms of the level of job.
Table 2: Relationship between ethnic background and employment outcomes 6 months after graduation (based on HESA data) (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Graduate job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Other</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the overall picture is a mixed one. Background characteristics of graduates do seem to influence employment success on several measures although the differences tend not to be huge and gender differences are frequently important. It should also be emphasised that these figures give absolutely no support for suggestions that expanding educational opportunities has not expanded employment opportunities. Around seventy percent of working class graduates were in graduate level jobs a few years after graduation, i.e. jobs they would not have obtained if they had not been to higher education. Even if their successes are not always as great as their middle class counterparts, they are still considerable. After some early difficulties in obtaining a job, Asian graduates are actually doing better than their white counterparts. And whilst older than average graduates do fare less well in the labour market than younger graduates, the overwhelming majority of them are ending up in good jobs. There may not be social equity in the graduate labour market but most graduates appear to be doing well.

2.3 The influence of institution attended and type of subject studied

The overall relationships between the backgrounds of students and their later employment success will be mediated by a number of factors of which the institution attended and the subject studied will be key ones. In Table 3 below we look at how these factors are related to employability. Three types of higher education institutions are identified: ‘old’ (pre-1992) universities, ‘new’ (post 1992) universities, and colleges of higher education. A 4-category grouping of subject fields was created, based on a simple arts/science split and whether the field was explicitly vocational or not. The chart below shows how subjects were allocated to these groupings together with the numbers of graduates in each category.

Categorisation of subjects (case numbers in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocational</th>
<th>Non-vocational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine, dentistry, veterinary</td>
<td>Biological sciences (214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other subjects allied to medicine</td>
<td>Physical sciences (207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing (93)</td>
<td>Mathematical sciences (88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and technology, agriculture (349)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture, Building and planning (66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law (127)</td>
<td>Social sciences (302)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and administrative studies (384)</td>
<td>Languages and humanities (417)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (189)</td>
<td>Arts (179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarianship and information (59)</td>
<td>Combined studies (54)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows clear differences in the employment experiences of graduates according to the type of institution they attended and the type of subject they studied. The differences between old and new universities are not great although there is a clear salary disadvantage for new university graduates well in excess of £1,000 per annum and a greater likelihood of feeling overqualified for one’s job. However, a recent paper has suggested that institutional differences may be greater if institutions are compared in terms of Russell Group and the rest (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003). Nevertheless, in general, we have a
number of studies that confirm institutional differences in graduate employment which reflect the old binary divide in British higher education and which confirm particular disadvantages for college of higher education graduates (e.g. Brennan et al, 1993, Brown and Scase, 1994, Purcell and Hogarth, 1999).

Table 3: The relationship between type of higher education institution attended, subject studied and selected indicators of employment success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution attended</th>
<th>Unemployed once (%)</th>
<th>In ‘graduate job’ (%)</th>
<th>Don’t feel overqualified (%)</th>
<th>Salary (£k)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Old’ universities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘New’ universities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges of HE</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Unemployed once (%)</th>
<th>In ‘graduate job’ (%)</th>
<th>Don’t feel overqualified (%)</th>
<th>Salary (£k)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocational art</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational science</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-vocational art</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-vocational science</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing the main categories of subject types, the labour market position of vocational science graduates in general proves to be the most favourable while the position of non-vocational arts graduates is the least favourable. There is a salary difference of £5,500 per annum between the two. However, the vocational arts graduates were the most likely to be in graduate level jobs and the non-vocational science graduates did better than the vocational science graduates in this respect. Graduates from vocational courses, whether arts or science, are much less likely to experience a period of unemployment following their graduation. Overall one can conclude that to maximise employment prospects it is better to have studied sciences than arts and better to have studied explicitly vocational subjects.

Having established the differences in employment prospects according to what the graduate has studied and where he or she studied it, we can now look at the distribution of graduates between institutions and subjects according to the background characteristics of social class, ethnicity and age. As can be seen from Table 4, middle class graduates are more likely to have attended an ‘old’ university as are the youngest age group of students. There is no significant difference in this respect between Asian and white graduates although if one looks at the more detailed HESA data (Table 5) clear ethnic differences do emerge in terms of the type of institution attended.

Table 4: Relationship between type of institution attended and subject studied and the background characteristics of graduates (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>‘Old’ university</th>
<th>‘New’ university</th>
<th>HE College</th>
<th>Vocational art</th>
<th>Vocational science</th>
<th>Non-vocational art</th>
<th>Non-vocational science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clerical/manual</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof/managerial</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white British</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of entry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below 21</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8
Table 5: Relationship between ethnicity and type of institution attended and subject studied (based on HESA data) (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attended 'old' university</th>
<th>Vocational art</th>
<th>Vocational science</th>
<th>Non-vocational art</th>
<th>Non-vocational science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>white</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black Caribbean</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black African</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black other</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other Asian</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turning to differences between types of subject, a more complex picture emerges. Indeed, young middle class white British graduates are actually more likely to have studied non-vocational arts subjects than other groups of graduates. Vocational courses are popular among Asian students. The more detailed ethnic breakdown in Table 5 shows that vocational science courses are least popular among white British students whereas non-vocational science courses are most popular with such students compared with the preferences of other ethnic groups.

For individual graduates, the type of institution attended and the subject studied will be important determinants of subsequent employment. However, care must be taken in ascribing causality in explaining differences between types of graduates. Thus, white middle class graduates may owe some of their greater success in the labour market to their greater likelihood of having attended an ‘old’ university. On the other hand, the superiority of ‘old’ universities over other institutions in terms of graduate employment success might lie in part in the social composition of their students. In looking at the influence of subject studied, it may be that white middle class students have sufficient social and cultural advantages outside higher education to overcome the potential disadvantages of studying a non-vocational arts degree.

It is not that these factors are unimportant. Quite the reverse. But they are important in combination. According to your social and ethnic background and your age, the institution you attend and the subject you study will have different implications for your prospects in the labour market. And the various background factors are themselves inter-related. As Table 6 below indicates, graduates from working class backgrounds were more likely to have entered higher education after the age of 25 and Asian graduates were more likely to have been aged between 21 and 24.

Table 6: Relationship between age at entry and social class and ethnic backgrounds of graduates (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental occupation</th>
<th>Under 21</th>
<th>21-24</th>
<th>25+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clerical/manual</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional/managerial</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Under 21</th>
<th>21-24</th>
<th>25+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>white British</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white others</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to attempt to establish the importance of the different factors in determining graduates’ labour market success, a range of regression analyses were conducted. Full details of these analyses are provided in the earlier CHERI report (HEFCE, 2003). The major conclusions reached were that a significant part
of the differences in employment success between different groups of graduates could indeed be attributed to the influence of educational factors. In other words, when the type of institution and subject studied, along with factors such as entry qualifications and class of degree are taken into account, background characteristics had a more limited impact on employment. However, while more limited, the effects could still be crucial to the future lives of the graduates affected by them.

2.4 The influence of entry qualifications and degree classifications

Two other important educational factors known to affect graduate employment outcomes are the higher education entry qualifications of the graduates and their degree classifications (e.g. Brennan et al, 1993, DfEE 1999, Smith et al 2000, etc). As Table 7 shows, students from middle class backgrounds tended to have somewhat better entry qualifications than students from working class backgrounds. The reverse appears to be the case for Asian graduates, a finding supported by HESA data which point however to substantial differences in entry qualifications between different ethnic groups, including within the Asian communities. The picture for mature students was mixed: the over 25s were far less likely to enter with A levels but, when they had them, their grades were perceived to be as high as the others. One important caveat here: the ‘high grades’ category was a self-reported item on the questionnaire so it is quite possible that there were differences between groups as to what was perceived to be a high grade.

Table 7: The relationship between entry qualifications, degree results and social background (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental occupation</th>
<th>'A' levels</th>
<th>'High' grades</th>
<th>1st or upper 2nd</th>
<th>Lower 2nd</th>
<th>3rd or pass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clerical/manual</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional/managerial</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white British</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white other</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of entry to HE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>under 21</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and over</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All (N=3000)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turning to degree classifications, we see from Table 7 that the degree results of working class students were just as good as those of students from professional or managerial backgrounds. This was not the case for Asian graduates although the small numbers in the sample meant that this conclusion should be treated with care. The HESA data for the same graduating cohort, however, support these figures although they also point to the very considerable differences between different ethnic groups. Mature students over the age of 25 when entering higher education did rather better than younger age groups: 62% gained first class or upper second degrees compared with 57% of the under 21s and 54% of the 21 to 24 year old group, a pattern which actually reverses the pattern of employment success for these groups.

We can sum up the relationship between entry and exit qualifications and graduates’ social backgrounds by the following somewhat contradictory statements:

- Graduates from working class backgrounds may be disadvantaged in the labour market from their slightly lower entry qualifications but they face no disadvantage from their degree classifications which are just as good as those of other graduates (suggesting, incidentally, higher ‘value added’ for these groups).
• It is really impossible to generalise for ethnic minorities because HESA data indicate considerable variations between different ethnic groups. Our limited survey data suggested that Asian graduates, a heterogeneous group themselves, would be advantaged through their generally high entry qualifications but disadvantaged by their lower than average degree classifications.

• Mature students (over the age of 25 when entering higher education) are likely to be disadvantaged by their lack of traditional entry qualifications but should be at an advantage from their better than average degree classifications.

2.5 The direct influences of social background upon graduate employment when indirect influences have been controlled

Where the effects of student background upon subsequent employment are indirect and mediated by factors such as the type of institution attended (i.e. the under-representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in ‘old’ universities) or entry qualifications (both lower grades and the greater likelihood of possessing vocational qualifications), there is not much that individual higher education institutions can do about it, other than for the elite universities to alter their admissions policies. Where other factors are at work, there may be possibilities of interventions by institutions to give greater support to disadvantaged groups of students. Such interventions are considered shortly. First, however, we summarise how much of the effects on employment of student background factors remain once educational factors such as institutional type, field of study, entry qualifications and class of degree have been controlled for. We also consider how social and educational factors can interact to affect employment outcomes in different ways. Initially, we look separately at the experiences of men and women.

The regression analyses on which these conclusions are based are provided in detail in our earlier report (HEFCE, 2003) and are not repeated here. The point to emphasise is that they give us an indication of the extent to which student background factors are important in the graduate labour market once the effects of factors such as institution attended, subject studied, entry qualifications and degree classifications have been controlled for.

In these analyses, we considered parental education rather than occupation as a measure of social background. Graduate men whose parents had only completed compulsory education earned on average 8% less a year, were a little less satisfied with their jobs and rated them lower in terms of job level than graduates whose parents both had degrees. Asian men were more likely to remain unemployed after graduation for a period of at least six months than those belonging to the ethnic majority. The same was true for graduates from other ethnic minorities. Male graduates who had entered higher education after the age of 24 had an increased risk of unemployment, poorer career prospects and a significantly lower chance of being in a graduate job three and a half years after graduation than younger graduates.

In the case of women, first-generation graduates were only half as likely as graduates with two graduate parents to feel that their qualifications were necessary for their jobs. Asian women however had clear advantages over their white British counterparts in terms of level of job, both according to the objective categorisation of occupations and their subjective rating of it. Black female graduates were less happy with their jobs than members of the ethnic majority. Women who were over 24 when they entered higher education were less satisfied with their jobs, less likely to be in graduate-level jobs and had worse career prospects than younger graduates.

However, the field of study complicates these relationships. We found that graduates whose parents had completed compulsory education only were at an extra disadvantage in the labour market if they had studied an arts subject. Men who studied a vocational arts subject receive an income of around one third lower than graduates who had studied similar subjects but whose parents were graduates. This is a big difference. But it was not found in all subject fields. Indeed, in vocational science subjects male graduates with parents who had only completed secondary education did even better on some criteria (the likelihood
of having a graduate level job) than those with graduate parents. But this pattern was not repeated for women.

With regard to the type of institution attended, age differences were more important than social background differences. They indicated that it was only among ‘old’ university graduates that delaying entry to higher education by more than a few years could lead to a relatively low salary and/or a greater likelihood of getting a non-graduate job. In contrast, older graduates who had attended ‘new’ universities could experience advantages over their younger counterparts.

Thus, compared with younger students, mature students enjoy fewer employment advantages from studying in an ‘old’ university. The employment of male graduates who started their studies after the age of 24 was hardly influenced by the type of institution attended. And graduates who had entered higher education between the age of 20 and 24 could even experience advantages from not going to an ‘old’ university. Women who studied as mature students experienced smaller benefits from studying at an ‘old’ university than younger students, although there were some, especially in terms of getting a graduate job.

### 2.6 Why some graduates are more successful than others

Perhaps these differences should not altogether surprise us. Certainly, even a cursory reading of some of the sociological literature on the reproduction of social inequality would show that inherited advantages can continue to outweigh the potential benefits that should come from educational achievement. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has used the notion of different forms of ‘capital’ to explain the reproduction of elites in France (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, Bourdieu, 1996) an approach drawn on by several UK studies, most particularly the research by Brown and Sease, 1994. To the rather obvious value of economic capital (inherited wealth) can be added the value of social capital (networks, knowing the ‘right’ people) and of cultural capital (having the ‘right’ values and lifestyle). Students possess these different forms of capital to different extents and the educational capital which they acquire from their studies and qualifications has itself a differential value according to the extent of their possession of other forms of capital. For example, an honours degree in history from an ‘old’ university has high value when accompanied with high social and cultural capital but has somewhat lower value when these forms of capital are lacking. In the case of engineering, other forms of capital are less important, the educational capital in itself having high labour market value. The difference between subject types described earlier in this section may be explained with reference to these concepts. However, even in the favourable case of graduates from ‘vocational science’ subjects, options may be limited through lack of other forms of ‘capital’. Thus the working class graduate in engineering is more likely to end up an engineer and less likely to end up a city banker than his or her middle class counterpart.

To repeat, the disadvantages which graduates from ethnic minorities and working class backgrounds face when they enter the labour market cannot be completely explained by the institutions they attended, the subjects they studied, the classifications of their degrees or their higher education entry qualifications. The same is true for mature students. And in any case one must remember that statistical averages are simply that: individual members of a particular group will be doing better or worse than the average. What sorts of factors can explain why some do better than others and, indeed, why some do better than would be expected from the social and educational factors considered so far? In particular, the identification of factors which can ‘make a difference’ and which can be influenced by higher education institutions and policy makers will be particularly important to strategies aiming to bring a greater degree of social equity to the graduate labour market. These factors we refer to as ‘intervening variables’ in our analysis and are the subject of the next section.
3 FACTORS WHICH CAN INTERVENE IN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND EMPLOYMENT

3.1 Some potential intervening factors

So far we have looked at factors related to a graduate’s social and educational background that, separately and in combination, seem to be associated with subsequent success in employment. Once having entered higher education, there is nothing that anyone can do about most of these factors. We can’t change our backgrounds, nor can we change our previous educational achievements. For the time being at least, the new higher education student is stuck with the institution which has accepted him or her and, while some flexibility in subject choice might still remain, the broad field of study is likely to be constrained by entry qualifications. Only class of degree – of the factors considered in section 2 – remains to be determined. But this should not be lost sight of. Amid the wealth of schemes introduced in higher education in recent years to enhance the employability of students, getting the best possible degree result remains one of the most effective things a student can do to strengthen his or her position in the job market.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that nothing is pre-determined. While the earlier part of this report showed that some graduates are at an advantage when they enter the labour market, the size of many of those advantages was not always very large and it should also be remembered that they represented average differences between groups. As with all averages, the fates of individuals will be above or below them.

The rest of this report concerns what might be done to level the playing field for graduates entering the labour market and to try to ensure that factors associated with the possession of real knowledge, skills and competencies are given greater weight than factors related to social and biographical background.

In this section, we review what the graduate survey data told us about the influence of a range of factors related to the student experience and the transition into the labour market. The survey had collected data from the graduates about their work experience, especially any gained during the period of their higher education, their participation in extra-curricular activities, any overseas experiences, how they went about looking for a job after graduation, and characteristics of the employers they subsequently worked for. It was possible to assess the relationship between these factors and subsequent success in the labour market.

The overall picture presented by the data is a messy one. While influences could be detected, they were sometimes not very large even if they were statistically significant. And a much larger sample would have been necessary to investigate how they differed in their effects when in combination or within different subject or labour market fields. Nevertheless, many of these factors were found to be important in two rather different respects: (i) they could assist in enhancing job prospects, (ii) they were not equally

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1 As has already been indicated, ‘employment success’ is a very multi-dimensional concept with both objective and subjective elements. Success in one respect, e.g. income, may not be matched in other respects, e.g. finding work that is satisfying and makes use of ones knowledge and skills. In the analysis on which this section is based, we constructed a combined three category measure of employment success, grouping graduates into ‘more successful’, ‘average’ and ‘less successful’ in terms of their achievements in ten individual success measures. A ‘real success measure’ was calculated in terms of their actual achievements and experiences. This was then compared with an ‘estimated success measure’ based on the success that would be predicted on the basis of the individual’s social and educational background. Thus, a graduate would be considered ‘more successful’ if his or her ‘real’ success measure was considerably better (by more than one standard deviation) than the ‘estimated’ success measure. However, in addition, at some points we will refer to data on individual dimensions of employment success where these are of interest. A full discussion of the analysis is provided in the earlier statistical report of the project (HEFCE, 2003).
available to all types of students. In other words, they influenced both employability and equity outcomes of higher education.

3.2 The effects of work experience and term-time working

Looking at work experience overall (placements, vacation work, other forms of work experience) between the beginning and the end of a programme of study, we were able to distinguish between (i) the amount of time spent on it, and (ii) whether it was related to the study programme. As can be seen from Table 8, substantial work-experience related to study was positively associated with ‘more successful’ employment outcomes whereas a relatively small amount of work-experience unrelated to study seemed to be actually worse than none at all. Large amounts of unrelated work experience or small amounts of related work experience did not seem to make much difference to subsequent employment, being as likely to be associated with ‘less success’ as to ‘more’. Of course, what was true overall may not be true for individual graduates. All of the factors considered in this section may be beneficial in certain contexts or in combination with other factors.

If we look at how work experience influenced the employment prospects of working class and mature students – there were not enough graduates from ethnic minorities in the sample to permit this analysis for them – we find the following picture. The pattern for the sample of graduates as a whole is repeated and to some extent strengthened for working class students. More than nine months of related work experience was associated with more successful employment outcomes but less than nine months of unrelated work experience was quite strongly associated with less successful outcomes. We do not, however, find any social class differences in the propensity to participate in different forms of work experience.

If we look at the experiences of mature students, we again find that more than nine months of relevant work experience was associated with more success in subsequent employment although lesser amounts seemed to be negatively associated and non-relevant work experience was as likely to make a negative as a positive difference. Older (25 plus) mature students were rather less likely than younger students to undertake the advantageous long period of relevant experience whereas the younger mature students (between 21 and 24) were rather more likely to have the longer experience.

Table 8: The effects of work experience during higher education (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All students</th>
<th>Working class students</th>
<th>Mature students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success</td>
<td>success</td>
<td>success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>enhanced</td>
<td>diminished</td>
<td>enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-8 months unrelated</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9+ months unrelated</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-8 months related</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9+ months related</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8a: Differences in amount of work experience (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social background</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-8 months unrelated</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9+ months unrelated</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-8 months related</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9+ months related</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Turning to paid work during term-time, we find a rather different picture. Here we are excluding vacation work and work undertaken during placements, etc and are focusing on work undertaken alongside studies, frequently for financial reasons (Little et al, 2003). Here again we take account of the amount of work undertaken (this time in terms of numbers of hours a week). For students generally, undertaking paid term-time working appears to be negatively related to more successful employment outcomes (even when its possible effects upon degree results have been taken into account). For working-class students, this was particularly marked. Moreover, such students were much more likely to work long hours during term-time. Similarly for mature students, they were both more likely than younger students to work long hours and such work was more likely to be associated with less successful employment outcomes (see Tables 9 and 9a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9: The effects of term-time working (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working class students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week on term-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9a: Differences in time spent on term-time working (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Term-time work is an increasing reality for undergraduate students in British higher education with around 50% of them working a significant number of hours each week (Little et al, 2003). That it appears to be associated with less success in subsequent employment is therefore rather important. Even more important is to know why this is so. Some clues are provided in the next section.

### 3.3 The effects of participation in extra-curricular activities

Participation in certain extra-curricular activities while in higher education has long been regarded as something likely to have positive impact on employment prospects (Brown and Sease, 1994, Purcell and Hogarth, 1999). It looks good on the CV, can yield contacts and build confidence as well as producing competencies and skills of potential value to employment. The experiences of the students in our sample bore out these conclusions. Students spending more than 10 hours a week on extra curricular activities were particularly likely to be more successful in their subsequent employment. The same balance of advantage occurred for working class students (no time at all spent in extra-curricular activities was particularly associated with less successful employment outcomes). However, such students spent less time on such activities and were more likely than other students to spend no time at all on them. The benefits did not, however, seem to extend to mature students. In any event, such students were far less likely to spend a significant amount of time on them: 62% of the 25 plus age group spent no time on extra-curricular activities compared with only 21% of the under 21s.

These differences reflect the growing diversity of the student experience as many students seek to combine study with other commitments – work and/or home. Insofar as traditional extra-curricular activities – sport, clubs, societies – have labour market value, some groups of students are disadvantaged by their failure to participate in them. It is here that we may be seeing a reason for the negative effects on
employability of term-time work. It may be less the effects of the work experience itself – which may in fact be positive – than the fact that working reduces the time available for other beneficial activities, both extra-curricular and study itself.

Table 10: The effects of participation in extra-curricular activities (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Working class students</th>
<th>Mature students</th>
<th>All students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success enhanced</td>
<td>success diminished</td>
<td>success enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10 hours</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ hours</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10a: Extent of participation in extra-curricular activities (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0 hours</th>
<th>1-10 hours</th>
<th>10+ hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age on entry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clerical/manual</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>managerial/professional</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 The effects of overseas experience

A similar pattern occurs in the case of overseas experience, increasingly a part of higher education for a significant minority of students. But it is a minority likely to exclude working class and mature students. While mature students were more likely than younger age groups to have worked or studied abroad prior to entering higher education, they were much less likely to do so during their higher education. Similarly, students from working class backgrounds were significantly less likely than middle class students to have studied or worked abroad. The benefits to longer-term employment of overseas experiences appear – from this survey – to be fairly small. But they are in the same direction as the other factors we have considered, i.e. they point in the direction of further disadvantaging already disadvantaged groups of students.

Table 11: Effects of overseas experience (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All students</th>
<th>Working class students</th>
<th>Mature students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success enhanced</td>
<td>success diminished</td>
<td>success enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none before HE</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some before HE</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none during HE</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some during HE</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5 The job search

It was not unexpected to find that different approaches to seeking a job varied in their effectiveness. For the sample overall, using contacts established through employment undertaken as part of the course was
the most effective method followed by assistance from teaching staff, use of the university careers service, being approached by employers and use of personal connections (Tables 12).

It is worth recording that use of personal connections by working class students was more likely to be associated with lack of success in the labour market, thus reversing the trend for the sample overall. Clearly, not all personal connections are of equal value. Working class students were less likely to use personal connections anyway. They were also less likely to contact an employer without knowing about a vacancy and rather more likely to use a job centre, a method associated with less successful employment outcomes (Table 12a). Most effective for working class students was advice from their teaching staff – although this method was not used by them any more than other groups.

Mature students used the same pattern of job search strategies as other students with the same pattern of success. However the effects upon success - as measured by the difference between ‘real employment’ and ‘estimated employment’ measures - for such students was slightly lower for all strategies.

Another aspect of job search is its timing. Leaving it until about the time of graduation was less likely to be associated with more success in employment and more likely to be associated with less success. Making an early start was more likely to enhance employment outcomes than not and those who left it late were more likely to have encountered problems. Mature students were more likely than other students to start their job search late. This was strongly associated with less successful employment outcomes in the case of mature students who commenced their job search at the time of their graduation.

Table 12: Job search (%)
Table 12a: Differences in approach to job search (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timing of start of job search</th>
<th>Social background</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prior to graduation</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>around graduation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after graduation</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods used</th>
<th>Working class</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
<th>Under 21</th>
<th>21-24</th>
<th>25+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>applied for advertised vacancy</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted employers ‘on spec’</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>placed own advert</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approached by employer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted job centre</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted a commercial employment agency</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used HEI careers office</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assistance from teaching staff</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacts through work experience</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used other personal connections</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>started own business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 Types of employer

Finally we examined whether the type of employer was associated with more or less success in the labour market (Tables 13 and 13a). We distinguished between size of employer and whether they were in the public, private or non-profit sectors. Working for a small employer was more likely to be associated with less successful employment outcomes as was working for a non-profit organisation or being self-employed. Mature students were much more likely to be employed in small organisations (35% of 25 plus group compared with 24% of the under 21s). They were also more likely to be employed by public sector organisations. However, there were no real differences in the types of employer between middle class and working class graduates.

Table 13: Types and size of employer (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working class students</th>
<th>Mature students</th>
<th>All students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>success enhanced</td>
<td>success diminished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-profit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-employed</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>working class students</th>
<th>mature students</th>
<th>all students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>small</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13a: Differences in types of employer (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social background</th>
<th>Working class</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
<th>Under 21</th>
<th>21-24</th>
<th>25+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>public</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-profit</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-employed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7 Summary and implications of section 3

Table 14 provides a summary of the association between successful employment outcomes and the various ‘intervening factors’ that have been considered above. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this table is the suggestion that working class students and mature students were making less use of the various factors associated with enhanced employment outcomes. Thus, these students appear to be at a triple disadvantage. Not only does their background work against them, not only do they possess less valuable educational capital, but they also seem to have less access to the very factors which might compensate them to some extent for these other disadvantages.

Table 14: Factors which are associated with successful employment outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Older graduates</th>
<th>Lower socio-economic groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work experience during HE</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of term-time working</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas experiences in HE</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early job search</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques of job search</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private employer</td>
<td>✓/X</td>
<td>✓/X</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium/large employer</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some caution, however, is necessary in interpreting these data. A statistical association does not imply causality. Our analyses controlled for some relevant factors but there may be others that we were not able to take into account. Not least of these are the attitudes and aspirations of the students themselves. We wonder, for example, whether the apparent effectiveness of certain job search methods lies less in the methods themselves than in the light they throw on the ambitions and motivations of the students.

For assistance in interpreting these findings and for insight into ways in which higher education can assist disadvantaged groups of students in improving their employment prospects we turn to the perspectives and experiences of the staff and students in the universities that participated in the second phase of the project.
4 INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

4.1 The institutional case studies

The research reported above – and by many other studies – indicates that most graduates have obtained good jobs by the third or fourth year after their graduation. However, a significant minority – in the order of 20% - appear not to have done so. It is also clear that some graduates get better jobs than others. Of course, the latter point is inevitable. The more relevant question is who gets the better jobs and whether the answer can be squared with considerations of both efficiency and equity. Efficiency is undermined if employers choose to recruit people who are going to be less productive than others whom they might have recruited instead. Equity is undermined if employment opportunities are limited on grounds other than ability and achievement.

Should any of this be of concern to universities and other higher education institutions? Higher education cannot be expected to overcome all the ills of society. Social inequalities and economic inefficiencies are facts of life that higher education must live with. However, it is a contention of this report that higher education institutions do have some responsibilities in this area, at least a responsibility not to further increase inequality and inefficiency in society. Moreover, we found this contention to be accepted by the vast majority of the people we talked to in universities during the second phase of the project.

We made repeat visits to four universities and single visits to a further three universities. Of the four, three were ‘post 1992’ universities and one was a ‘pre-1992’ university. One was in Scotland, one in London and two were in the north of England. Of the other three, two were ‘pre 1992’ universities and one was a ‘post 1992’ university. One was in Wales and the other two were in the English midlands. The institutions were not selected randomly. They were recommended to us as universities that we re committed to both widening participation and to enhancing employability.

The purpose of the visits to institutions was two-fold: first, to enable us to test out the findings from the survey data and to seek interpretations of their significance from people who had day-to-day contact with students and were knowledgeable about their attempts to get jobs; second, to learn of efforts being made within these universities to enhance the employment prospects of potentially disadvantaged groups of students.

Before considering what we learned from the universities we need to review the nature of the problem we were exploring and in particular to address the question with which we commenced this section, viz. who gets the better graduate jobs and can the answer be squared with considerations of efficiency and equity?

The first part of the question is relatively easy to answer and has been the subject of the earlier sections of this report. In order to address the second part of the question, a number of distinctions need to be made. The first distinction is between getting a job and doing a job. We surely cannot automatically assume that employers always select the ‘best’ people. And even if new graduate recruits might be considered ‘best’ in some sense, they may still need a lot of further training and education before they become proficient in doing both their first and all subsequent jobs. The first degree is very much the initial step in the preparation for doing most jobs but it may be the crucial step in getting a job. A question arises therefore about the balance of effort within universities between assisting students to get a good first job and in preparing them to be successful and productive in both their first and subsequent jobs.

In looking at the reasons why some people get better jobs than others, three different sets of factors can be distinguished:

i) competency factors (C): possession of knowledge, skills and competencies relevant to doing the job in question; educational credentials are regarded as appropriate measures of the extent of the possession of these competencies, etc;

ii) attitudinal factors (A): here we can distinguish between a) the attitudes and values of graduates themselves – including their aspirations, ambition and self-confidence, b) the
attitudes and values of employers – their expectations of their employees, not just in terms of meeting the technical requirements of the job but to ‘fit in’ to the prevalent culture of the organisation, show appropriate initiative or docility or whatever, and c) the match between a) and b);

iii) status factors(S); which will include a mixture of biological, social and racial factors together with related background factors such as schooling, personal contacts and life experiences which receive preferential valuation by potential employers.

iv) luck(L): being in the right place at the right time; the state of the job market at the time of graduation: these and similar factors should not be forgotten even if there is nothing that can be done about them.

It is the first set of factors that are commonly regarded as the prime job of educational institutions to transmit and as the chief legitimate reason why some people get better jobs than others. The second set are also recognised as relevant – if sometimes regrettable – factors in job selection but here there are differences of view as to whether they are any part of higher education’s responsibilities to inculcate. The third set would generally be regarded as ‘unfortunate facts of life’ which universities cannot do anything about. And to all of them we must add the unpredictable factor of ‘luck’ to the equation.

In other words, C + A + S + L = success in employment.

The key question for higher education, therefore, is whether it is able to compensate students for a lack of S by providing them with additional C and/or A. This essentially is what we were asking the universities in our study.

4.2 Institutional priorities and targeting

All of the universities in the study were committed both to widening participation and to enhancing the employability of their graduates. But there were considerable differences across and between institutions in the priorities accorded to each and there were relatively few examples of the two aspects of institutional policy being brought together in a systematic way. Nevertheless, when it came to practice in institutions it was virtually impossible to separate out equity and employability issues from a range of other institutional issues, ranging from the design of curricula to student retention rates and including matters as diverse as assessment strategies, how student services were organised and the physical location of the careers centre.

It became clear to us very early in our fieldwork that the idea that institutions could compensate for earlier disadvantages among some of their students by targeting certain support services on particular student groups was largely impracticable. One institution had put on some special careers sessions for ethnic minority students but they had to be cancelled for lack of interest. There had been slightly more success in running things for mature students. But we found no examples of special activities being focused on students from working class backgrounds. And of course there were very good reasons for this. In all institutions there was a strong institutional culture of equality, of treating all students equally. And it may well be that many students themselves did not wish to regard themselves as different from others, especially if the differences had negative connotations. Of course, the consequences of treating people equally in a context where considerable inequality already exists is to reinforce that inequality. In fact, to a considerable extent, universities may be doing more that this – they may be increasing the inequalities between students. In terms of the above equation, C and A and S all tend to be correlated in which case disadvantages in terms of one are exacerbated rather than compensated by the others.

There was little doubt that in most institutions the already ‘advantaged’ students were the more likely to take advantage of the various opportunities available in their institution to enhance their employability. Section 3 above considered some examples of this in terms of such things as participation in extracurricula activities or overseas experiences. But to these could be added such small things as visiting the careers service, browsing the careers library, attending sessions on CV writing or preparation for interviews, talking to teaching staff. The reasons for these differences can be found in the changing nature of the student experience for at least some students.
4.3 A changing student experience

There are at least three salient characteristics of the student experience that need to be borne in mind. The first is that students are increasingly busy with other things. More than 50% of them are engaged in paid term-time work of one sort or another, often committing 20 hours or more (Little et al, 2003). Large numbers of mature students have domestic responsibilities, often in addition to paid work. More students are now living at home and in consequence have ongoing commitments to family and friends which have nothing to do with their lives as students. For all of these reasons, time available to do more than meet the essential requirements of university life – meeting coursework deadlines etc – is extremely limited. This can lead to a very instrumental attitude where activities which ‘don’t count’ towards qualifications in a clear and direct way are discounted. But this instrumental ‘part-time’ approach to study is not evenly distributed among the student body. Students from working class backgrounds are more likely to have paid jobs than others (Little et al, 2003). Mature students are more likely to have domestic commitments. Both are more likely to live at home.

A second and related characteristic of the student experience concerns the attitudes, aspirations and awareness of students. The growing instrumentalism of some has already been referred to. But it may be a rather inefficient instrumentalism because it is not sufficiently based on a good knowledge of options, opportunities and strategies. Students from certain backgrounds enter higher education already fully equipped with these things. In a sense, they already possess what higher education has to offer. But others may not perceive the importance of what is on offer and they are too busy ‘surviving’ to realise what they may be missing. As was explained to us by one careers officer, it was just no use expecting mature students to come to careers sessions during the early stages of their study (a factor associated with successful careers outcomes in our statistical study). Their minds were full with completing the next assignment, with collecting the kids from school, getting to the supermarket before it closed, paying the credit card and the mortgage, making time to get to the library before they started their next shift at work. The ‘here and now’ was complicated enough without adding worries about the future two or three years down the line.

Related to all of these factors is the growing anonymity of the student experience for some. Not only are many students not around the university all that often (see above) but when they are there they are in large lectures and in class groups where the majority of the other students are strangers. These are the consequences of rising student staff ratios and of modularity. There is generally less small group work and when it occurs it brings together students who are not bound together by a common programme of study. There is an absence of course ‘culture’. In some ways this can make student life easier for disadvantaged students. One feels less of an outsider when there is no culture or community to be ‘inside’. But at the same time there is a loss of opportunities to discuss with fellow students, to learn from them, to help each other, to obtain contacts, to begin to change one’s ‘identity’ – all central features of the student experience for previous generations. One member of teaching staff at the Scottish university in our study referred to the many mature students who spent four years at the university ‘desperately hoping that they would not be found out’. In other words, they remained ‘strangers’ in the university community, did not believe that they fully belonged and, we might surmise, did not fully recognise themselves as ‘graduates’ in quite the same way as their peers.

We must add that this is something of a caricature of the considerable diversity that exists in the experience of studying in higher education. Much depends on where you study. In some universities, term-time work is less common, there may be fewer mature students, there may be better facilities for study on campus and the patterns of experience described above may only apply to a minority. In other places, virtually everyone has multiple commitments in busy multi-cultural environments. There is much to be said for both kinds of student experience. But for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there will only be the option of the latter.

As we have indicated, all of this makes it very difficult for universities to compensate for earlier disadvantages of their students. But many people in universities are attempting to do just that and we must now turn our attention to how they are doing so and with what results.
4.4 What institutions can do organisationally

As already indicated, what quickly became apparent was how far everything is interconnected within institutions, especially within departments. In this section, we can merely indicate something of the range of factors that are relevant. In section 5 of the report we will look at a small number of institutional initiatives in more detail but, for the moment, we will look at the overall picture. It is a complex one. We shall distinguish between organisational and educational issues although inevitably they are connected.

4.4.1 Who’s responsible?

A first set of questions concerns where responsibilities lie for issues of equality and employability and, in particular, in the relationships between academic departments and central student services, including careers. There was no common pattern to this. But we can note that student and careers services differed considerably in their resources and consequently in their strategies. In many cases, they had little option but to adopt a passive policy, of coping as best they could with those students who chose to knock on their door. And even then, waiting lists for interviews were long. And in one university the careers service appeared not to possess any reserved rooms where interviews could take place. However, in other institutions careers services were able to be rather more pro-active. Staff visited lectures to meet students and to raise awareness of all students about the services on offer.

There were even larger variations between academic departments in their interests in equity and employability matters, both within and between institutions. It is clearly easier to implement an institution-wide policy through central services than through faculties and departments. But it is not necessarily more effective. Academic staff have all sorts of things on their minds – the RAE, teaching ever larger numbers of students – and may well not even accept the assumption that they have any responsibilities beyond teaching and researching their subject.

Many institutions have set up specialist support units to support effective teaching and learning. Other units support widening participation and employability. Many of these units are project-based with short-term funding and their activities disappear when the funding goes. Nevertheless, the kinds of relationships which exist between these sorts of institutional units, including careers, and academic departments may be crucial. We report in the next section how some careers services are co-operating with departments to introduce careers-related matters into the curriculum. The institutions we visited differed in terms of the relationships between their central student services and academic departments. These partly reflected larger organisational and cultural differences between institutions, the relative autonomy of faculties, the resources available to central services. We should record, however, the dominant view we heard from staff in student services that their colleagues in academic departments needed to ‘do their bit’ and that there was an awareness-raising job to do for staff in some departments. For their part, teaching staff differed in the time, interest and competence that they felt they had to address issues beyond the boundaries of their subjects. They also differed in their attitudes to and knowledge of the work of various central units. Some were regarded as an unnecessary intermediary layer. Thus widening participation units asked departments: ‘what are you doing about widening participation’. However, there was generally appreciation of the need for units such as careers services even if this was accompanied by little understanding of what they actually did.

4.4.2 Targeting support

A second set of issues concerns the feasibility of targeting services to particular groups of students. We have touched on the difficulties of doing this previously. Here we would note the different problems faced by institutions according to the composition of the student body. Where disadvantaged students form a high proportion of the student body, the problem of targeting might not appear to arise. ‘Everyone is disadvantaged at this place’, we were told at one university. Yet, different groups of students might still have different needs. And in any case targeting is likely to be necessitated from resource constraints. Such institutions are likely to be among the less affluent. In institutions where the student body is more mixed, it may be difficult to identify disadvantaged students and, as we have noted, difficult to get them to use the services on offer. The very real difficulty within institutions of getting additional supports to those who really need them (and not further advantaging the already advantaged) might suggest that national
resources should be targeted on those institutions where the majority student body is in need of additional support.

4.4.3 Missions in conflict?

The very success of some institutions in widening participation may create difficulties when it comes to enhancing employability. In one of the universities in the study, considerable achievements in terms of extending access to minority and working class groups had been accompanied by – and perhaps even achieved through – the development of an institutional culture that reflected the majority student groups (ethnic minorities). The atmosphere of ‘acceptability’ and ‘familiarity’ that had been created was clearly important in attracting students to the university and making their experience there a positive one. But some staff in the institution questioned whether it provided the best preparation for participation in the cultures of work and professional life. There may be a tension between both respecting the diverse cultures of origin of students and at the same time to extend students’ horizons and awareness beyond those cultures. The sociologist, Richard Sennett, has spoken of the ‘street’ and the ‘office’ as the major sources of identity in modern society (Sennett, 2001). Embracing the ‘street’ may be an essential part of widening participation, but does that necessarily entail neglecting the ‘office’? Combining the two is the task facing institutions which have student bodies predominantly comprising disadvantaged groups.

4.4.4 At the institutional boundaries

Another ‘organisational’ area concerns the relationships between higher education institutions and other organisations. At the point of access to higher education, this largely means schools and further education colleges although the importance of community associations should also be remembered, especially in respect of ethnic minorities. Helping students to be clear about why they are studying and helping them to make choices about what and where to study are clearly important to both educational and employment success. Foundation programmes that delay crucial choices are also important here, although note also the concerns that have been expressed about the effects of modularity on the nature of the student experience.

At the point of exit, careers services – and others within institutions – seek to establish links with employers, local and national. While it is clear that some employers will not be pushed from their concentration on elite universities and certain kinds of ‘advantaged’ graduates, that still leaves a lot of employers, especially local ones. It seemed to us that it was hardly realistic to expect all employer contacts to be achieved through careers services and that the links established by academic departments with local employers could benefit their students generally. The high proportion of students who obtain jobs through contacts established during work placements is one example of the potential effectiveness of these sorts of links.

A rather contentious aspect of employer links with higher education is raised by the question of whether institutions can assist well-intentioned employers to recruit from disadvantaged groups. The issue was raised pointedly by a representative of one major national employer whom we met in the course of the project. His organisation had a deliberate policy of recruiting from minority groups. And his question was whether institutions could help employers to identify ‘talented’ students from among disadvantaged student groups. Both practical and ethical issues are raised. As in other forms of targeting, this might imply an element of positive discrimination. However, the absence of targeting appears to result in negative discrimination. The careers staff we spoke to about this expressed unease about moving beyond ‘advice’ to ‘recruitment’, however noble might be the motives.

4.4.5 Special initiatives

A fifth organisational issue to mention concerns the many special initiatives – often government funded – that institutions have mounted in relation to both access and employment issues. We encountered several in the institutions we visited, covering things such as mentoring schemes and volunteering, often managed by special units within the institution. Although there was evidence for the effectiveness of such initiatives, they seemed to involve such small numbers of students that their applicability to addressing the larger issues of equity and employability may have to be questioned, certainly in the absence of cost-effective ways of mainstreaming them.
4.4.6 ‘Getting’ a job v ‘doing’ it

A final organisational issue requires us to return to the distinction between ‘getting’ a job and ‘doing’ one. A lot of institutional activity seems to be concerned with the former. Students can obtain help with CVs. They can attend practise interviews and simulated assessment centres. One almost imagines an ever more elaborate game being played as employers think up new selection methods and institutions think up new ways of helping their students to get round them. And, of course, those who don’t know the rules of these games are less and less likely to succeed in them. Do any of these activities really enhance the productivity of the future worker, which is presumably the real reason why employers choose to recruit graduates in the first place? Many students we met rather doubted it and some expressed confidence that, although they might have difficulty in obtaining suitable work, when they did they would succeed because of the talents and competencies they had acquired during their higher education.

4.5 What institutions can do educationally

4.5.1 Enhancing competence or confidence?

In considering how higher education enhances employability, it is necessary to look beyond questions of curriculum knowledge, although this is not unimportant. In the universities we visited, issues of self-confidence, awareness, clarity of purpose, identity and ambition have all been emphasised rather more than skills and competencies by the staff and students we have met. The part played by the non-academic parts of students’ lives, and the relevance of the learning achieved through them, in acquiring these qualities of self-confidence, awareness and the like are matters being given consideration in several departments and institutions. It is apparent that these are qualities that affect not only future employability but also retention and academic achievement in the short-term. And they raise questions about the awareness and responsibilities of academics for these sorts of matters.

Matters specific to the inclusion of careers issues in the curriculum will be considered in some detail in the next section. The large question that they raise is how students in subjects traditionally regarded as non-vocational can become more aware of the relevance of their learning – inside and outside the classroom – to both obtaining a job and being successful in it. And perhaps the even larger question is how can the students’ awareness be raised when so many of their teachers possess no such awareness themselves. These are questions for later.

4.5.2 Curriculum organisation and ‘course culture’

There are also some wider curriculum issues that need to be addressed. We have already noted some of the effects of modular forms of course organisation upon the student experience. The isolation of individual students and the absence of support from a ‘course culture’ can affect retention, achievement and subsequent employability. Students who are effectively part-time may become especially isolated on modular programmes even though such programmes may offer the sort of flexibility of study opportunities that are needed by students with busy lives outside of college. Such programmes can also allow students to pick up modules relevant to employment that might not otherwise be available to them. At least one of the universities we visited was attempting to address this tension and was introducing ‘more structure’ into its modular programme.

4.5.3 Work experience

A further important curriculum issue concerned the role of work-based learning. Its value – when part of an organised work placement – to obtaining employment after graduation has been demonstrated by this and other studies (Bowes and Harvey, 2000, Mason et al, 2003). Yet once again there is an equity issue. Many students from disadvantaged groups are put off courses with long placements because they may prolong the duration of study and cannot easily be combined with other commitments. It has also been suggested that such students may be less likely than others to obtain the ‘good’ placements. These
problems have led to a growing interest in some institutions about the extent to which the benefits of organised work placements can be achieved through other forms of (paid) work experience. The statistical data reported earlier cast some doubts on this but it must be remembered that these were aggregate data and undoubtedly disguised the existence of many working students doing better than the average as well as many who did worse. Thus, we quite accepted the contention made to us in several institutions that it might be possible to use such work experiences to enhance both the academic and the employment success among students. Many of the developments in this respect concerned the introduction of student profiles, and in particular the use of personal development planning, in order to demonstrate – to both the students themselves and to their potential employers – that important learning had taken place about which they might not otherwise have been aware.

4.5.4 Changing attitudes to drop-out

A different set of educational issues concerns attitudes to drop-out both by institutions and by the students themselves. There is undoubtedly a stigma attached to drop-out in British higher education that hardly exists in some other countries. A consequence is that drop-out – and the fear of it – can be psychologically damaging and can undermine self-confidence and identity which might already be shaky. And yet, for many students today who are juggling complex lives and commitments, periods of ‘drop-out’ – in order to earn money, in order to get on top of other aspects of their lives – might be quite sensible and deserving of support. There was an acceptance of this in at least a few institutions. It was argued that there was nothing wrong with ‘drop-out’ providing that ‘drop back’ and ‘drop in’ could be facilitated. This was certainly to be preferred to giving in to pressures to drop standards in order to ‘get people through’ which would only compromise the credibility of degrees and reinforce a sense of institutional hierarchy in the eyes of employers and others. There was a view that the needs of disadvantaged students might be aided by a greater acceptance of the possibility of ‘stretching’ courses/programmes over a longer period and moving away from full-time/part-time distinctions.

4.5.5 Re-thinking a ‘liberal education’

We referred above to the cultures of the ‘street’ and the ‘office’. To these might be added the culture of ‘a liberal education’, a concept central to longstanding traditions of British higher education. Compared to continental counterparts, higher education in the UK has long stressed the ‘development of the whole person’. It was suggested during a group discussion in one university that what was needed was nothing less than a re-thinking of the idea of a liberal education to embrace a notion of ‘whole person development’ that was relevant to a context of mass higher education and a multi-cultural society. For students with fragmented lives, higher education touches only small parts of the person. Much is mutually defined by university and student as irrelevant. This may permit co-existence but it may limit the amount of learning going on by both parties.

4.6 Conclusion

This section has looked at some admittedly large issues facing institutions in addressing the twin objectives of increasing both equity and employability. The interconnectedness of these two primarily external sets of issues facing institutions with a large and complex set of internal issues related to central processes of higher education was striking. They reflect the increasing diversity of both higher education institutions and of the students who attend them. Whether they can be addressed by special initiatives or ‘add-on’ support services seems doubtful. However, there are plenty of initiatives about. In the next section, we look at some examples of practical ways in which higher education institutions are attempting to enhance the employability of their graduates.
5 SOME INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

In this section, we look in more detail at some specific initiatives by higher education institutions to improve the employment prospects of their graduates. We will be asking whether these initiatives are likely to equalise opportunities or just improve them for some. The bulk of the section will be given over to two broad types of initiative which were found to varying degrees in all of the institutions we visited. The first of these is the introduction of careers education in the curriculum and the second is personal development planning, a national initiative scheduled for full implementation in 2006. The final part of this section will review more briefly some other initiatives we encountered.

5.1 Careers education in the curriculum

Issues and options

All of the four case study universities had introduced elements of careers education into the curriculum although very different approaches were being taken. Some examples will be described shortly but first some major distinctions will be made.

The first of these is a distinction we have referred to earlier as between ‘getting a job’ and ‘doing a job’. For many years, vocational courses in areas such as engineering and medical education have been concerned with the latter without necessarily doing much about the former. In the last few decades, they have been joined by a large variety of ‘new vocational’ courses in areas as diverse as tourism, business, heritage and environment, health studies, information science and so forth which have also emphasised the relevance of their curricula to undertaking particular jobs but again have not necessarily concerned themselves very much with helping students to obtain these jobs. Insofar as the latter role was accepted, it was something for the careers service or for informal advice from teaching staff or for supervised work placements to achieve. How to ‘get a job’ did not enter formally into the curriculum.

This is beginning to change. We found a number of examples of departmental or institutional initiatives directed towards improving students’ prospects in the job search process. Staff from the careers service were usually involved. Most often courses were subject specific with contributions or at least support from subject staff but in at least one case the university had introduced a ‘careers option’ as part of its modular degree programme that was theoretically open to all. It was, however, by no means taken by all or even by a representative cross-section of the university’s students. The module appeared to have been completely shunned by the students from at least one faculty, arguably students who would be more in need than most of such a course.

This reflects another key distinction in approaches to careers education in the curriculum, than between ‘generic’ and ‘specialist’ approaches. On the face of it, there is much to be said for the latter. Graduates face very different labour market situations according to what they have studied. For example, for some graduates employment destinations are largely already known, medical students generally become doctors. History graduates become all sorts of things, about which neither they, their teachers nor their careers advisors may have much awareness while they are at university. Such differences between subject areas would seem to call for differences in approach to careers education in the curriculum. But there are further reasons why an approach to careers education which is embedded in the course curriculum may be preferred over generic approaches. A chief one is that it is more likely to be compulsory and therefore be experienced by all students, not just those who see a need or who are particularly ambitious in career terms. As we have noted in previous sections, initiatives which are optional tend to miss those students who stand most to benefit from them. If careers education is to help provide a level playing field for graduates entering the labour market, it needs to be part of the curriculum for all graduates and be made relevant to their likely employment situation.
Not all careers education in the curriculum is narrowly focused on ‘getting a job’. We found several examples in both vocational and non-vocational subjects of the introduction of material to improve employability in terms of ‘doing a job’. These were usually in the areas of the more generic skills and competencies – communication skills, team working and the like – that were regarded as applicable more or less irrespective of context. Again, as we shall see, different approaches were taken, especially in relation to the degree of embedding within other parts of the curriculum.

A related point concerns whether these parts of the curriculum were assessed and whether they ‘counted’ towards the student’s final degree result. Unless the careers element could be explicitly identified, it would be rather difficult to assess it directly. Thus, where careers education was embedded in the rest of the course, assessment was likely to be indirect and less visible. This suggests two rather different approaches, both of which have their arguments for or against.

The first approach would make careers education explicit, compulsory and assessable. This has the advantage of raising awareness as well as transmitting knowledge and skills. But it also runs the risk of rejection, or at least compliance, by both students and staff for whom employment issues are not at that time a high priority. The second approach would integrate careers issues within the rest of the curriculum. They would not be assessed separately nor made explicit. They would be part of the ‘hidden curriculum’. Where successful, this might well be an effective approach impacting on all students on the course. However, ensuring the success of this approach might be more difficult. In some contexts, it might only be words on a syllabus – no doubt included to meet some institutional or national requirements – without being translated into real experiences for both students and staff.

All this raises one fundamental question about careers education in the curriculum. What should be the content of the curriculum and who is qualified to teach it?

We have already referred to the distinction between ‘doing a job’ and ‘getting a job’. On vocational courses, teaching staff will have knowledge and experience of the former and, along with careers advisors, may also have much to offer students with regard to the latter. However, the situation is more difficult on non-vocational courses. Many teaching staff have no work experience outside of academic life and little knowledge of labour market prospects to pass onto their students.

However, the above assumes that careers education is largely – or even exclusively – experientially based rather than research and knowledge-based. This need not be the case. There is in fact quite a large research literature relevant to graduate entry to the labour market. It draws on labour market economics, sociology and public administration and presents its own intellectual demands in addition to whatever practical application it has for students. If careers education is to seriously enter the higher education curriculum, it might be expected to draw upon the knowledge base in the field. It is recognised that it will be much easier to integrate such knowledge within some academic courses than others but, given the multi-disciplinary possibilities offered by many course structures today, the nature of the ‘home’ discipline need not be a barrier to cross-disciplinary explorations.

We look now in a little more detail at a number of initiatives, some institution-wide and some within individual departments. Many of these were of quite recent origin and so we have little to say directly about their success or otherwise. We can only report what they were attempting to achieve and how they were going about it. They will, however, illustrate some of the above tensions: the generic versus the specialist, optional or compulsory, free-standing or integrated, concerned with getting a job or doing a job. They will also provide some indication of what is today feasible in universities of different types and how far they seem likely to benefit graduates of different types.

Example 1: On line career development

The first example is of an initiative by the careers service at a post-1992 university in the north of England. The initiative was initially developed by a remote faculty of the university and it arose in response to the growing emphasis on graduate employability by the government, funding and quality bodies. Its aim was to build career development learning into the curriculum. The careers service had developed an on-line career development learning course. This involved the development and delivery of accredited, subject-specific, self-directed learning provision through partnership with academic
departments. Students taking the course had to assess their skills, values and interests, relate them to available careers, develop appropriate career goals and formulate action plans to work toward achieving these goals. A recognition of the value of work experience and extra-curricular activities and a record of the skills developed during these experiences was included in the on-line course. About five departments in the university had introduced the on-line course for their subjects but it was hoped, over time and resources permitting, to extend this to most of the university.

According to the university’s careers service the important notable features of the course were that it worked as a partnership between the careers service and academic departments. This was felt to bring commitment, resources and skills to bear on production and delivery and, therefore, made efficient use of resources. Students were able to undertake self-directed accredited learning tailored to their main subject(s) of study.

The course was targeted to year 2 students as this would allow them significant time in their programmes to develop and implement a careers plan and be sufficiently close to graduation for the activity to be meaningful. The course consisted of a generic core with subject-specific sections and contained seven main sections:

- self assessment,
- generating career ideas,
- researching occupations,
- decision-making,
- goal setting,
- actions planning, and
- writing applications.

Not all the departments currently using the course accredited it in a formal way but the generic core was valued as a 10 credit package, with 100 hours work. Through undertaking the course students were able to undertake a self-analysis of their skills, aptitudes and interests, relate the self-analysis to a range of careers, research occupations, determine suitable options, develop suitable job-hunting strategies and write applications.

The careers service regularly collected feedback from students and this was used to make regular improvements to the module. Some of the comments received from students were:

“The programme was very informative and gave me a good insight into future job prospects, it was also very easy to use.”

“The assessment was a very strong point of the course in my opinion, if you did the research and work! It allowed you to discover useful routes and vital information that you need to know when applying for different places.”

“Many different jobs are available after the course and the careers on-line programme helped to show what is available to us.”

The first example focused on the job search process with a particular emphasis on providing students with information and ideas about their options. One might hypothesise that this would need to take a different form for students on different programmes who, by virtue of their choice of programme, could be at very different stages in the process of choosing a job or career.

Example 2: ‘Capabilities’

The second example is of a university (post-1992) which has attempted to incorporate the different facets of its students’ lives into academic study through its curriculum structure. This is done by way of the introduction of core ‘capabilities’ in the curriculum. This system operated on an institution-wide basis and was defined as involving learning, adaptation, application and effective engagement with all circumstances of life, including work and the community, and the capacity to manage change. The university had
developed six generic ‘capabilities’ which individual departments were then expected to define, interpret and contextualise for their own area. These six institution-wide generic capabilities were:

- to act appropriately in the context of social and cultural diversity and the modern environment;
- to make ethical evaluations;
- to think critically and produce solutions;
- to manage self and relate to others;
- to communicate effectively;
- to seek, handle and interpret information.

Within the university’s modular structure a maximum of two of the generic capabilities were developed and assessed within each module. The capabilities were required to be clearly identifiable in the learning outcomes of each module and be related to the overall programme outcomes. Students were given the opportunity to develop all six capabilities to the appropriate level in each year of their programme.

Below is an extract showing how a department in the humanities faculty had translated two of the core capabilities for one of its programmes. This was done in the form of a work placement module which was introduced about three years ago and its goals were to allow students to develop transferable skills to prepare them for employment at the end of their undergraduate study and to focus on the capabilities identified as being associated with ‘graduateness’ by means of experiential learning. The module was seen as adding a further dimension to their undergraduate studies by complementing the more formal academic training. The module was open to all advanced level students.

The placement was for a minimum of five weeks, normally undertaken during the summer vacation after completion of the second year. The module aimed to provide students with the opportunity to gain experience of the working environment, to undertake a work-based project relevant to their academic level, to enhance their learning experience by applying and building on their academic skills in the workplace, to familiarise themselves with the culture and structure of a working environment and to develop new skills.

The two core capabilities applied to the work placement were (i) manage self and relate to others, and (ii) act appropriately in the context of social and cultural diversity and the modern day environment. The extract from the work placement module demonstrates how the department had contextualised the two capabilities to fit into the overall programme of study.

**Extract from a work placement module in a humanities faculty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manage self and relate to others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The student will be able to:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manage self</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plan, prioritise and organise work to ensure deadlines and objectives are met consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate application to and completion of tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete tasks in an accurate and thorough way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop a critical self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make decisions and accept responsibility from them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Think and act effectively and independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Progressively require less supervision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate s/he has worked as an effective and accountable member of the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relate to others</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Maintain co-operative and helpful relationships with all employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accept the authority of others and criticisms of work and ideas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Reflect upon those criticisms and demonstrate that they have acted on their reflections
• Seek advice and guidance from colleagues, as appropriate
• Demonstrate some leadership qualities
• Learn from more experienced colleagues
• Participate constructively in meetings and discussions
• Contribute to any evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the business
• Work as a reliable team member

**Act appropriately in the context of social and cultural diversity and the modern day environment**

The student will be able to:
• Demonstrate organisational awareness and commitment
• Adopt the standard practices of an organisation e.g. policies and procedures, dress, time-keeping
• Identify and relate to the roles and structures within the organisation
• Adapt to the requirements of the organisation and colleagues
• Act within other social and cultural constraints within the organisation
• Evaluate the effect of her/his actions on other people within the organisation
• Operate within timescales and other constraints of the modern day business environment
• Demonstrate flexibility in meeting the needs/requirements of different people within the organisation
• Demonstrate s/he has responded appropriately to unexpected opportunities and problems
• Exchange, process and report back on information received/actions undertaken

The department ran pre-placement induction sessions to familiarise students with the demands and requirements of the work placement, to help students evaluate their abilities and identify suitable work areas, and also on how to produce CVs for placement applications. The learning outcomes expected from the work placement included the ability to demonstrate how the student had operated both independently and with others in a structured and routine supervised work environment, whether the student had communicated appropriately with colleagues and supervisors, whether the student had shown a rational and organised approach to the tasks set by applying known and new techniques and methodologies, and an ability to evaluate his or her performance in a critical manner.

The assessment of the module was both formative and summative. The formative process included the maintenance of a structured log which allowed the students to monitor their progress, to reflect and improve on their performance. The summative assessment included comments and observations from the employer.

Unlike the first example, the ‘capability curriculum’ appeared to be designed to help students in both ‘getting a job’ and in ‘doing a job’. But like the first example, it took the form of a generic approach that could be tailored to different subject/course contexts. The second example represented an institution-wide approach and, as such, appeared to be meeting mixed responses among academic departments. One criticism was that it focused upon ‘competencies’ rather than confidence although it could be argued that the acquisition of one is likely to lead to the other.

**Example 3: Independent studies**

The final example was of an ‘independent studies’ module ran at another post-1992 university. The module grew out of the university’s volunteering scheme. The rationale behind the module was that students, either individually or in small groups, could propose and carry out a package of work that could not be accommodated within other existing units in their programme. The work did not necessarily need to be related to a named degree.

The module was often taken as an opportunity to work with an outside organisation to develop a range of professional skills in a real work environment. The aims were to provide students with the opportunity to apply academic skills and to develop professional skills in a real work situation; to enable students to
clarify their career plans and enhance their employability; and to provide valuable links and services to the wider community. At the end of the module, students were expected to be able to show evidence of the development of a range of key skills to an appropriate level, an ability to negotiate and deliver to deadlines; apply concepts learned at university in the work environment, and reflect constructively on all aspects of the work and articulate their own learning.

The module was for students at level 2 and was worth a maximum of 20 credit points. The learning consisted of one and a half hours of tutorial time each semester plus a two hour briefing meeting; the rest was independent work for 200 hours. Students were assessed on a folder of evidence of the development of professional, creative and academic skills and were graded on achievements in (i) the identification, explanation and application of relevant theories, models and concepts; (ii) communication of ideas, information, arguments and results in written, verbal and visual formats appropriate to purposes and audiences; (iii) working with others in a professional manner to meet shared objectives; and (iv) reflection upon and evaluation of the strengths and limitations of their own performance and that of others, and an awareness of the ethical, social, cultural and institutional contexts of the work.

Once again feedback on the module had overall been positive and this testimony was received from a student who took the module in 2001:

“This has been an invaluable and extremely rewarding experience for me. I can honestly say that I have learned more practical skills and knowledge through this project, which will be of use to me in my future career, than I have in any other units of my degree. I can’t deny that it was extremely hard work and requires a great amount of effort and commitment, but I would definitely recommend it to anyone who is considering this project.”

This third example was much more about ‘doing a job’ than the others had been and it sought to combine both academic and employment-related goals, as well as providing service to the local community. Unlike the previous two examples, the independent studies modules was optional. It therefore ran the disadvantage of possibly failing to attract those students who stood most to gain from it. It was also unlike the others in that its development had been academically rather than careers service led.

These three initiatives had been introduced fairly recently. They appeared to be quite popular with the students who took them but none appeared to have been subjected to systematic evaluation as to its effectiveness. Were their students more successful in the labour market than others? A recent study of similar initiatives at other institutions (Mason et al, 2003) suggests that their value might lie more in relation to getting the initial job after graduating rather than in any long-term employment benefits.

5.2 Personal development planning

Personal development planning (PDP) is a national development following a recommendation in the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and a subsequent policy statement of May 2000 and guidelines (February 2001) issued by Universities UK, CoSHEP, SCOP and QAA. PDP is part of a wider policy on student progress files. The primary objective of PDP is to provide a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect on their personal development.

At the time of our visits, institutions were at the early discussion stages in the development of institution-wide policies on personal development planning. Issues of the focus, purposes, content, format were still being considered. Some of the questions raised included:

- staffing issues: what were the implications for staff time, training and workload?
- monitoring: who would monitor the system?
- support: would it be provided by one support tutor or a range of units in an institution, for example careers, learning centre staff?
- assessment and accreditation: if it was not assessed or accredited, would the students engage with the process?
Another issue concerned whether student activities and experiences outside the university should be included. For some potentially disadvantaged students, this issue could be crucial, raising the possibility that learning achieved from the wider experiences of their complex lives might achieve some recognition.

However, a more fundamental question that the institutions were addressing was whether the students really wanted such a system and whether they would see any value in it. Some expressed concerns that PDP-type initiatives could be seen as intrusive, delving into the 'private' lives of the students whether they liked it or not.

Some of these issues were highlighted in a study that we have just completed for Universities UK on the progress being made in institutions on the implementation of higher education progress files (Brennan and Shah, 2003). This confirmed the wide variety of interpretations that were being given to the concept of Personal Development Planning and the very uneven developments of policy and practice, both between and within different institutions.

There were certainly differences of view within the case study universities about the purposes of PDP. (It should be acknowledged that the PDP concept was not widely in use at the time of the fieldwork and what we were looking at were often local developments within institutions which shared much of the philosophy and general approach of PDP.) In one institution the purposes were defined as

i) to provide a department with a complete record of students’ academic performance so that progress could be monitored and serve the basis for any references which a tutor might write before and after a student graduates;

ii) to define the minimum level of pastoral care the department would provide; and

iii) to encourage students to reflect on progress at regular intervals and record self-evaluations in relation to academic work and general skills in order that they can take the necessary actions to improve the quality of their learning and to enhance their career prospects. In this institution the main purpose appeared to be focused on academic performance.

In another institution, the purpose was defined as the development of students’ confidence and self-awareness so that they could improve on their ability to learn and also to make life and career choices. For this institution the main purpose seemed to be the personal development of the student.

In some institutions, staff were attempting to find ways of linking term-time working with the PDP exercise. However, there were differences between departments about the kinds of work experience that could be regarded as potential learning opportunities and also differences on whether such learning could be assessed and accredited. Some staff thought it best to limit the relevance of term-time work to semi-professional jobs in areas that would be clearly linked to the content of the course. This was an option largely limited to vocational or semi-vocational courses. Other staff were prepared to see the relevance of virtually any form of work experience, providing the student could demonstrate it.

Some recent studies have found that students from socially disadvantaged groups were more likely to have to work during term-time than other students and that many of these students worked long hours (Van Dyke et al, forthcoming). It is important, therefore, if students, their teachers and potential employers can view such experiences positively and identify what has been learnt from them. PDP could be a vehicle for doing precisely this.

We now provide examples of different responses and experiences of two departments within the same university to personal development planning. In this university the initial framework for PDP was
developed by the careers service. The first example is of a department where the response to PDP had been positive and the second example is of a department where PDP had been given the ‘thumbs down’.

The department where the idea has been accepted was a science department. In this department we interviewed, separately, the head of department, one of his colleagues with the responsibility for the development of an electronic web-based version of PDP, and a student. This department had a fairly homogenous student body. PDP was introduced in the department in 1998. Participation had not been compulsory and there had been about a 75% take-up. It had been most popular with third year students because, the staff believed, they realised the importance of their curriculum vitae and the contribution that PDP could make to it. The PDP was based on individual feedback through a counsellor/personal tutor. Students had an opportunity to meet with the counsellor for two half-hour sessions per annum. Counsellors were drawn from amongst the academic staff in the department. Each counsellor had three students from each year of the course. The onus was on the student to take up the opportunity of PDP.

The PDP in this department was structured on a self-assessment basis and was supplemented by feedback, not only from the counsellor but also from other academic staff. It covered the student’s pre-HE education, other skills (e.g. computing, word-processing, foreign languages), other qualifications, work experience (Saturday jobs, voluntary work, full-time or part-time work) with an outline of the main duties and responsibilities, and a self-profile of skills and qualities with evidence of how these were demonstrated. The checklist of skills and qualities included communication skills (verbal, non-verbal and written), inter-personal skills (group/team work, debating/negotiating), problem-solving and investigative skills, and personal/self-development skills.

There had been great variation in the input made by staff into the PDP exercise – some staff were extremely enthusiastic and others undertook it with the least effort possible. The member of staff we interviewed with responsibility for the electronic web-based version felt that the PDP lacked a clear motivating factor for the students and that it needed a better structure and consistency. He hoped that the web-based version would address these issues and also that it would aid continuity from one session with a tutor/counsellor to the next.

Because of the way the system is run, the department had not managed to get a global view of students on their reaction to PDP but, overall, the head of department felt that the staff reactions have been positive. Indeed, the head personally felt that, if done properly, the PDP process could be the most demanding experience that the student would experience at university. Therefore from 2003/04, the department was hoping to introduce PDP as a credit-based activity and this would mean that participation would be compulsory for all students. The head of department hoped that accreditation would standardise the system and make assessment roughly equal for all students. Students would be awarded credit for undertaking an analysis of their learning. This would imply, of course, that the counsellor would also have a role as an assessor but this was not viewed as a problem because the assessment would not be about the academic ability of a student.

The student that we interviewed from this department was a mature, final year student for whom this was the second time round in higher education. She had previously gained an IT degree and had worked in a management capacity for six years before joining this department. She had been involved in the PDP exercise since joining the department. Because of her previous employment experience which required regular ‘PDP-type’ assessments, she had no difficulty with the idea of PDP. She felt, however, that her fellow students, particularly the young students straight out of school, found it a daunting, overwhelming and difficult exercise, even though good guidance was provided. She, therefore, felt that PDP should be introduced in the first year as a timetabled practice workshop. She confirmed that the approach was not consistent between counsellors and that the onus was very much on the student to approach the counsellor. She felt that, like the students, staff also lacked the motivation to take PDP seriously. She also confirmed that there seemed to be no continuity from one session to the next. Overall, her view of the PDP exercise was negative. According to her experiences, she felt that the one-hour session organised by the university’s careers service was the more beneficial. It provided useful information on what employers looked for in a graduate.

The department where PDP has been given the ‘thumbs down’ was a department in the humanities faculty. We interviewed the head of department. The concept of PDP had been discussed at a faculty
meeting and had been rejected. The main reasons for this were educational efficacy and resource implications. In this department there would be nearly five times as many students per staff member compared to the science department. But, in any case, the head of department felt that 'reflection' was in the nature of the degree. It was at the core of the subject and did not require add-on initiatives. He felt there would be scepticism among the members of the department if it were suggested that academic credit were to be given on the basis of experiences gained outside the university. And yet, this same academic reflected that he had himself recently asked a second year seminar group to write an essay on 'some aspect of your experiences outside the university in the style of George Orwell's Down and out in Paris and London'. Perhaps the more creative university teachers have always engaged in PDP-type activities, but within the frame of the concerns of the discipline rather than wider employability and higher education policy agendas. The latter are often regarded with a degree of suspicion.

The wide range of attitudes towards PDP-type activity in universities was confirmed in our recent study for UUK (Brennan and Shah, 2003). We found two major dimensions to the variations in approach to PDP: firstly, whether it should be conceived primarily in terms of employment considerations or more widely in terms of academic objectives and, secondly, whether it should be made compulsory and subject to assessment. We also found subject differences to be important. As shown from the examples given above, the more vocational subjects were more likely to be supportive and to take a relatively narrow view of what experiences would be relevant to PDP. Other subjects were either opposed (both in principle and on resource grounds) or supportive. When the latter, these subject groups were more open to a broader conception of PDP than their vocational colleagues.

These differences in emphasis reflect wider debates about the purposes of higher education as reflected in the traditions of different subjects and, indeed, of different institutions and national higher education systems. In principle, UK higher education should be more open than many to ideas underpinning PDP. Since at least Newman's writing in the nineteenth century, UK higher education has placed considerable emphasis on the personal development of its students. And a recent international survey of graduates reported that UK graduates valued higher education most for its personal development benefits. But this British tradition concerned the personal development of an elite within an elite set of institutions. It represented a set of assumptions and values about the 'desirability' of certain kinds of personal development that some might reject in a mass higher education system. It might be argued that such assumptions and values should be resisted and the focus of higher education remain exclusively on knowledge transmitted through the formal curriculum augmented by professionally-related training in the case of vocational subjects. Other things are not higher education's 'business'. Our own position would be that it is not possible to maintain this distinction. Employers certainly do not. From our own and several other studies, it is clear that they value certain kinds of extra-curricular experiences and backgrounds more than others. It comes down to a question of whether only a relatively narrow set of life experiences provide learning of value or whether learning opportunities are available more widely, if only they could be recognised and assessed.

5.3 Other initiatives

We encountered some other fairly small-scale initiatives in the case study institutions aimed at enhancing graduate employability. These were all mainly as a result of national funding schemes, for example the Higher Education Active Community Fund (which was designed to encourage greater involvement of students and staff in voluntary and community activities) and the Innovations Fund (which was set up to support projects which enhance equal opportunities within higher education and to improve links between higher education and employers). We found that because of both the rather small amounts of funding available and the short-term nature of such national schemes, these institutional initiatives only involved a small number of students and most institutions were then not able to allocate funds from their own institutional budgets to continue the activities. In the main, the initiatives were one-off, quite expensive and only a small number of students were able to benefit from them. Often the students who availed themselves of these opportunities were not from the 'disadvantages' groups of students. The reasons for this may be two-fold: first, lack of awareness of the availability of such opportunities and, secondly but more importantly perhaps, a lack of confidence in getting involved with such activities.
We now describe three different initiatives that we encountered in our case study institutions – volunteering, on-line mentoring and Insight Plus.

**Volunteering at a post-92 university in the north of England**

Volunteering at this university was introduced as a result of funding from the Active Community Fund. The conditions of this fund were, according to the university, open to broad interpretation and allowed institutions to set their own targets and methods. The aim was to help students develop new skills, improve their employability and make a contribution to the local community. The projects which formed part of the volunteering scheme ranged from one-off ‘challenge’ events and on-going schemes based in local schools. At the time of our visit, the university had ten projects running, across a wide ranging set of topics from cultural awareness and drama, to environmental education and fundraising, to children’s parties, pre-school literacy and football. These activities were designed to provide a practical set of skills and evidence and experience to demonstrate their achievement. At the time of our visit about 250 students in all were involved in the volunteering scheme. The students were mainly from education and psychology subject areas, predominantly white middle-class and female. The university was planning to actively promote volunteering to a wider student group by introducing new project areas, for example sports volunteering which it was hoped would increase male interest.

**MERITS (minority ethnic recruitment, information, training and support) project**

This project was funded by the DfES and administered by the HEFCE innovations team. The overall aim of the project was to enhance the abilities of black and Asian students to compete effectively for employment to match their skills and qualifications, to help employers to both recruit and retain employees from these groups, and to ensure that careers services provided appropriate careers guidance for these groups. In all, the MERITS project involved six pilot projects in different higher education institutions. One of our case study institutions in the north of England participated in the project. This university developed an on-line mentoring programme which involved nearly 30 mentors matched with nearly a hundred black and Asian students. The university developed a web-based system to support links between the mentors and mentees using an on-line portfolio so that students could self-analyse, set up their goals and action plans and produce a reflective log. Each mentor and mentee logged onto the online mentoring system where the mentee entered a personal profile, goals and an action plan, and reflections on learning during the mentoring process. The information was only available to the mentee, the mentor and the project staff. The project staff provided supporting documentation and on-line support. The on-line approach did not preclude face-to-face or e-mail communication and a number of mentors and their mentees either met in person or spoke on the phone.

The university’s careers team reported to us that the pilot project had been very useful to all those involved and the feedback from both the mentors and the mentees was positive. Unfortunately, there was no further funding available and so the project could not continue.

**Insight Plus**

To reflect the participation of students in non-academic extra-curricular activities, ranging from involvement in clubs and societies, volunteering in the community and part-time paid work, Insight Plus is a national award that had been developed to recognise the key skills (leadership, ability to work in teams, effective communication and an understanding of how organisations work) developed by students through this experience. It was developed by CRAC (Careers Research and Advisory Service) in collaboration with three employer partners. The objectives of Insight Plus were to give employers an insight into the experiences and competencies of potential recruits, to provide a ‘kitemark’ for the skills developed through extra-curricular activities, to provide students with the opportunity to recognise the value of their learning from such activities and to have this accredited, and to provide a framework for career management. Accreditation required at least 200 hours of work experience with at least ten hours of related private study. The programme entailed the development of the following core learning objectives – managing performance, organisation context, working with people, effective communication, using information, organising work and customer service. It was supported by a website, mentoring and workshops.
Our case study institution in London (a post-92 university) participated in Insight Plus. However, less than 20 students were involved in it and, because of lack of further funding, it did not continue. Overall the feedback from the students who participated was positive. This included:

“Enabled me to clarify my goals, made me realise that I needed a plan.”
“The content had me seriously thinking about my career goals and life in general …”

In terms of skills developed, the comments from students included:

“Being able to be more effective in terms of time management and deciding what I really want from my future career.”

“Ability to reflect on my actions.”
“I have a lot more confidence”
“Communication and team work”

There seems little doubt that the experiences gained from initiatives of the sort described above have been valuable to those involved in them. Although we have only been able to provide quotations from individual students rather than the results of systematic evaluations of such initiatives, there seems no reason to doubt their value. But, as we have seen, they only benefit a few students and, in terms of the concerns of this report, sometimes the ‘wrong’ few. They are also mostly rather costly to provide and few institutions seem able to maintain them after the external funding initiative has come to an end. Nevertheless, their success may be suggestive of developments that might achieve a wider reach and impact.

5.4 Conclusion

We have hardly done justice to the wide variety of ways in which institutions are attempting to enhance the employability of their graduates. There are reviews of this work elsewhere (Lang and Millar, 2003, Mason et al, 2003). It is a response to government pressures on higher education over a number of years to do more to ensure that graduates are well-equipped for entry into employment. The initiatives we have described have all, one way or another, represented a broadening of the curriculum beyond more recognisably ‘academic’ concerns to take account of the experiences of students themselves and of the expertise and experience of various professionals, especially within careers services. Academic staff embraced these initiatives with varying degrees of enthusiasm reflecting subject traditions, institutional policies and cultures, and individual preferences.

From the findings discussed in the earlier part of this report, it might be conjectured that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will, on the whole, be less rather than more likely than other students to avail themselves of these sorts of opportunities when they are optional rather than compulsory. For this reason, initiatives such as careers education - which forms a compulsory part of the curriculum - and personal development planning - which is intended to apply to all - may be important developments that can assist disadvantaged students to turn their educational achievements into employment success. But how far are they likely to address the disadvantages that some students face? And what are the continuing obstacles to these students benefiting from such initiatives?

Many of the approaches which aim to raise awareness of employment and career issues among all students will do much to redress imbalances between students in the information they possess about the career opportunities open to them after graduation. They may also add to students’ ‘know-how’ concerning the job search process and how to impress employers. Given that some students are more deficient in such knowledge than others prior to entering higher education, employment awareness raising for all students within the formal experience of higher education should help provide a more level playing field at the point of entry to the graduate labour market.

However, given that knowledge of ‘self’ may be at least as important as knowledge of employers and employment, those aspects of recent initiatives that aim to bolster the confidence and self-awareness of students may be especially important. The more radical versions of personal development planning –
which take a large view of knowledge, its sources and the experiences that can promote its acquisition – may have most to offer in converting potential disadvantage into something positive and advantageous. It remains too early to judge whether the radical end of PDP will become dominant but the signs are not too promising. The obstacles, here as in much else, are to do with attitudes and resources.

There is, of course, the ever-present danger that the ‘Daily Mail will get hold of it’ – ‘BA in Bar Work’ headlines! Notwithstanding the views of several academics we spoke to that learning from experiences outside of the formal curriculum could be a much more demanding process than conventional ‘classroom’ learning, there remains a widespread suspicion that this is not so in practice. And there will be a clear risk that, for resource and other reasons, it will be the ‘experience’ itself rather than the ‘learning’ from that experience that will be given recognition. Can such learning be assessed with rigour? Would universities be prepared to indicate that some students had ‘a rich set of extra-curricular experiences from which they appeared to have learned little’? Would this not be trespassing beyond the normal boundaries of the university and be best avoided, if only because of the resource implications of attempting to do it properly?

For every enthusiast we met in universities, we probably met rather more who were sceptical to some degree, whether for issues of principle or practicality. Can the sorts of initiatives described in this section of the report be successful without obtaining wide support within higher education? We noted how, in several places we visited, sceptical teaching staff could produce sceptical students. In part this may be because it is perceived that these sorts of initiatives represent government and managerial agendas and not the concerns of students and staff. Of course, most students are concerned about their employment prospects after they graduate but that doesn’t necessarily translate into accepting the value of every well-meaning initiative set before them. As we have noted several times, students are mostly busy people with a lot going on in their lives. They are necessarily selective in how they use their time. They may recognise better than others where their best interests lie, know better than others what their priorities are, realise better than others the obstacles and opportunities they face.

It may be that the most important decision to be made is whether ‘employability’ should, in one sense of another, be part of the higher education curriculum for all students. If it is not then, as we have previously noted, initiatives to promote employability may at the same time increase the labour market disadvantages of already disadvantaged groups of students. If it is to be part of the curriculum for all students, will the resources be available to include it properly, i.e. with intellectual rigour as well as demonstrable practical utility? Will time be made available for it, by both students and teaching staff? Will students and staff be persuaded that it is a legitimate and valuable part of their university experience?
6 CONCLUSIONS

It has become commonplace to describe higher education in the United Kingdom as a ‘mass’ system. In coinining the distinction between elite, mass and universal systems in the 1970s, the American sociologist Martin Trow set out what he saw as some of the central features of mass systems of higher education (Trow, 1973).

- Access became a right rather than a privilege.
- Functions of higher education became more concerned with transmission of skills and the preparation for a broad range of technical and economic roles.
- Curricula became more modular, flexible and semi-structured.
- Institutions became more diverse – ‘cities of intellect’ with mixed residential and commuting students.
- Selection became meritocratic with compensatory programmes to achieve equality of opportunity.

These were all features of the institutions we visited as part of this project. But some of the features of Trow’s ‘universal’ form of higher education were also visible.

- In the curriculum, boundaries and sequences break down as do distinctions between learning and life.
- There becomes great diversity with no common standards with aggregates of people enrolled but rarely or never on campus.
- There is much postponement of entry.
- Access is ‘open’ with emphasis on ‘equality of group achievement’ (class, ethnic).
- There is much paid work undertaken during term-time.

What had started out as a project that focused on higher education’s boundaries – concerning access and employment – became increasingly concerned with the ‘inner world’ of higher education institutions – their curricula, the expectations placed on their staff, the daily lives of their students. Except that for many students, this world was no longer ‘inner’ but increasingly bound up with other aspects of complex lives. For these students, higher education was less a ‘stage’ in the life course than one aspect of life experienced in parallel with many other aspects – social, domestic, economic.

The complexities of students’ lives pose questions about the helpfulness of some of the statistical associations indicated in the earlier parts of this report. While undoubtedly representing some form of aggregate truth, many of these associations must necessarily fail to capture the complex interaction of the factors influencing the lives of individual students. Categories of institutional types, of subjects, of types of curriculum and of students (young/old, middle class/working class, ethnic minority or majority) are probably far too crude to capture the complex inner diversities that exist within institutionalised higher education and its student bodies. While the statistical analyses are certainly helpful in providing an overall picture of the factors that influence graduate employment, they should not be used to disguise the many things that are going on beneath the surface.

Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of what the figures do tell us. We might summarise simply the messages that we get from them with the following:

- The well-known lack of social equity at the point of admission to higher education is matched by a further lack of equity at the point of exit from higher education.
- However, to point to the continued influence of a person’s social or ethnic background on employment prospects after graduation is not to deny the considerable employment benefits that higher education bestows on the vast majority of graduates.
We have asked: ‘Access to what?’ A simple answer would say

‘to a set of experiences and achievements that will enhance considerably a person’s employment prospects’.

But an elaboration of the answer would add

‘to a set of experiences and achievements that will not completely remove the detrimental effects of prior social and educational backgrounds, ethnicity and age’.

In the process of asking ‘Access to what?’ we have found ourselves posing other questions that go beyond the scope of this project to answer. These include the following:

- What are the implications of a radically changing student experience for the ways in which courses and student services are organised?
- What are the new expectations being placed on academic staff and their colleagues in careers and other student services and how are they to be met?
- What are the appropriate relationships between knowledge that is formally acquired and assessed within the boundaries of a higher education institution and knowledge acquired from work and other social settings?
- Can diversity and flexibility be reconciled with equity in the educational experiences and employment opportunities available to students?
- What are the appropriate relationships between knowledge that is formally acquired and assessed within the boundaries of a higher education institution and knowledge acquired from work and other social settings?
- Have higher education institutions changed sufficiently to accommodate the needs of students from a wider variety of backgrounds and living increasingly complex and varied lifestyles?
- Do traditional goals of personal development through higher education have to be sacrificed in order to achieve the more instrumental goal of obtaining a good job?

This project has found a lack of connection between policies on widening participation and policies on enhancing employability but, at the same time, a considerable interconnectedness at the level of practice and experience within institutions. At the level of practice, the effects of widening participation connect not only to issues of employability but also to issues of curriculum and assessment, of organisational structures and cultures within institutions, to the changing role of the academic and the developing role of central student services.

To point only to complexities may not be regarded as entirely helpful by the policy bodies who commissioned this study. In order to attempt to regain some clarity, we return again to Trow’s distinctions between elite, mass and universal forms of higher education. Although these have generally been regarded as sequential stages in the development of higher education systems, Trow himself foresaw the possibility that the three types could co-exist. Recent national policy in the United Kingdom, for example the 2003 White Paper (DfES, 2003), would seem to support this analysis. The importance being attached to the success of a small number of ‘elite’ universities – ‘homogenous with high and common standards’), in Trow’s words – masks the reality of diversity in a ‘mass’ higher education system moving rapidly towards becoming a ‘universal’ one.

Excessive focus on the elite end of the system translates, in terms of widening participation, into a policy emphasis upon widening access to ‘leading universities’. From the perspective of this report, such an emphasis may be somewhat misguided. While it is certainly true that attendance at ‘pre-92’ universities generally bestows an employment advantage, the extent of the advantage is mediated by factors such as the subject studied and the background characteristics of the graduates. For some groups of students, attending a ‘pre-92’ university may bestow little employment advantage. And when the effects of factors such as institution attended, subject studied, entry qualifications and degree classifications are controlled for, graduates from disadvantaged groups still appear to do less well than other students on several employment criteria.

If extending access to elite universities is not the panacea for extending social and economic opportunities, what is? Given that it seems probable that students from disadvantaged backgrounds will always be more likely to find themselves in the lower status parts of the higher education system, greater social equity is
therefore likely to be achieved by reducing status differences between institutions rather than strengthening them. Educational hierarchy cannot be disassociated from social hierarchy. Each supports the other.

We have referred to the ‘triple disadvantages’ experienced by many students. Disadvantages which derived from social and educational backgrounds were accentuated further by the nature of the student experience. Opportunities available during higher education could not be grasped due to a combination of lack of awareness and lack of time. And, for good reason, students’ priorities lay elsewhere.

Rather than attempting to legitimate the elite elements of higher education by striving for unattainable meritocracy, greater equity and social justice are more likely to be achieved by facing up to the significance and implications of ‘mass’ going on for ‘universal’ higher education. Many of these are implied in the above pages. We conclude this report with our own suggestions of priorities for attention at national and/or institutional levels.

• The reality of many students’ lives is that they need to ‘stretch’ their courses over a longer period of time if they are to gain most out of them. This should be encouraged when the circumstances warrant it rather than, as at present, stigmatised.

• Relatedly, the distinction between full-time and part-time study has become so blurred that it should be done away with, bringing the UK into line with most of the rest of Europe.

• Rather than separating ‘sheep’ from ‘goats’ at the point of entry to higher education by highlighting institutional status differences, the reality of lifelong learning should be recognised and opportunities strengthened to build upon initial higher education at all stages of the life course.

• Accordingly, rather than creating league tables to emphasise institutional hierarchies, quality assurance needs to emphasise the importance of high minimum standards everywhere in order to ensure the credibility of all higher education qualifications as a basis for future learning.

• Recognition of diversity in higher education and among its students also requires recognition of the diversity of sources of knowledge and learning. The introduction of student profiles – especially the Personal Development Planning element – may help to remove the misleading tyranny of the honours classification.

The ‘mass’ form of higher education in the United Kingdom has a strong and strengthening elite component within it. This may enable higher education to perform functions of reproducing elites and extending opportunities simultaneously but it must necessarily limit the extent of the latter.

Widening participation in higher education offers individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds probably their best available ‘escape route’ from these backgrounds towards something better. But widening participation in higher education does not of itself contribute towards the creation of a fairer society. This requires not only equal opportunities to get into higher education, but equal opportunities within higher education for students to make the most of the experience.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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