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PRACTICAL MATTERS:

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK ABOUT VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

**Dr Liz Atkins, Dr Kevin Flint and Dr Ben Oldfield
on behalf of the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development**

June 2011

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ORGANISATION OVERVIEW

City & Guilds Centre
for Skills Development

City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development is an
independent, not-for-profit research and development
body for vocational education and training. It works
to influence and improve skills policy and practice
worldwide through an evidence-based approach.
It is part of the City & Guilds Group.

The desire to integrate evidence into skills policy and
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and learners to:

- understand current challenges and find evidence-based
  solutions

- provide research findings that are relevant and practical

- link research, policy and practice by sharing knowledge
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by promoting and enhancing learning and teaching for
individuals, organisations and communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

High levels of youth unemployment and challenging global economic conditions mean that it has never been more important to ensure young people have the skills they need for work. Not only do young people need high quality training and education, but they also need appropriate guidance through the complex process of moving from education and training into work.

Learners cannot be guaranteed good employment if their training is not based on a clear understanding of what skills are needed for a chosen career. Studies show that if learners are not provided with accurate information about their career choices and qualification pathways, they can end up with a gap between their aspirations and their actual achievements. Sometimes that might mean that someone has to retrain after choosing a degree or qualification that bears little real relevance to their ambitions. But at its worst, it can lead to disillusionment and exit from education and training, making it even harder for people to succeed.

We know that vocational education can help people to realise their potential and achieve fulfilling and well-paid employment, but in the eyes of the media, some policy makers, and a large number of parents and teachers, there is a heavy bias in favour of higher education and against further and vocational education. While higher education will always be right for some, this bias could lead to many young people discounting vocational routes prematurely and unfairly.

What, though, do learners themselves think about the education and career pathways open to them? Their perceptions, after all, have a great effect on their choices. In this report, City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development sets out what young people themselves think about vocational education. Only by understanding what motivates young learners can we hope to overcome the misconceptions and misunderstandings that lead to vocational education being seen as a 'soft' option. That, in turn, can help empower a new generation of entrepreneurs and skilled workers to enjoy successful and prosperous careers. I hope this report helps make that ambition a reality.

Chris Jones FInstLM
Director-General
City and Guilds of London Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All the young people in this study saw vocational education and training as clearly related to the world outside formal education, thus providing not only possibilities for their employment and future career, but also generating a space in which they could make meaningful and valued contributions to their communities.

This study of young people's perceptions of vocational education and training in two schools and two colleges in the north-east of England and in the Midlands serves to illuminate both its importance to young people and some of the tensions and contradictions constituted by policy in this field.

The importance of vocational education in young people's lives is drawn from its value as a credential and from the unquestionable opportunities it offers them in helping to build self-esteem and develop new skills and confidence. It provides the opportunity for significant measures of achievement for young people who, in some cases, have enjoyed only limited previous experience of success in the education system.

The study also continues to put a spotlight on the paradoxical disjunction between the regard students have for their vocational programmes and the low value they believe is placed on such courses in our society, which still places much greater value on a traditional curriculum. It also highlights once more a particular conundrum in which students continue to reproduce structures, such as social class and gender stereotypes, in the name of education, whilst acknowledging the low esteem in which vocational education is generally held by society.

What continues to be missed by policy makers is the unique world of the lived experience of each individual student. It is such lived experiences that constitute an undimmed hope for the future, sometimes based around clear and realistic expectations, but for many students, particularly those operating at the lower levels, these experiences more often serve to limit agency and constrain their horizons for action.

The study also sheds more light on the multiplicity of occasionally messy trajectories and the many unforeseen events in the lives of young people. Many of the young people in this study occupy spaces that are far removed from those generated by the rational, professionally mediated decision making, in which the idealised student moves predictably from school into employment that currently appears to delimit and circumscribe the imaginations of policy makers.

In fact, what may sometimes appear to the external observer as contingent and serendipitous events are, for the young people involved, entirely rational. What is again unacknowledged by policy makers is that the rationality of these young people is structured by their unfolding network of relationships with family, friends and others in the community, out of which they constitute meaning in their lives. It is not the abstract rationality of a narrowly conceived individual relationship with vocational education.

As fine ambassadors for their schools and colleges, the students who talked to us in this study were pragmatic and practically oriented.

Tacitly, they each appeared to be strongly charged with the spirit of being part of a wider community in which they could play a worthwhile and meaningful role through the development of their own skills. In concert with the mood they each experienced through their work in vocational education, all placed considerable value in learning-by-doing that was beginning to become significant for them in the wider horizon of the communities in which they lived. The vocational education they had each experienced had served to extend the network of their relationships.

Is it not time to take seriously such rationality of students' worlds as a locus for policy making?

INTRODUCTION

This document reports on a qualitative study exploring students' perceptions of vocational education within an English context. The approach to vocational education is rooted strongly in further education (FE) colleges, and their role as education institutions tends to be idiosyncratic to the UK, although there are some differences in the systems within each of the countries making up the UK. These differences are discussed below.

This final report presents the data and identifies a number of issues and emergent themes raised by the study. It discusses each of these emergent themes in detail and considers their respective implications for young people and vocational education and training. The report, which is intended to challenge existing policy and open further debate, also identifies potential subjects for future research and investigation.

Aims and importance of the study

Much of the work on vocational education, particularly that concerned with parity of esteem, makes reference to wider societal perceptions of vocational education. However, the perceptions of vocational programmes which are held by young people have not been widely explored, yet can provide important insights for us as we attempt to develop deeper understanding of the perceptions, experiences and educational trajectories of young people. Consequently, the overarching aim of this study was to explore the perceptions held by young people of the vocational programmes they were undertaking, with the intention of using the findings to inform future policy and research.

Undertaking this study has provided an opportunity to explore under-researched issues around vocational education from the perspective of those most significantly influenced by them: the young people undertaking contemporary vocational programmes in schools and colleges. It has facilitated a greater understanding of their perceptions and aspirations as they seek to make a future for themselves in complex and uncertain times and in diverse communities.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in England, and it should be noted that there are significant differences in the political approach to, and structure of, the education systems in England and Scotland, which creates difficulties in drawing direct comparisons. Increasingly, this is also the case between England and Wales. Whilst the English and Welsh systems have traditionally operated as a single system, and have been subject to the same policy and legislative framework, this changed with Welsh devolution in 1999, and since then policy has diverged as the Welsh have pursued a more 'traditional social democratic agenda' (Pring et al., 2009, p.170).

Consequently, secondary education in Wales is still located in community-based secondary schools, and a policy of competition between learning providers has not been pursued as it has in England. A further and very significant difference in terms of vocational education has been the decision of the Welsh Assembly not to introduce the Diploma, which has been the focus of considerable government policy and investment in recent years in England, but to continue supporting the evolution of the 'Welsh Bac', an overarching award which encompasses existing academic and vocational credentials. However, there are similarities as well as differences, so whilst this report considers the English context, it also offers broader insights for the wider UK context.

Finally, this study has provided an empirical basis from which to inform the debates around the perceptions and understandings of vocational education and, hopefully, to contribute to developing a more effective and highly esteemed system which meets the needs of young people at the beginning of the 21st century.

Methodology

A mixed methodology was adopted for this study, and was constructed in such a way that it could be applied across each of the international contexts. Data were gathered from four sites to facilitate comparisons between young people from different social and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, the sites chosen were geographically distant from one another, and encompassed rural, suburban and inner-city locations as well as young people from a range of different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Three data-gathering methods were utilised. Focus groups were held with young people in two schools and two colleges, which facilitated the comparison of two different age groups: those aged 14-16

and those aged 18-20. One in-depth individual interview was also held at each site, and this had two purposes: to explore some of the issues arising from the focus group in greater depth; and to provide a means of triangulation. These methods were the primary sources of data. Additionally, however, an online questionnaire was made available to the participants on an opt-in basis. Unfortunately, insufficient responses were received from this to facilitate a reliable and meaningful analysis. Data arising from the interviews and focus groups was subject to SPSS analysis. Interview and focus group data were also subject to a thematic qualitative analysis. Participation was voluntary, and ethical clearance obtained through the Ethics Committee of Nottingham Trent University. Parental consent was obtained for the participation of those young people aged under 18 at the time of the study.

Participating institutions

COLLEGE 1

College 1 is a large, inner-city, multi-campus institution in a city whose manufacturing base suffered significantly in the industrial decline of the 1980s and early 1990s. Business and cultural investment in the area now supports the development of a wide range of service industries. The research took place at its vocational centre, which drew its students from an area of significant social disadvantage. The local population is largely white and working class, and this was reflected in the student participants.

COLLEGE 2

College 2 is also a large, inner-city, multi-campus institution. Unlike College 1, however, the local population is ethnically and culturally very diverse and this was reflected in the young people who participated in the study. Whilst maintaining a manufacturing base which is heavily rooted in car production and the railway, the city still experiences significant disadvantage amongst some of its communities. Again, this was reflected amongst the young people who participated in the study.

SCHOOL 1

This school is located in a very rural small market town. It is some distance from the closest large town and serves a predominantly white population from socio-economically diverse backgrounds. The school is a high achieving institution and, unusually, has a state boarding facility. It offers a broad curriculum, including a range of vocational options. Those young people who participated in this study were undertaking a Creative and Media Diploma.

SCHOOL 2

This school has been designated as a High Performing Specialist School and has recently been awarded a second specialism in vocational studies. It is located on the outskirts of a small town but within close distance of large conurbations. Similarly to College 1, business and cultural investment in the area supports the development of a wide range of service industries. The school serves a population of young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is presented in six chapters, beginning with this introduction which provides an overview of the rationale for the study and discusses some of the key issues addressed within it. This is followed by chapter 1, which is a review of the literature exploring vocational education in the English context and draws on the extensive body of literature available and all major studies conducted over the past 25 years. In doing so it traces the history of vocational education in England from the advent of the new vocationalism to the present day and considers the key issues which have occupied researchers and policy makers throughout that period. This chapter also identifies the different conceptual and theoretical frameworks which have been used in the literature to inform analyses of vocational education. Chapter 2 discusses the methodological approach used in the study, outlines the methods used and modes of analysis, as well as discussing the methodological and ethical issues which arose and how these were overcome. Chapter 3 discusses the findings of the study, which are presented in narrative form and draw heavily on the voices of the young

people who participated in the research. Chapter 4 discusses the conclusions we have drawn from these data and highlights the key themes arising from the study in terms of:

- giving learners advance knowledge about the tasks to be undertaken

- students' perceptions of the value of vocational education

- the paradoxical dichotomy between the regard students have for their programmes and the low value they believe is placed on such programmes by a society which values a traditional curriculum

- the lack of straightforward and linear trajectories amongst the participants in contrast to policy assumptions

- the contingent and serendipitous events mediating the choices young people make about their futures

- students' *and* communities' constructions and interpretations of practical and vocational education.

Finally, chapter 5 considers the implications of these conclusions for future policy and research, and concludes with recommendations for both.
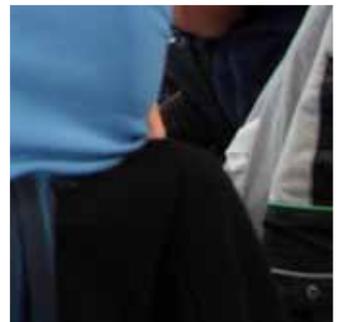
CHAPTER 1:
LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The history of vocational education in England and Wales has been well documented (see, for example, Bailey, 2002), and debates around the key issue of parity of esteem can be dated back at least 150 years (eg see Taunton Commission, 1868; Whitehead, 1929, p. 74). The debates became more intense, and the issues more complex, with the rise of new vocationalism in the 1970s, the move away from an independent education policy to a position in which it was driven by economic policy, and more recent concerns about the effects of globalisation on young people.

These more recent events can be dated to Callaghan's Ruskin Speech of 1976. A number of new educational initiatives emerged in response both to this and to a broader concern around mass youth unemployment. These initiatives came to be known as the 'new vocationalism' and included the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), Youth Training Scheme (YTS), Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), and the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). The move to an education policy driven by economic imperatives may be observed in that TVEI was created by the Department for Industry, rather than the Department of Education and Science (DES) and in the establishment of the quango the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) to oversee YTS programmes.

These new initiatives were commended by politicians as progressive educational reforms which would address issues of inequality but were extensively criticised by academics (see, for example, work by Cohen, 1984; Finn, 1984, 1985; Dale, 1985). These criticisms raised concerns that the programmes represented a move from traditional vocational preparation, seen in the old-style apprenticeships, to a state of job 'readiness'. Even at this early point in the history of new vocationalism, parity of esteem was a key concern. For example, McCulloch (1987, p. 32) criticised the initiatives as being 'narrow and divisive', whilst Bates et al., (1984) argued that they were forms of preparation for unemployment, rather than preparation for meaningful work. Despite these concerns, developments in vocational education continued. Perhaps the most significant of these was the introduction of the Level 3 (later Advanced) and Level 2 (Intermediate) GNVQs in 1992 in response to the white paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES 1991) as part of a strategy to increase participation and achievement in post-compulsory education and training. They were followed a year later by the Level 1 (Foundation) and although withdrawal began in 2000 in response to the Curriculum 2000 reforms, it was not until 2006 that the awards were finally withdrawn. Their replacement with the specialised Diploma in 2008 has attracted comparisons between the two awards and some criticism (eg see Hodgson and Spours, 2007; Allen, 2007; *Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education*, 2007; Pring et al. 2009), but no research is yet available into the outcomes of the Diploma, the future of which is politically uncertain.

MAJOR STUDIES

Vocational education has been a Cinderella area in terms of research. Whilst the studies which have been conducted have led to a considerable number of publications, much of the research into vocational education has been small scale. Extensive, national studies have been limited but include a small number of empirical studies (the ESRC 16-19 initiative[1], the Leverhulme study, The Teaching and Learning Research Project[2] and work by the LSC) as well as the major *Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education*[3] which drew on a broad range of work in its deliberations. A significant number of smaller studies have added to this body of knowledge, much of which relates to GNVQ (eg see Smithers, 1997; Bates, 1997; Helsby et al., 1998; Wallace, 1998, 2001; Bathmaker, 2001, 2005; Ecclestone, 2002) and focuses on the issue of parity of esteem (eg see Edwards et al., 1997; Robinson, 1997). Level 2, and particularly level 1, learners have, until recently, been largely excluded from these debates and only a small number of studies make reference to them (eg see Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Ball et al., 2000; Bathmaker, 2001; Hodgson et al., 2007; Atkins, 2005, 2008, 2009), although there is a much larger body of work considering the early pre-vocational programmes such as CPVE and TVEI (eg Brockington et al., 1985; Gleeson, 1987; McCulloch, 1987; Millman & Weiner, 1987) much of which has relevance to contemporary lower level vocational programmes.

Many of these studies draw on a Bourdieusian analysis of education and society, using his concepts of structure, agency, habitus and field. This review makes reference to these concepts. Brief definitions of each term are given below.

Habitus is used to explain the way in which individuals think and behave. Referring to the 'inheritance of the accumulated experiences of their antecedents' (Robbins, 1998, p. 35), it relates to individuals' primary knowledge of their life and situation, meaning that, crucially, it is embodied rather than consisting of attitudes and perceptions (Reay, 1998, p. 117). Habitus does, however, significantly influence attitudes and perceptions.

Field is closely related to habitus, and refers to social fields (such as education which might be sub-divided into academic and vocational or particular cultural groups). For an individual to survive in a particular social field, they need to understand (or be 'born into' – see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992a, pp. 72-73) the unwritten rules, cultural beliefs, discourse and practices associated with that field.

Structure relates to societal structures which control or influence the lives of individuals. Examples include social class, education, the state and the family.

Agency refers to the potential for control an individual has over their own actions or destiny within societal structures such as education. Therefore, this concept is related to choice and motivation: the field will orient the choice (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66) but individual agency will determine which of the choices is made and those choices will, in turn, be influenced by the habitus of the individual.

KEY ISSUES IN THE RESEARCH

Six key issues (parity of esteem, transition, identity formation, social class, gender and assessment) recur across the body of work which explores vocational education and training (VET) in an English context. Much of this work highlights the tensions between government rhetoric and the realities of the life and transition experiences for many young people, and explores the social and structural inequalities which constrain them. Each of these is considered separately in the following sections of this review.

PARITY OF ESTEEM

Debates around parity of esteem have a long history, as do the government initiatives intended to combat the disparities between the academic and vocational education routes (see, for example, Taunton Commission, 1868; Whitehead, 1929; Board of Education, 1938; DES, 1991; McCulloch, 1994, 1995, 1998; DfES, 2003a, 2005). In recent years these have focused on the differences between GNVQ Advanced and A Levels (eg Macrae et al., 1997), and an emerging literature is now discussing issues around the Level 3 Diploma and A Levels (eg Pring et al., 2009, pp. 115, 132). However, despite a multitude of initiatives, the issue remains as pertinent today as in previous years, with an online commitment made by the Labour party, four weeks in advance of the 2010 general election, to 'end the damaging divide between academic and vocational learning'. Over the past 20 years, government policy has envisaged that by raising the perceived quality of VET, particularly at level 3 where comparisons are made with the 'gold standard' A Level, this would necessarily result in a greater parity of esteem between vocational and academic education. However, for reasons largely associated with societal perception of vocational education, structural weaknesses in the vocational route and the economic return associated with vocational credentials as opposed to academic credentials, this has not happened.

Current debates focus on the three-track pathway which has been available post-16 for many years, and is now available post-14 together with a new, fourth track of foundation learning. The triple pathways – academic A Levels, broad vocational GNVQ and occupational NVQ – arose from the Dearing *Review of Qualifications for 16–19 year olds* which aimed to provide a 'coherent national framework [of qualifications]' (1996, p. 1). Since this time NVQ and A Level credentials have remained largely unchanged. The GNVQ was withdrawn gradually from 2000, and has now been replaced by the Diploma and a range of other broad vocational qualifications such as BTEC awards. Despite the intention of providing a coherent framework, concerns around parity of esteem persisted, resulting in a range of government reports and initiatives (eg DfES, 2002, 2003a; Leitch, 2006), all of which expressed the intention of redressing the issue of parity of esteem, improving vocational education and raising its status in order to meet the economic demands created by changing employment patterns. Concerns have focused around the relationship of each type of credential to social class, and the career and life chances associated with each route, and have led to the system being described as a form of tripartism, a system which McCulloch (1998, p. 4) argues has 'strong underlying cultural influences'. More serious concerns were raised by Tomlinson (1997, p. 17) who argued that the triple-track system led 'to a situation where young people are not educated to be equal citizens in the society or even members of the same economy'. McCulloch also suggested that this was considered acceptable as it accords with the 40/30/30 society envisaged by Galbraith (1992) and Hutton (1995) (*ibid*., p. 4). Similar concerns recur throughout the literature on vocational education, particularly that which explores the relationship of social class to education.

Other concerns in respect of parity of esteem have focused on level 1 and 2 programmes. The challenges facing those entering level 1 and 2 programmes are much greater, not least because of the much extended transition they face and the far more limited exchange value of lower level credentials (Colley, 2006, p. 25; see also Keep, 2009, p. 40), but also because these young people are lacking in the cultural and economic capital necessary to support an extended transition (Colley, *ibid.*; Atkins, 2009, p. 42) and, whilst having hopes and dreams for the future, lack the knowledge of how to achieve their aspirations (Bathmaker, 2001). Recognition of these multiple divides – academic/vocational and above/below level 2 – has led Pring et al. to suggest that 'the role of qualifications at levels 1 and 2 in supporting progression into employment needs to be re-examined' (2009, p. 132).

SOCIAL CLASS

Social class is a significant issue in the UK context, since class hierarchies and cultures are deeply embedded in our society and influence many aspects of life in the UK. It is a particular issue in the vocational context because educational outcome is closely associated with social class, and also because the vocational curriculum is class specific and accessed largely by young people from lower socio-economic groups (Colley et al., 2003, p. 479; Macrae et al., 1997, p. 92). Whilst this is evident at 14+, when the schools offering the most extensive vocational options are lower down the league tables and have a less affluent intake, the issue is even more apparent at 16 + where 'the intake to different types of institution – further education (FE) colleges, tertiary colleges, schools and sixth form colleges – differs significantly in terms of prior attainment, social class and ethnicity' (Stanton & Fletcher, 2008). Furthermore, social class is a key societal structure which is instrumental in forming attitudes and perceptions amongst individuals. This has significant implications for career decision making since, as Wright (2005) has argued, subjective attitudes and perceptions play a very important role in young people's decision making. She goes on to argue that 'it is through these subjective attitudes that aspects of class, gender, ethnicity, education and labour market opportunities are internalised and influence perceptions of opportunities and what is appropriate, perceptions which also reflect individual personalities and life histories'.

Since the advent of new vocationalism, vocational programmes have been regarded by many to be a form of preparation for particular low-level roles in the workplace. The tripartite nature of the education system post-16 has reinforced this and, despite government efforts to make the vocational route more attractive through the use of particular types of marketing and information, advice and guidace (IAG), there is evidence to show that students are very much aware that the choices made within the three-track system carry 'different messages about desirability and exchange value within the labour market' (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 10; Macrae et al., 1997, p. 89). This is supported by more recent work (Keep, 2009, p. 40) which has criticised the marketing of education and training and questioned the policy belief that effectively marketed, 'demand led' education and training together with improved IAG will increase participation and achievement. Keep goes on to argue that the 'selling' of education and training is bound to fail if people 'have any inkling' that low-level vocational qualifications deliver only the very limited gains of low-pay, low-skill work with few or no opportunities for progression.

Such qualifications are associated with forms of VET and related initiatives which some (eg see Colley, 2003, p. 169) have argued perpetuate a deficit model of youth associated with social exclusion and social class. This supports early work by Clarke and Willis (1984, p. 3), who identified a policy perception that young people needed to be inculcated not only with the skills, but also with the right attitudes, for work, a perception they believed originated from Callaghan's Great Debate (1976) about education and by Moore (1984, p. 66) who argued that there was an associated view that those young people who required inculcation with the right attitudes and skills for work belonged to a particular category of non-academic low achievers.

Other writers have agreed that programmes such as CPVE and latterly GNVQ inculcated social disciplines such as teamwork, attendance and punctuality (Cohen, 1984, p. 105; Chitty, 1991b, p. 104) and were effective in preparing young people for specific low-pay, low-skill occupations (Ainley, 1991, p. 103; Helsby et al., 1998, p. 74; Bathmaker, 2001; Atkins, 2008, 2009). These arguments, made in the context of the social inequalities reflected in the field of vocational education and analyses of class relations, structure and agency within the field have led some to argue that vocationalism exists as a form of social control (eg Avis et al., 1996, p. 174; Yeomans, 1998; Coffield, 1999).

It is apparent that those with lower level credentials and from lower socio-economic groups are largely directed to vocational education and training, which was argued by Bates (1993b, p. 72) in the 1990s and by Colley et al., (2003, p. 491) a decade later to be significant in the replication of classed and gendered inequalities. Other work has also made clear the association between social class and vocational education, and has argued that the field of vocational education serves to reproduce existing social inequalities (eg Bates and Riseborough, 1993; Hodkinson et al., 1996; Bathmaker, 2001, 2005, pp. 85, 86; Avis, 2007, pp. 162, 167; Atkins, 2009, p. 160), although Ball et al. (2000, p. 145) have argued that the situation is more complex and that new class hierarchies, inequalities and exclusions have resulted from changing labour market conditions and structures. Pring et al. (2009, p. 60) have suggested that this is because those young people on the 'royal route' of A Levels and higher education and those on low level vocational education programmes achieve credentials with 'polarised' exchange value in the labour market – an argument made earlier by Robinson (1997, p. 35) – which the current education system does little to ameliorate. They conclude that society is becoming more, and not less, divided. Taken together, these arguments suggest that pre-ordained positioning in the labour market associated with social class and education becomes a determinant of future life chances as working class subjects are kept in 'subordinate positions' in which they lack both power and capital (Willis, 2004, p. 170).

There is no doubt that social class is a significant influence on career and subject choices (and thus on the way in which young people perceive particular types of vocational education), ultimately leading young people down pre-determined paths traced by their families and wider communities before them. The influence of social class is, however, subject to subtle differences across class fractions, a phenomenon which is well illustrated by Colley (2006) in her study of emotional labour amongst a group of trainee nursery nurses. Despite the very significant influence of social class on career decisions and trajectories, it is unlikely that any of the young people engaged in VET will be aware of this to any great extent. Colley (*ibid*.), supporting earlier work by Bates (1990, 1991, 1993) and Skeggs (1997), did find that the 'nice' trainees who conformed to the norms of the professional nursery worker differentiated themselves from the 'rough' trainees who did not. Although these studies make clear that young people differentiate and judge themselves and each other according to often subtle class fractions, two significant issues lack clarity. Firstly, it is not clear to what extent, if at all, young people are aware of the influence that class plays in their career opportunities and the in/equalities associated with this. Secondly, greater understanding is necessary of how young people define particular types of VET or occupation as right or not right for them, and the association that these perceptions have with social class.

In summary, in the context of social class research suggests that young people at less prestigious schools and in further education – those who are lower achieving students academically (and both groups will largely comprise working-class students) – will tend to be directed towards vocational education. Those taking higher-level vocational education programmes may continue to access higher education but, as Hoelscher and Hayward (2008, p. 20) have argued, students with combinations of vocational and academic qualifications are more likely to access higher education successfully than those holding only vocational qualifications and, in addition, VET students are more likely to attend less selective HE institutions. For those on lower level VET programmes the outlook is even less rosy. They will find it much more difficult to access higher education, partly as a consequence of the much-extended transition necessary, so many will seek to make a transition into the workplace, constrained not only by what is available in their local jobs market, but also by their perceptions of what is an appropriate job for them.

GENDER

Adherence to 'gendered habitus' (Reay, 1998, p. 61), in which young people appear to view stereotypical gender divisions as natural and universal, forms a major part of their dispositions and identities. Gender identity is closely associated with social class and with vocational education, as many of the programmes pursued by young people are not only class specific but also heavily gendered (Colley et al., 2003, p. 479) in both content and in the occupational area they relate to. Examples of this are the almost exclusively female childcare groups and the engineering courses which recruit almost exclusively male students: both are heavily gendered; both require credentials no higher than level 3 and both might lead to what Ashton and Field (1976 cited by Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 7) have described as 'working class career jobs'.

Despite attempts to break down gender barriers as a means of raising aspirations and widening access, evidence suggests that gender divisions and perceptions of what is, or is not, appropriate work, have remained unchanged over time. Ainley (1993, pp. 23, 24) argued that conventional distinctions between work perceived as suitable for men and that perceived as suitable for women in the manufacturing industries were being eroded by the twin pressures associated with the expansion of the service sector and the contraction of traditional industry, but other work tends to dispute this. Also in 1993, in a book based on the outcomes of the ESRC 16-19 study, Bates questioned why working class girls continued to enter working class, gender stereotyped jobs; Skeggs (1997, p. 57) later suggested that this was because women were positioned by historical (class-based) legacies and the limited range of opportunities

open to them. Later, Fuller and Unwin (2003, p. 11) found that apprenticeship intakes were split on heavily gendered lines and Colley et al. (2003, p. 471) and Clarke (2002, pp. 62, 77) have both suggested that young women on care and childcare programmes demonstrate dispositions shaped by female caring stereotypes.

This supports earlier work which implies that gendered educational choices made at an early stage have a long-term impact on job opportunities. Hodkinson et al. (1996, p. 148) found that all the young people in their study chose occupations within traditional gender stereotypical roles, arguing that individual schematic views of the type of jobs an individual may or may not do are developed within a class-based and gendered habitus, meaning that 'choices' are constrained by these factors. Put simply, this means that a young person who views male and female gender stereotypes in very traditional, class-based terms will not consider courses or occupations which they perceive to be inappropriate to their gender (eg young men will not take up childcare since this is seen as 'women's work'). This has significant implications for young people's choices as it is a powerful influencing factor in career decision making.

Hayton (1999, pp. 162, 165) explored the issue of gender in subject and occupation choice and found that gender differences evident in subject choice across both academic and VET programmes, including modern apprenticeships, are related to social exclusion in later life. Her work suggests that gendered non-participation in subjects has 'a significant effect on …Higher Education options, career opportunities and job prospects'. As Hayton goes on to argue, gendered subject choices are often reflected in the work that individuals engage in, and have implications for their salary levels. This is particularly pertinent for young women, since many of the occupations traditionally regarded as 'women's work' are associated with low rates of pay, even at a professional level. Examples include nursing, which figures amongst the lowest paid professions in the UK, cleaning, childcare and many of the lower paid jobs in the service sector. Despite initiatives to address these issues, rigid gender divisions remain apparent amongst young people undertaking VET programmes in England (Colley et al., 2003). Therefore, in the absence of more recent research into transitions and career decision making, these studies have clear implications for the ongoing implementation of the Diploma, each 'line' of which is associated with a particular vocational area; most of these areas have a significant gender bias in their workforce.

Much of the research around gender and vocational education concurs with the perception that young women have fewer opportunities than young men. However, in their study Ball et al. (2000, p. 38) found that the gendered nature of retail work gave some young women certain

advantages over their male counterparts, and Atkins (2008, p. 198) found that young men as well as young women were heavily constrained by 'local cultural and gendered practices and beliefs which are regarded as natural and normal by the community'. These included a lack of value placed on education amongst white working-class young men, associated with a very narrow, gendered view of what might be appropriate work for them. This suggests that the issues are complex, but that, in different ways, both young men and young women are constrained by gendered views of the world and that this will influence their perceptions of the type of course, programme or career which is 'right for them'. Taken together with the associated influences conferred by social class, it is clear that the choices made by young people, and their perceptions of appropriate occupations, are heavily influenced by factors beyond their control. Further exploration of these issues in a 21st century context could usefully develop that thinking and inform policy in this area.

IDENTITY FORMATION

The 1980s 16-19 ESRC project was the first to undertake a major exploration of identity formation amongst VET students. The project aimed to identify young people's transitions from school to the labour market, to establish how and why some trajectories were different and to explore the implications for individual young people's economic and political socialisation, self concept and subsequent life chances (Roberts, 1993, p. 229). The research suggested that many young people were being channelled into predestined lives and occupations and, as a consequence, notions of career route and trajectory became somewhat controversial (Roberts, *ibid*.). These findings refuted earlier work by Moore (1984), who had cited Boudon (1973), Halsey et al. (1980), Moore (1979) and Hussain (1981) in his argument that educational career paths could not be treated as agencies of identity formation because 'there is no enduring relationship between particular career paths and particular occupational positions'.

The 16-19 initiative produced a range of work which explored identity and trajectory. Bates and Riseborough (1993) explored the developing identities of the young people who participated in the study. Bates also produced a number of other publications which focused on femininities and female gender stereotyping (eg see Bates 1990, 1991), whilst Banks et al. (1991) drew on the findings to explore how the adult occupational and political identities of the participants were established. Later work informed by Bates's study included that by Skeggs (1997); Colley et al. (2003), Colley (2006) and Atkins (2009), all of which explore the development of identities appropriate to particular classed and gendered vocational occupations.

Identity formation in the context of transition was explored by Hodkinson and Sparkes in 1993 when they initially proposed the influential theory of Horizons for Action. This theory, developed further in their 1996 book, suggests that pragmatically rational career choices are constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions (1996, p. 3). They also (*ibid.*, pp. 146, 147) drew on work by Giddens and Bourdieu which they argued to be complementary, suggesting that lifestyle and habitus are inseparably interrelated, being constrained and enabled by the social and cultural conditions within which the young people live and which are in turn influenced by the actions of that individual. Other work by Hodkinson (1996, pp. 132, 133) utilised an analysis by Strauss (1962) to explore transformations of identity, and proposed the notion of 'careership', rejecting the concept of rational 'ladder-like' trajectories. The concept of careership sees development as transformation, based on turning points.

Drawing on data from the Leverhulme study, Bloomer (1997) also drew on the theory of Horizons for Action, arguing that dispositions learning and knowledge are inseparable from other dispositions which comprise habitus and suggesting that, for the young participants, habitus and studentship were mutually reinforcing. Later work by Ball et al. (2000, p. 24) explored the making and remaking of identity amongst young people. They argued that post-16 decision making is bound up with the 'expression and suppression' of identity and also suggested that identities are not only socially and culturally located in time and space, but are 'inflected by rejection, displacement and desire'. This notion of rejection as an influence on identity is supported by other work: Bathmaker's (2001, p. 88) foundation GNVQ students wanted to move from being disaffected learners to being 'students', a desire which may have been rooted in an attempt to move beyond the dispositions they brought from past learning programmes (Ecclestone 2002, p. 144) and to be valued within a hierarchy of lifelong learning. Later work by Bathmaker also explores the influence of GNVQ programmes on identity formation within a 'knowledge' society and argues that it offers a typology to help understand the stratified nature of social inclusion, where social inclusion is defined in terms of participation in learning (2005, p. 96).

Recent studies have shown leisure to be a fundamental aspect of identity formation, which suggests that for many young people on VET programmes, learning is of less importance than family and leisure activities (Ball et al., 2000, p. 148). Ball et al. explore this in some detail, discussing the 'leisure led identity' of some of the young people they studied. Similarly, the foundation students studied by

Atkins (2009) 'bought in' to the rhetoric of lifelong learning, but despite this, the most important aspect of their identity formation was bound up in their leisure activities. These activities were often in tension with the demands of the programme they were pursuing and created difficulties as they tried to negotiate different arenas and reconcile the demands of social lives which, for most young people, are 'pivotal elements of their identities and are equal to, if not more important than, their educational selves' (Ball et al., 2000, p. 59).

ASSESSMENT

An outcomes-based approach to assessment was introduced in VET in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the introduction of NVQs and GNVQs and remains embedded in both the NVQ and successor qualifications to the GNVQ such as the Diploma. The implementation of criterion-referenced and outcomes-based approaches was claimed to encourage individuals' potential, and to make teachers and institutions more accountable, as well as promoting learner autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002, p. 2), but has been subject to widespread, and increasingly vocal, criticism. For example, Esland (1996, p. 68) regarded the behaviourist, outcomes-based notion of competence as part of a 'sterile and dehumanised [assessment] system which has led to increased commodification of education and training'. Also concerned with the wider application of the outcomes-based approach, Ecclestone (1997) argued that NVQs, with their criterion-referenced, outcomes-based approach, had serious implications for a 'critical, broad based education'. In a recent paper Hyland (2009, pp. 121. 122), whilst critiquing therapeutic education, argued that the risks of this 'pale into insignificance' in comparison to 'the damage wreaked by CBET and the behaviourist outcomes movement in the UK', a view supported by Wheelahan (2007) who utilised a modified Bernsteinian analysis in his argument that 'competency based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge'. In a broader critique of different pedagogical models, Avis (2007, p. 161) highlights the tensions between VET and economic policy and practice, arguing that 'narrow, outcome led learning is out of kilter with the needs of a knowledge economy', suggesting that such approaches to learning are not compatible with the depth and breadth of understanding needed to compete in an increasingly competitive, globalised and highly educated economic market place. Such approaches have also been associated with 'box-ticking' approaches to teaching and assessment, and it is possible to infer from this that they stifle creativity in teachers as well as limiting the extent of the subject knowledge taught.

Earlier work by Bloomer (1997, pp. 193, 194) argued in favour of more process-based assessment, suggesting that the purpose of assessment should be clearly distinguished, with that related to selection, allocation or accountability not permitted to determine the nature of assessment for learning, an argument supported by the work of the *Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education* and reported by Pring et al. (2009, p. 81). Making similar arguments, Hayward et al. (2006, p. 244) had earlier proposed an overhaul of the existing assessment system to facilitate the reconciliation of assessment for learning with assessment for accountability, whilst Davies and Ecclestone (2008) argued in favour of formative assessment being grounded in secure subject knowledge, rather than the instrumentalism which they considered to be prevalent in many VET courses.

The views of outcome-led learning and assessment highlighted here have contributed to negative perceptions of VET in a number of ways. Comparisons drawn between the length of a traditional apprenticeship and the length of time taken to achieve an NVQ led to criticisms from workers on vocational occupations, and criticism of the limitations of these types of learning and assessment have led VET credentials to be associated with surface, rather than deep learning. Such negative perceptions have been promulgated through the media and led to a view of contemporary craft tradespeople which regards them as being less skilled than those in previous generations.

CONCLUSION

In summary, current issues being explored broadly cover the nature of the pedagogy in VET, concerns that VET forms part of a divisive, classed and gendered educational system which is complicit in the (re)production of labour, and that the outcomes-based, behaviourist forms of assessment used are reductive and dehumanising. Similar criticisms have been made over the past 40 years, and multiple government initiatives have failed to stem the tide of criticism. What emerges from these criticisms, however, is that parity of esteem cannot be achieved by 'tinkering round the edges' and making changes to credentials, when the problem lies in societal and educational structures and systems. The impact that these have on young people is profound.

It is apparent that, during a global recession in the early 21st century, young people on VET programmes face uncertain futures. Their transitions from school to work are likely to be extended, and they will have to compete in the labour market with many others who may well hold higher level (or academic) credentials, and evidence suggests that this is likely to place them at a disadvantage. To some extent, these uncertainties are compounded by the political uncertainties in a country facing a serious recession and governed by the first coalition in 70 years.

From a policy perspective, this provides opportunities to learn from the history of VET and move forward by addressing some of the key issues in contemporary VET in England, based on current research evidence.

AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

These issues, which arise from the literature review, are taken forward in the conclusions and inform the final recommendations of this report. In short, there is a clear need for further research to inform policy in this area.

The impact and implications of gendered habitus have not been thoroughly examined in vocational education in England, and future research could explore the impact of gendered and classed stereotypes in educational and employment choices made at 14+. Such a study might also include the extent to which young people are aware of the influence that class plays in their career opportunities and the related in/equalities. Associated with this, future research could usefully explore how young people define particular types of VET or occupation as right or not right for them, and the association that these perceptions have with social class.

The recent rise in youth unemployment has not been researched or considered in relation to policy commitments to raise the compulsory education age to 18.

Existing work in VET explores distinctions between working class and middle class. The impact of class fractions on perceptions, choices and trajectories in VET and the implications for achievement have not been widely addressed.

There are no longitudinal studies exploring the trajectories of young people engaged in VET, and the opportunities and choices available to them, despite evidence that certain groups of low-achieving young people are directed to vocational options.

CHAPTER 2:
METHODOLOGY
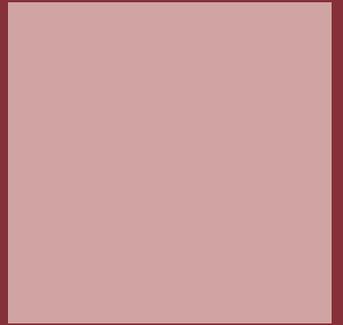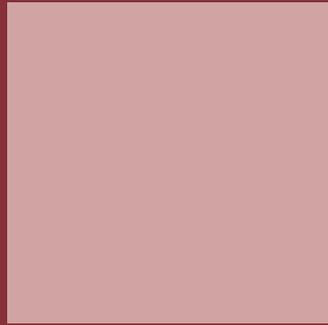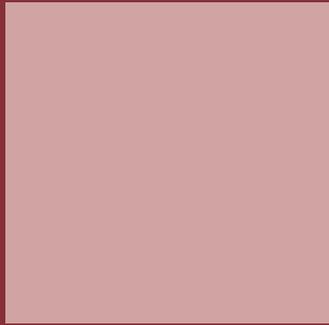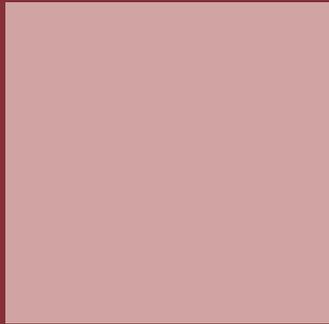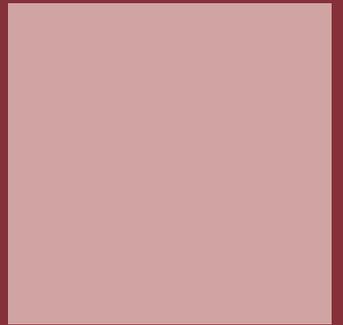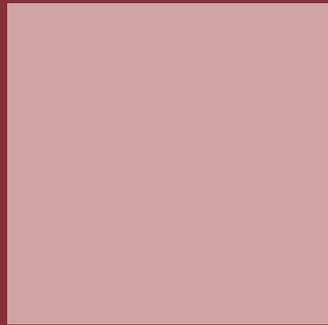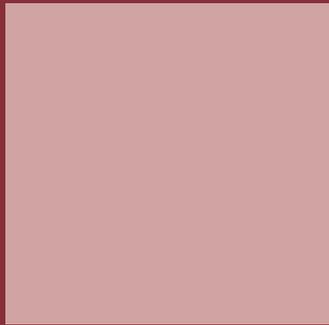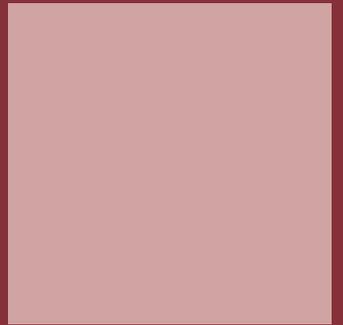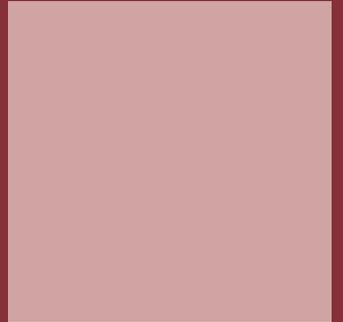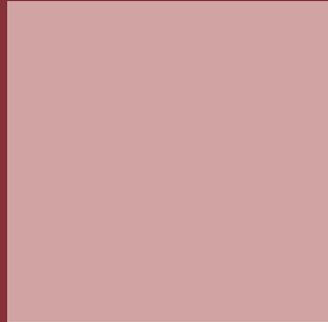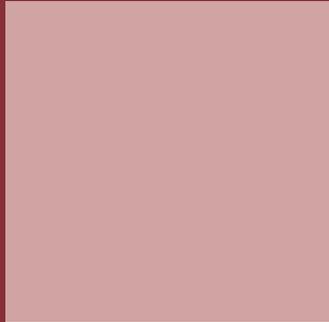
CHAPTER 2:
METHODOLOGY

The methods used and the underlying methodological assumptions grounding this study owe more to the structure of the research questions and the setting of the research than to the ideology of the researchers (Gorard and Taylor, 2004). The methodology used in this study was developed to provide a secure, rigorous and ethical basis for the generation of knowledge regarding young people's aspirations in terms of vocational education. Of particular interest were their perceptions of and aspirations to engage with vocational education and training. The methodology sought to provide a secure foundation for the generation of knowledge regarding young people's perceptions of the skills they need in order to pursue particular careers, the various meanings they have constructed about vocational education and training, and the factors that influence their decisions regarding vocational education and training in response to the research questions identified earlier.

At the heart of the study were the stories that young people disclosed of their own developing skills. In practice we had negotiated to interview one student at each of the four centres in England. The methodology employed was designed to ensure that the stories of individuals in the study were representative of the experiences of a much wider constituency. At issue had been the need to facilitate discussion that would encourage young people to talk openly about vocational education and training, and in expressing their views provide the researchers with a basis for uncovering some of the key issues and challenges that face young people in terms of vocational education and training.

The researchers were able to create the conditions to warm up and prepare the individuals, who each told us their stories, by first conducting a focus group interview at each of the four centres. The focus group (Bryman, 2008, pp. 474, 476; Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 376, 377) provided a tightly structured forum for questioning, where the accent was on helping young people, through dialogue, to construct their own meanings about aspects of vocational education and training. There has been a 'growing use' of focus groups in cultural and media studies (*ibid.*: 475). One influential study in this field by Morley (1980) into a British news programme that was popular in the 1970s showed that 'meaning does not reside in the programmes but also in the ways they are watched and interpreted'. Similarly, in setting up the focus groups for young people it was considered that each of the groups would be given a forum for negotiating and constructing meanings about vocational education and training. It was assumed that meanings did not somehow inhabit aspects of vocational education and training, but rather that the young people constructed meanings through their dialogue with each other, and with the researcher.

Methodologically, in working with younger people who have not yet completed their formal education, it was recognised that in the unfamiliar surroundings of a research project, they might not be able or willing to speak openly and to question each other. It was therefore considered important to have slightly larger focus groups – with 12 participants in each group – than might be suggested by the literature on focus groups, where the typical range has been between 3 and 10 participants (*vide* Fenton et al., 1998; Kitzinger 1993, 1994; Livingstone 2006; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Lupton, 1996; Macnaghten and Jacobs 1997; Morgan and Spanish, 1985; Schlesinger et al., 1992; Warr, 2005).

In each of the four centres selected for participation in the research in England the study adopted a common format. By involving 12 young people in each of the centres it was hoped that the slightly larger group size would help the students to feel that they were just in another lesson at school/college, rather than what for some might appear as a strange research project. Moreover, in most cases the students who joined the researchers for the focus group interviews sat next to their friends as a basis for support. From our pilot study conducted in preparation for the main research in each of the centres, 12 young people proved to be not too large and 'unwieldy' and 'hard to manage' as Morgan's (1988, p. 43) study had suggested.

In practice, in some of the focus groups the groupings were not as tightly specified in terms of age as we had asked for in our original negotiations with each of the four centres. In some cases there were obvious pressures on centres in terms of examinations, formal assessments and timetabling that were compounded by illnesses and

unforeseen contingent events. Ethically, it was considered important to respect the integrity of their respective forms of organisation and to work with the young people who presented themselves at the focus groups, rather than to make any attempts to obtain students according to more exacting criteria of the specified age range. In all cases the young people who presented for their focus group interviews were within months of being in the specified age range.

So the rationale for the 'mixed methods' (Creswell and Clark, 2006; Gorard and Taylor, 2004) employed in this study was simple. This approach provided a spectrum of methods that enabled the researchers to address each of the research questions and to place the experiences disclosed in each of the individual stories and the focus groups in a wider context within each of the communities involved. In adopting this approach the different methods employed provided the basis for further triangulation of data, thus enhancing the validity and reliability of the evidence obtained from the study. In fact, with the qualitative research evidence, and the evidence obtained from the review of the literature, the methodology provided the basis for a combined level of triangulation at the level of the individual, the group, and of collectivities (organisational and cultural represented in the literature) (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 142; Denzin, 1970).

The dialogical approach adopted in this study sought to listen to the voices of young people as they described their experiences of vocational education and training. Methodologically, such an approach recognises that their various experiences are mediated by their own historical settings, the power practices in which they find themselves and the symbolic orders characteristic of society. It provides an opportunity to represent young people's voices in narrative form, and develop understandings of the way in which those voices are influenced and mediated by power practices arising from the current organisation of the 14-19 sector and the competitive environment in which schools and colleges are located.

So the literature review formed a key part of the methodology and was focused as a meta-analysis of what is already known in the field of vocational education, and specifically in relation to the research questions. It sought to draw on the original work in this field (*vide* Atkins, 2009; Bates et al., 1984; Bathmaker, 2001; Colley, 2006; Hodkinson et al., 1996).

In all of the centres the teachers worked hard to organise the focus groups so that they represented a range of views about vocational education and training. Ideally, what was needed for the focus groups was a collection of individuals in which each was the bearer of particular characteristics required of the group (Morgan, 1988, pp. 41, 48). In practice, the researchers worked with a variation on 'volunteer sampling'. Ideally, it would have been preferable to work with 'purposive sampling' where the individuals are handpicked to reflect a complementary series of views on the issue of vocational education and training (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 114, 116). However, in all the centres the mixture of handpicking by teachers, which accounted for the majority of participants, and a small contingent of volunteers was helpful in providing a broad range of backgrounds, interests and experiences.

The 'convenience sampling' (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 114), which involved in this case inviting individuals from the peer groups to give an in-depth understanding of the experiences of particular individuals and groups, may be considered to be relatable to other groups in similar contexts. It was used effectively to create a wider background snapshot of the experiences of young people in each of the four centres in England in which the research had been conducted.

Technically, in referring to young people's perceptions of vocational education and training, perception was taken to mean the consciousness that individuals had of particular ideas relating to the researchers' main subject. Pragmatically, in this study such consciousness was considered to be registered and indexed by what had been spoken by individuals within the focus group or individual interview settings.

The qualitative study of the data obtained from individual interviews and the focus groups in each of the centres was set within an interpretive paradigm (Schutz, 1962; Hughes, 1990). Strategically, 'interpretivism' requires that researchers attempt to grasp the subjective meaning of social action, reproduced in this case in the focus group and the individual interview. The researchers adopted the standpoint of a phenomenologist who views human behaviour within the focus group and the individual interview as the product of how young people interpret the world. In order to grasp the meanings the students' attributed to vocational education and training, in adopting the standpoint of the phenomenologist there was an attempt to see things from the perspective of the young people in the interviews (*vide* Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, pp. 13, 14).

So tactically the approach adopted within the study sought to facilitate the gathering and analysis of data in order to attempt to uncover the meanings individual students attributed to their experiences of vocational education. 'The observational field of the researchers – their social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings', students and their teachers, 'living and acting within it.' 'By a series of common sense constructs' the students had 'pre-selected and pre-interpreted their world which they experience as the reality of their lives.' In this case it was those 'thought objects' regarding vocational education and training which 'determine their behaviours by motivating it in different ways'. It was the researcher's job, if you like, 'to uncover some of those thought objects' and the meaning they had for the young students involved (Schutz, 1962, p. 59).

In being reflexive it is also apparent that the foregoing unfolding methodology itself continually expresses a relationship between the researchers and others involved in the research; such a respectful relationship each with the other provides the basis for ethical research (McNamee and Bridges, 2002). More formally, the ethical framework was drawn from the BERA ethical guidelines (2004) and took cognisance of current legislation such as the Children Act (OPSI, 2000). This included gaining appropriate consents for young people to participate in the study.

SELECTION OF INSTITUTIONS

This proved to be the most problematic aspect of the whole study; namely, negotiating with individual organisations in which to conduct the research. Ethically, the selection of institutions was based, in theory, upon the need to conduct the research in contrasting institutional settings, reflecting the importance of uncovering differences in the individual participants' relationship with the other.
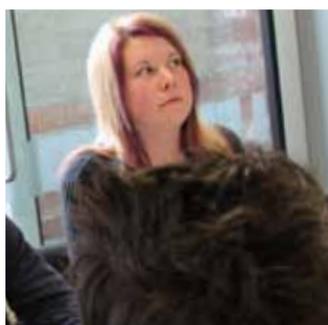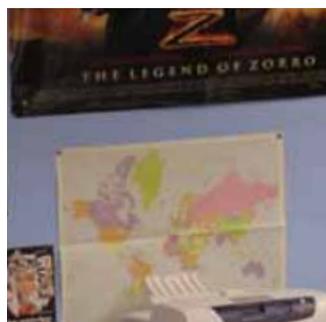
The researchers located organisations in Newcastle and the East Midlands reflecting four distinctly contrasting cultural settings for the study. Organisations were selected on the basis of their capacity and willingness to become part of the project. The researchers were grateful to those institutions that agreed to work with them.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS FOR THE FOCUS GROUPS

Following negotiation with the selected institutions, the project team identified and contacted a broad range of participants reflecting the required research stratification in terms of age, phase, gender, sector etc, and invited them to participate in the research.

Ethically, and in accordance with the Revised British Educational Research Association (2004) guidelines, the work with all participants was based upon the principle of 'voluntary informed consent' (BERA, 2004); all participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time up to the point of writing the final report. In any reporting all participants have been anonymised and identified only in terms of fictitious names in order to protect the confidentiality of all of the data collected at an individual level.

In working with young people under the age of 18 years the research team was required to work within the guidelines laid down by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (BERA, 2004). Article 3 of the Convention 'requires that in all actions concerning' young people, 'the best interests of the young person must be the first consideration'. Article 12 requires that young people 'who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express them freely in all matters directly affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity' (*ibid*.).

The project team invited up to 12 participants to take part in each event. Although experience suggests that it is prudent to allow for participant drop out, in practice each of the organisations presented 12 participants. All participants were asked to complete the necessary consent forms prior to attending the event.

FACILITATION OF FOCUS GROUPS

The project team undertook four focus groups to explore the perceptions of young people of vocational education and the barriers to engaging in the sector. The premises of the four selected participating institutions were used to host each of the one-hour events.

Led by an experienced facilitator, and supported by an experienced researcher, each event was video-recorded (using Nottingham Trent University equipment) and the researchers additionally took full fieldwork notes from each of these events. Each focus group followed an agreed schedule and prompts to ensure consistency with the research instruments used by the two other participating countries.

Prior to the focus group event, all participants were invited to complete a semi-structured questionnaire to ascertain basic demographic information as well as data relating to personal aspirations and understandings of vocational education. This data was then coded, entered and analysed using SPSS.

Nottingham Trent University organised light refreshments for participants at each event. At each event participants were offered an incentive – a £5 book voucher, sweets and drinks – to compensate them for their time.

DATA ENTRY AND ANALYSIS (SPSS)

Data from the interviews and focus groups was analysed according to the requested stratification of evidence relating to age, gender, geographical location and sector. Quantitative analysis of the data provided a measure of the mean for each domain of stratified evidence along with a measure of the spread of the data around the mean. This analysis was complemented by a basic descriptive analysis that was undertaken and written up in this final report.

The patterns of data that emerged from this first stage of the research were then used to inform the structure and content of the questions presented in the in-depth interviews, and to provide background pictures of some of the experiences of wider peer groups of students who had taken part in the focus groups and the individual interviews. Although the initial sampling in this study was never intended to produce generalised findings for the whole population of students, the project data file is available in SPSS format to allow for further country-wide analysis and to support future research.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Participants for the in-depth interviews were selected from the same institutions as the focus groups and were selected from each of the regions, ensuring at least one interview from a rural location. Interviews were conducted by an experienced researcher and recorded using audio equipment. Similarly to the focus group schedule, the interview protocol was designed to ensure consistency with other country research instruments. In conducting the interviews the researchers were mindful of Lewis Cohen and his colleagues' dictum 'that the interview is a social, interpersonal encounter and not merely a data collection exercise' (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 361). In this particular study the researchers had all gained much earlier experience from working as teachers with students in this age range, so sensitising them to the need to generate an appropriate mood in the interviews so that young people can talk freely (Kvale, 1996, p. 147).

The interview protocols helped to ensure that each of the focus groups and individual interviews were structured using a standard protocol. The interviews were conducted in ways that always reinforced the positive responses of the participants. The transcripts from the study indicate that the researchers were always prepared to repeat questions for clarification. In some cases the interviewers also worked with individuals to check their understandings of what had been said by respondents. It was also recognised that young people require sufficient time in which to respond to particular questions (Arskey and Knight, 1999, p. 53).

In reflecting critically upon each of the interviews conducted with the focus groups and individual students, it was apparent that the researchers had opened the possibility for participants to make 'spontaneous', and sometimes 'rich and relevant answers'. The transcripts also suggest that there was a good ratio of the duration of student responses compared to the relatively short questions that were posed. There was also a number of occasions when the researchers attempted to elicit and clarify meaning, but it was also apparent that the researchers were sensitive to the world of young people in which meanings were continually being negotiated (Kvale, 1996, p. 145).

Participants in the four in-depth interviews were additionally incentivised, as indicated earlier, to give up their time to take part, although exactly what such incentives meant for the participants had not been part of the study. Just how much incentives contributed to an incentive economy mediating the responses of participants in the research is an open question. Indications from the interviews conducted suggested strongly that the drinks and book tokens simply accorded with the dominant moral codes of participants, who appeared to respect the fact that they had been thanked for their contributions, rather than as a way of buying particular responses from them.
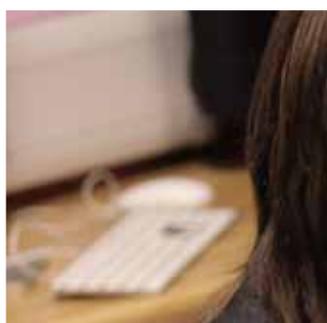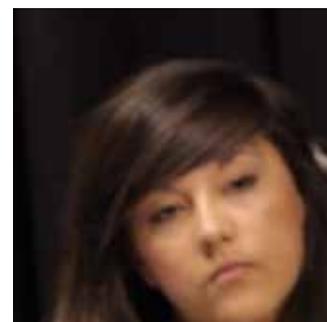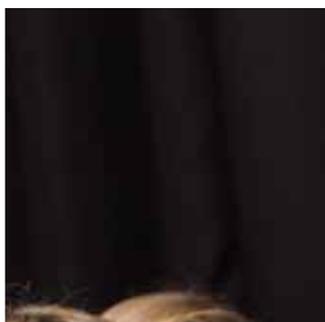
QUALITATIVE DATA HANDLING AND TRANSCRIPTION

All qualitative data collected during the course of the focus groups and the in-depth interviews was managed according to guidelines for ethical research laid down by BERA (2004) and Nottingham Trent University. In the management of data the research team complied with regulations regarding the storage and protection of data as set down by the Data Protection Act (OPSI, 1998). All data collected during the research was kept secure at all times. The research team worked to ensure that in moving to publication the evidence would be presented in such a way as to maintain both the confidentiality of the original data collected and the anonymity of individuals in participating organisations.

The researchers are confident that the transcripts from the interviews and the focus groups will provide a rich source of insights into the aspirations, motivations and understandings of young people concerning vocational education.

ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

The researchers identified and reported on successes against the deliverables of the project that had been negotiated with the City & Guilds Centre for Skills Development (CSD). Analysis of the qualitative data from the in-depth interviews and the focus groups was based on the application of 'grounded theory' (Glaser, 1996) as an inductive process involving the 'systematic generation of theory from data', centred interest upon the voices of the participants and was consonant with the interpretive methodology outlined above. The 'grounded theory' analysis is predicated on assumptions that the worlds of young people are multi-layered, complex and inter-connected. As Flick (1998, p. 41) has suggested, 'the aim is not to reduce complexity by breaking it down into variables' that in some way mediate the connections students make with vocational education and training, 'but rather to increase complexity by including context'. On further reflection it was also apparent that in the time available the researchers had gained relatively sparse levels of knowledge regarding the contexts of the worlds in which the participants in the research had lived.

Grounded theory is also not averse to quantitative methods (Glaser, 1996); in the analysis the researchers continually sought to uncover what was relevant to their questions concerning young people's perceptions of vocational education and training. Unlike much quantitative analysis, however, 'grounded theory does not attempt to force the data to fit with a predetermined theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 3). Grounded theory starts with what is given in the data, which is then analysed to uncover emergent themes and theories. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 205) suggested that grounded theory regarding students' perceptions of vocational education and training must fit the situation that is being researched. As Cohen and his colleagues (2007) indicated, such grounded theory analysis presented the researchers in this case with a number of challenges, not least:

- to be open and 'tolerant' of what 'emerged' from the data;

- to be tolerant of any possible 'confusion' that arose when 'theory is not immediately obvious';

- to be 'resistant to any premature formulation of theory';

- to be able 'to pay close attention to the data' that had been presented in this study;

- to be open to the process of engaging in 'theory generation rather than theory testing';

- to be open to 'emergent categories rather than' any 'preconceived or received categories' (*ibid*.: 492).

One of the dangers for the researchers in this case was in fact their level of reading which some grounded theorists might see as closing off possibilities in the data.

Analytically, the data was subject to theoretical sampling, which involved collecting and gathering, coding and analysing the data, and on an iterative basis adding to the sample until there was sufficient data to describe what had been unfolding in the context of the world of the young people who had been interviewed. The coding of data involved both 'dis-assembling' – breaking the data down into paragraphs, sections, lines – and 'reassembling' (Ezzy, 2002, p. 94) and rearranging the data through coding to produce new understandings of the similarities and differences in young people's perceptions of vocational education and training. The 'open coding' was completed with the intention of gathering the data into manageable chunks. The researchers' generation of new codes and categories for the data was based upon the principle of 'constant comparison' which was directed towards producing a good fit between emergent theory and any data collected from the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 102).

In their employment of the principle of constant comparison, the researchers in this study were continually interested to find data that was disconfirming, negative and discrepant, because it was such data that provided a basis for the emergence of new themes and theory regarding students' perceptions of vocational education and training.

In addition, provisionally, in responding to the research questions and the aims of the research, the analysis also sought to explore possible correlations between students' perceptions of vocational education and training and their extant characteristics, such as gender, age and social class, from both urban and rural settings.
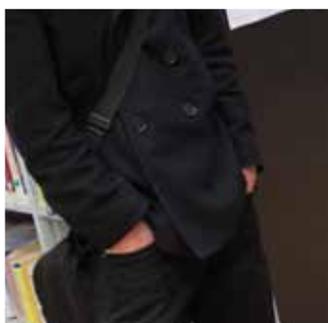
CHAPTER 3:
FINDINGS
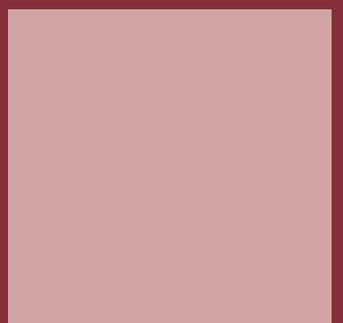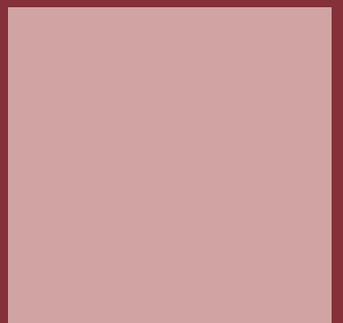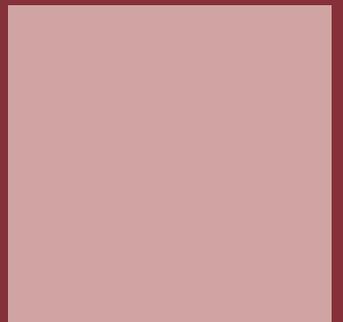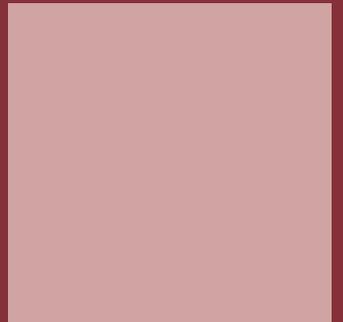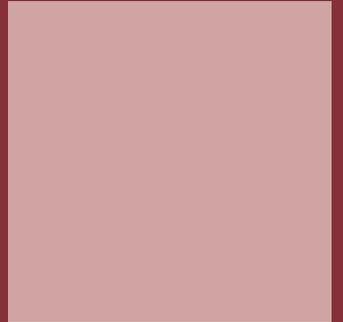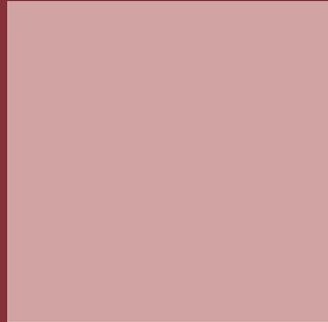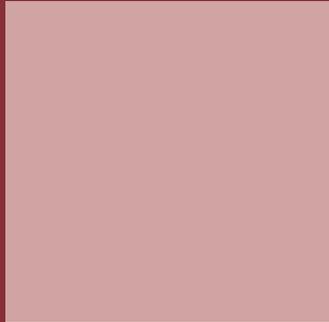
CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS

AVAILABILITY OF GUIDANCE AND DECISION MAKING BY LEARNERS

The data suggests that the college students (18-20 year age range) had arrived on their programmes more by serendipity and contingent events than by making apparently rational career choices and pursuing linear trajectories supported by coherent and consistent careers guidance. Typical responses were, as Kate reported: 'I was told that I had failed loads of courses and that beauty was for me, and I was, like, are you sure.' And Steven: 'I hated school, this was the only place I could come.' Other young people had chosen BTEC awards 'based on GCSE results' or had withdrawn from A Level courses.

David's story was interesting. After leaving school at 16 he had gone to work at Woolworths and was made redundant when the company went into liquidation. He took his sister to an open day at College 1 and a tutor started talking to him about courses available. He enrolled on the spot on a computer course. Until this point he had been unaware that somebody his age (21 years) could do a college course as he believed that colleges were for people up to the age of 19.

Freddy had enrolled on an engineering programme after being rejected for an apprenticeship at a well-known car manufacturer. He re-applied and was rejected for a second time at the end of his first year. He subsequently applied to a local university with a strong engineering profile and was accepted to do civil engineering. This series of events, ultimately leading to higher education, may have offered Freddy a wider range of career options than would have been available had he been accepted for the apprenticeship.

Amongst younger students (in the 14-16 year age range) similar evidence of the influence of contingent events in their lives was apparent. For example, Harry had been guided onto a BTEC route by his school and was pursuing a number of options, including two BTEC awards in business and drama, as well as core curriculum subjects of English, maths and science. This reflected the wider experience of young people in schools, many of whom had been firmly guided into a vocational route at the point of making their decision regarding future career options. Harry reported that teachers were helpful at the point of subject choice because: 'they also know how well we are doing in each subject [but they are] a little bit biased and want you to pick their courses'. The combination of subjects that he eventually took meant that he was unable to take RE at GCSE level, a subject that he wanted to pursue, and so he was left with a range of more limited choices. Harry's situation supports earlier work by Atkins (2008b), which argued that young people make choices that are not their own, and emerging findings from a study by Colley et al. (2008) and work by Fuller and Unwin (2003) who found that employers believed that schools did not promote the Modern Apprenticeship (MA), did not encourage young people to apply to non-traditional sectors, and did not do enough to inform young people about the sectors in which it was available.

It was also apparent that where young people had made career choices these reflected the cultural capital that individuals had at their disposal; in particular the data suggested a strong familial influence. Across the focus groups and interviews familial influence appeared nine

times as the main source of guidance. For example, David (computing level 2) aspired to work for the police in their forensic IT department, and he had been influenced by his uncle who worked for the police and was familiar with that particular department. David also acknowledged that he might not achieve this aspiration and subsequently discussed the possibility of lower paid, lower skilled work, such as 'mending computers' or 'working in a computer shop'.

Harry, a younger student from School B, had been born into a musical family. He described himself as a musician, suggesting this was a key aspect of his identity, and he aspired to go to a 'musical university' and to be a successful musician. However, he acknowledged that 'it's hard to be the best at what you do in music' and that this might mean that an alternative career plan would be pragmatic. Harry's alternative career plan was to do 'business' (although he was not specific at what level he planned to study) and subsequently to go into 'banking'.

Also reflecting the way in which these young people draw on cultural capital and familial role models, Claire aspired to 'do something in health'. It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that she followed advice from her mother, a nurse, to do health and social care before progressing to a career in the health arena.

Such narratives serve to illuminate the obvious dislocation between extant forms of careers guidance and the realities of the students' own worlds, in which their 'Horizons for Action' are both constrained and enabled by external opportunities and personal subjective perceptions (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 3) which, in turn, are obviously intimately connected with their local communities and families. In contrast to these realities, dominant forms of careers guidance, reflecting government 14-19 policy, are predicated on the assumption that individuals are able to make rational and informed choices on the basis of abstract, or even concrete, examples which are often outside their own lives – a model of 'technical rationality' (*ibid.*:120). Data from this study, in concert with earlier studies in this field, such as that by Hodkinson et al. and including, for example, later work by Hodkinson (2004), reaffirms such dislocation and suggests that policy strategy does not reflect sufficiently the lived experiences of young people in an increasingly globalised world.

A majority of the young people were knowledgeable about careers guidance services, and most had had contact with the 'Connexions' service (the national career guidance service in England). A total of five students directly referred to the 'Connexions' service as well as talking to teachers

(N=6) and families (N=3). Support from Connexions was largely confined to the completion of online guidance programmes available in schools and colleges, and three-year action plans which were completed at school. Data also suggested that young people sourced their guidance from families, friends and teachers rather than the Connexions service, and that they had used this service when directed to do so, mainly around the transition point of 16+, a factor which has implications for the structure and organisation of careers services, and which raises questions about whether those young people who drop out of their programmes have greater or lesser degrees of contact with the careers services than those who remain on their programme.

LEARNER CAREER ORIENTATION AND LEARNING ASPIRATIONS

All the young people who participated in this study had clear hopes and aspirations for their futures. Students' understandings of their possible career paths varied in sophistication, with clear differences, not only between age group and level of programme, but also between subject areas. It was apparent that those young people following programmes such as business and engineering, which might be regarded as having a more significant academic content, were able to make more sophisticated interpretations of the term 'career' and had greater personal clarity in terms of their career orientation. In contrast, those young people on programmes that were more practical, and included less academic content, made less sophisticated interpretations, and this was true across all levels of study.

Examples of these different understandings of the term 'career' were manifold in the data. Stacey, a beauty therapy student, talked about a career as 'a job that you want to do for the rest of your life and you enjoy'. In contrast, John, a business student, defined career as being 'a long-term commitment in a specialist area and having the right skills and knowledge within that area and progressing up the ladder'. Other business students made similarly complex definitions, including Joe, to whom a career meant 'financial support and being able to climb the business ladder, maybe into middle management and higher'. In contrast again, Zoe, who was following a course in childcare, spoke of career as 'something you want to do and get paid for'. Amongst the younger students, perceptions were similar. Josh (School B) thought that a career was 'a job you do for a long term and earns a lot of money', whilst Daisy (School A) said that a career was 'something you do after university', and Daniel (School A), the only construction student in that group, considered that a career involved 'getting qualified in woodwork and having a secure job'.

It is possible that these differences reflect class-based and sometimes gendered perceptions. Vocational education has been argued to be both classed and gendered (Colley, 2006). The subject areas reflected here are associated with very different career opportunities in social terms. Business and engineering provide opportunities to engage in higher education and/or high-skill work with associated levels of income. As such, they are associated with higher socio-economic groupings than beauty, and childcare courses, which in general lead to low paid work with few opportunities for progression. These latter subjects are more commonly associated with lower socioeconomic groups, something which is, perhaps, consistent with the class fractions discussed by Colley (2006, p. 23).

Issues of gender and class, as well as those related to their chosen course or profession, were apparent in the young people's emerging identities. They variously identified themselves as students, as learners, as developing skills, as workers, as well as identifying with the courses they were pursuing. These identities were stereotypically gendered and reflected in their choice of vocational programme. In turn, these choices were not so much their own individual rational choices but reflected more on the constraints of social and gendered positioning in their communities.

On reflection, and provisionally, this study draws attention to the fact that these young people live in a socially stratified society which ideologically invests in education the possibility of challenging such extant orders. However, the different voices in this study have already shown how much their decision making, their understandings of careers, and the ways in which they articulate concerns about their career aspirations are reflective more of their habitus and social positioning than of any possible cultural capital acquired through education.

The researchers would argue that these issues of social class are also intimately inter-connected with apparently gendered differences in the foregoing responses. So the apparent gender differences in the nature of the definitions given appear to be representative of the gendered nature of vocational education and the way this was reflected in the students present at the focus groups and one-to-one interviews. For example, whilst childcare courses are invariably female in orientation and engineering and construction courses are customarily male domains, such bifurcation is merely reflective of dominant gender stereotypes which are also closely associated with the stratification of social class. Further, this supports arguments by Bates (1993b: 72) and in later work by Colley et al. (2003, p. 491), Bathmaker (2005, pp. 85, 86) and Avis (2007, pp. 162, 167) that vocational education and training is significant in the replication of classed and gendered inequalities.

Although there were these apparent differences in the level of understanding in the meaning of the term 'career', there were broad similarities regarding what young people hoped to achieve from a career. Most significant of these was money (N=6). Whilst this was of significance to all young people, there was a gender difference in that male students tended to ascribe greater importance to financial rewards than did female students. Lewis (College B) hoped to 'achieve a lot of money' and, similarly, Chris (College B) aspired to 'high levels of income', and three other male students in the same focus group identified 'financial support' and 'financial security' as the most important aspect of a career. Amongst the female students, across age ranges and institutions, the financial rewards tended to be secondary to more qualitative concerns, such as 'enjoyment' (Daisy, School A), 'developing confidence' (Stacey, College A), and 'independence' (Bella, School B). This evidence reflected gender differences which have already been characterised and illuminated within feminist research (*vide* Irigaray, 2004 {1984}).

Other than money, enjoyment and security, there were a number of factors which influenced career choice and aspiration. At College B, for example, Harry had chosen to do business and aspired to a career in business because he believed it had 'status' which he conflated, perhaps correctly, with good pay. Related to the issue of status, John, an ICT and business student, hoped 'to progress up the ladder', imputing aspirations to gain both higher status employment and to earn more money. Overall, the progression aspect of working appeared six times as a theme in the focus group data. George, whose aspirations had changed from hoping to do an apprenticeship to applying for university, noted the more elite nature of a university credential in his statement that: 'a lot of people at college tried to look for an apprenticeship, not so many go to university'. He went on to talk about the 'value of a degree' and the different type of career aspirations associated with doing a degree as opposed to an apprenticeship. George had an expectation that employment in his chosen field would result from a year's placement in industry as part of his degree programme.

For some of the participants their career aspirations were not obviously related to the courses on which they had been enrolled. Nicky (College A), for example, had decided to move from a Level 3 in Art and Design to a Level 3 in Travel and Tourism because 'I don't want to do art anymore [and] I want to work on the cruises and stuff'. A number of female students from different vocational backgrounds mentioned working on cruise ships, which they seemed to associate with glamour, affluence and the possibility of travel and adventure. Given the social positioning and socio-economic groupings of these young people, such aspirations offered them the possibility of experiences that would otherwise be denied to them. Like Nicky, Becky planned to move to a

different vocational area, reporting that 'I was offered a place to be a nurse, but I turned it down to do beauty; I might do business next'.

This implicit 'pic-n-mix' approach again raises questions about policy assumptions around linear career trajectories, as well as around the nature of skills that might be acquired from two different vocational courses, and the extent to which this will prepare young people such as Becky to engage with the high-skills globalised economy of government rhetoric. There is the possible danger that such rhetoric can raise false hope and expectations. Amongst the young people at School B, all pursuing a media course, there was a general belief, eloquently expressed by Ellie, that 'we will get jobs more easily than people with A Levels and stuff, because we will already know how to do lots of things like use a video [camera] that they will have to teach people with A Levels'. This highlights the need for both realistic work experience and objective and comprehensive information, advice and guidance.

The general optimism of youth appeared to be reflected in the experiences of all of the participants in each of the four centres, who were confident that they would be able to achieve their career aspirations, or at least gain some kind of secure related employment. It was also reflected in their enthusiasm for the courses and their planned careers. Such optimism might be seen as misplaced, although none of the students made any explicit reference to the current recession, but it is possible that awareness of this influenced the young people in the way they each had a number of secondary aspirations which in some cases were, perhaps, more pragmatic and offered more flexibility in the current employment market. For example, Abbie, a beauty therapy student, suggested that she might 'work and [move into] management, [work on] cruise ships, [work as a] mobile [beauty therapist], or go to university'.
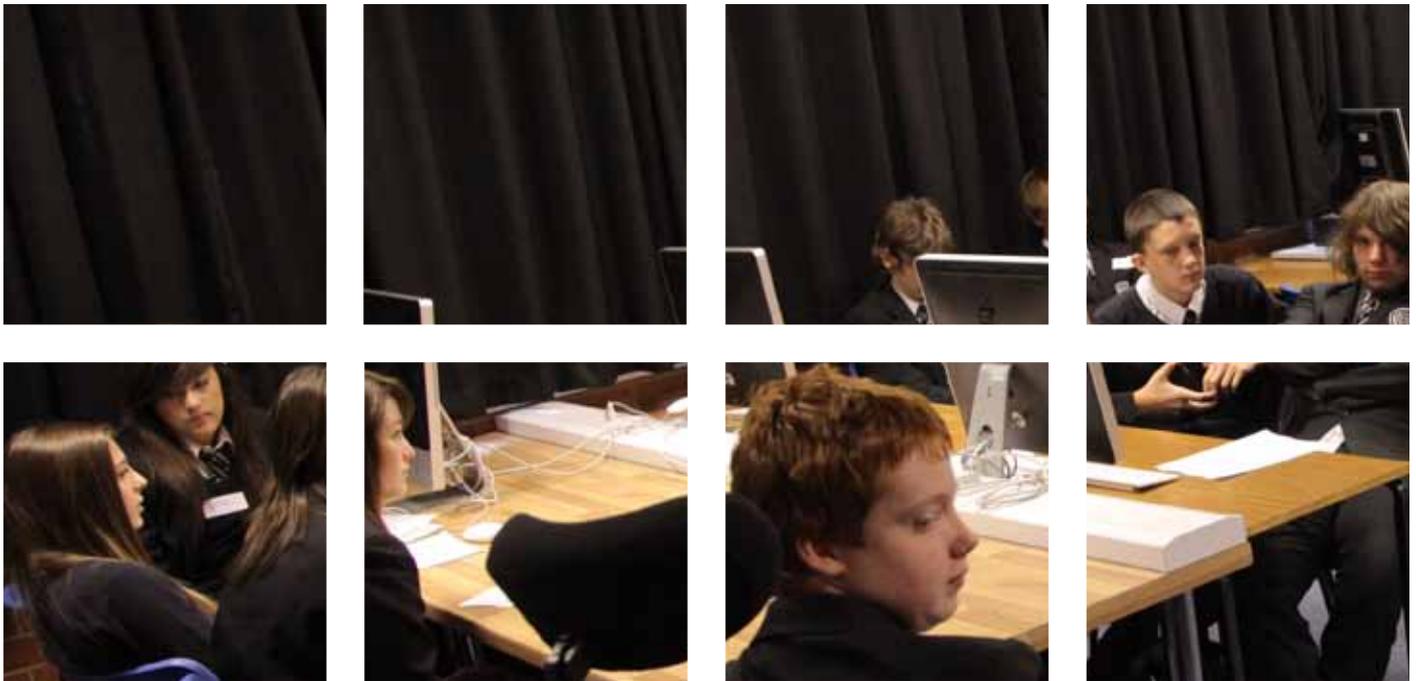
UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The young participants in this study had no clear understanding of the term 'vocational', despite being on vocational programmes. It was interesting that when given prompts drawn from a list of occupations, only craft occupations, such as plumbing and bricklaying, were commonly identified as vocational. More elite vocational occupations, such as lawyer and medical practitioner, tended not to have been considered to be vocational. For example, Becky (College A), a beauty therapy student, believed that law is not vocational because 'my twin does law, and she does law theory work, which is why I don't think so, and she needs to go to university for law'. It is interesting that for Becky the fact that law requires a university education and involves the application of 'theory' precludes it from being a vocational occupation. The few students who did identify law and medicine as vocational occupations (including some from Schools 1 and 2 and a small number from College 2) were predominantly from higher socio-economic groups than other participants, so their perceptions are likely to reflect access to greater levels of cultural capital.

Definitions of vocational were largely focused on 'practical' and 'skills', with many young people also using the term 'hands-on'. This appeared a total of 11 times as a theme in the focus group and interview data. The young people from School 2 talked about the hands-on aspect of their Creative and Media Diploma course being around activities such as filming and sound recording. Other practical learning alluded to by participants included 'waxing eyebrows', 'designing and making clothes' in fashion, 'fixing computers',

'placement activities' and using 'metalwork machines'. Only one student, Steven (ICT and business), said that 'we don't do any practical learning. All we do is type stuff …' and 'we don't fix computers or anything that I class as practical'.

Young people were clearer in their definitions of what was constituted by the expression 'practical learning'. For Cameron, an engineering student, for example, 'practical learning is learning by doing something'. He took the example of 'how to use metalwork machines' and recalled that 'the teacher will show how something [operating the metalwork machine] should be done and how to work the machine'.

'Learning by doing' was important to the students, some of whom had previously begun A Level courses and drew unfavourable comparisons between A Levels and vocational courses. What was particularly interesting was that, without exception across all four centres, and similar to Bathmaker's (2001) GNVQ Foundation students, all the young people in this study were extremely positive about their vocational programmes. They saw them as 'the right course for me' (Bathmaker, 2001), and similarly to the young people in Atkins's (2009) study, the students here believed that these were 'good' qualifications, which they conflated with 'good' jobs. However, the young people in this study, whilst describing the many advantages they perceived in undertaking a vocational qualification, were acutely aware that, in comparison to 'academic' qualifications such as A Levels, these qualifications have a different currency within education and employment (eg see Keep, 2009, p. 40; Tomlinson, 1997, p. 10; Macrae et al. 1997, p. 89).

George, an engineering student, for example, explained that he would have to do a foundation year to his degree, because 'they [the university] don't think that BTEC students have enough maths'. Having a twin who was pursuing an A Level route and being the only person in his family had ever taken 'a different route to A Level', he was, perhaps, most acutely aware of the difference in esteem but also well positioned to make considered comparisons between the two routes. Similarly, David, an ICT student, reported that his friends were confused about his BTEC course, saying that 'they are not sure what it is; they don't think it's very high'. Tori, an art and design student, referred to society at large, saying that 'they … think the people who stay on at sixth form are cleverer than the people who go to college', and Chloe, also an art and design student, believed that other people 'feel that we are doing these courses because we are thick'. For these students, and others who made similar comments, it was interesting that the acknowledgement of issues around parity of esteem were only related to the perceived academic ability of students pursuing the different route: none of the young people made any more sophisticated differentiation between the two. This suggests that these young people may well perceive themselves as less able or less successful than their more affluent, middle class peers who are undertaking the A Level route, but that they may have little 'inkling' that low-level vocational qualifications deliver only the very limited gains of low-pay, low-skill work with few or no opportunities for progression (Keep 2009, p. 40).

The data also reflects a clear dissonance between these students' recognition of the lower esteem in which vocational qualifications are held, and their belief that they are each pursuing good qualifications that will enable them to achieve their aspirations. Eleven participants across the interviews and focus groups identified that they believed that vocational courses had a negative perception by friends, employers and/or universities. For the younger students at the two schools parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications was not generally an issue, and these young people did not comment on wider societal perceptions of vocational education. This may be due to the interplay of two factors. Firstly, they had been actively guided through a positive decision-making process at school where choices were often contingent on non-career related factors, such as the popularity of the teacher. This process may have encouraged them to see the qualification in a more positive light. Secondly, at this age and stage in their education, they were likely to have had less exposure to issues of parity of esteem, which may become more apparent when they make later transitions to employment, to sixth form or to higher education.

ATTRACTIVENESS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The young people's perceptions of the attractiveness of vocational education and training were closely associated with the views discussed above, around the value they placed on their courses and wider societal perception. For example, David, an ICT student, believed that sometimes 'people look down at you because what you are doing, they don't look at it in the same way as if you were in the sixth form doing academic studies'. Despite this, he believed that the course had many advantages, although these were social rather than educational. 'It's more convenient for where I live. The college is not too far from where I live. And the hours are suitable for me. It sometimes feels that there are not enough hours in the day. That sounds a bit thingy, but there are. It's not too far from where my friends live. You never get bored. If you don't want the refectory, you can walk into town. There are always people around us; different departments get their breaks at different times.'

There were some students who reflected on the value of the vocational course. Tori, a creative media student, placed a high value on the placement component of the course and said that 'not all jobs want grades, they want experience as well. I know people who are doing A Levels, and work in clothes shops; they have the [academic] ability, but not the experience'. Similarly Liam, Ashley, Joshua and Jack, all at School 2, believed that their practical experience on their Creative and Media Diploma would make them more employable in the media industry than students with more academic backgrounds. They thought that students with academic backgrounds would have to be taught these practical skills, which they themselves already possessed. However, these observations may reflect misperceptions on the part of the young people around their personal skills levels, those required in the industry, and the characteristics of young people sought by employers in the industry. Other data suggested that one of the reasons young people liked their vocational programmes was the lack of examined content – there was a feeling that course work, whilst perceived as demanding (Matt, an ICT and business student, described it as 'absolutely HUGE'), supported the development of study and research skills and enabled the young people to achieve better outcomes than an examined process. Ellie, a business student, considered that her course, with its ongoing assessment, was a good preparation for university. She had been accepted at a local university to do a degree in international relations.

The young people, despite not having seen any advertising for their courses, had a number of suggestions about how others might be persuaded to take up a vocational option. These included comments such as: '[like] at Treetops College you go in for a trial day where you attend the lessons and everything to see if you like it' (Kate, College A); 'open days at universities where lecturers go with you' (George, College B); and 'people coming in who are doing the course as teachers will just sell the positive points of the course, whereas the students can say what it's really like' (Josh, School B). Joe, from School A, talked about the importance of work experience. He said 'work experience helps you to think about whether something is what you want to do as a career'. These comments illustrate the potential value of informing young people about the vocational programmes which might be related to an area in which they undertake work experience. This could open up the experience of vocational education, and draw clearer links with the world of work, than is currently the case. Although work experience is a mandatory component of the Diploma, such experience comes after the choice of programme: these data suggest a value in facilitating the work experience to inform the choice of programme.

The perceived attractiveness of vocational education was also reflected in the perceived popularity of the courses. Al, an ICT and business student, noted that 'last year we had two groups, this year we've got three', suggesting that the marketing of his BTEC course by the college had been effective in addressing parity of esteem issues, and inferring to Al that if more people had enrolled on the course it must be perceived as being a 'good' course. Despite these issues around parity of esteem, it was interesting to note that none of the young people recalled any national or local advertising of vocational education. When asked about marketing they referred exclusively to local institutional marketing. For example, Matt, an ICT and business student, had seen College 2 advertised 'on the side of taxis', whilst his friend Al, on the same course, had seen similar adverts on 'billboards'.

Although the students in this study had seen little overt marketing of vocational courses, many of them alluded to more informal marketing of vocational programmes, primarily through education professionals and, to a much more limited extent, through the Connexions service. By this we mean that these young people had been offered, or had been persuaded to 'choose', particular options during discussions with a teacher or college/Connexions advisor. In particular, the data suggested that many of the students in the younger age group had been firmly and actively guided in their choice of a vocational programme, raising questions about the extent to which they had 'meaningful choice' in their decision making (Wright, 2005, p. 3).

Older students were also subjected to similar influences as they made decisions about their futures. David described taking his sister to enrol on a course and falling into conversation with a tutor. David had no intention of enrolling on a programme, but reported that Paul, the Tutor, 'convinced me that this was right for me'. David also made the point that he would be progressing to the level 3 course, since his choice was 'do level 3 or get on the dole'. Becky, speaking for all her beautician peers, said that 'we had to do level 1 first, because we didn't have the grades to do level 2'. At the time of the interview these young women had successfully completed their qualifications at levels 1 and 2 and were part way through a level 3 course and they had a very clear expectation that they would be successful in completing this higher level course. They mentioned that some of their peers had withdrawn from the programme, and they expressed with some pride that they 'had stuck with the course'. It is clear that, despite issues around parity of esteem and the limited economic return and prospects for progression associated with vocational credentials, a level 3 qualification represented a significant achievement for this small sub-group who had begun at level 1: level 3 would provide them with a credential that offered the prospect of employment in a competitive industry, or could, as Abbie noted, potentially lead to some vocational higher education programmes such as nursing.

In summary, these data suggested that in most cases these students had made their decisions regarding particular vocational programmes, not on the basis of some imagined rationality where they each had all the known options available to them, but pragmatically, on the basis of what proved to be available in the contingent events of their everyday lives. In most cases their decision-making process appeared to have been strongly mediated by others, usually family, but in a smaller number of cases, such as David, by an education professional. Once these choices were made, these young people appeared to have embraced with enthusiasm these programmes and the opportunities that they might offer. However, it is worth noting that the field work for this study took place at the end of the academic year, after those students who might have been less enthusiastic might have moved into alternative forms of employment, education or training.

CHAPTER 4:
CONCLUSIONS
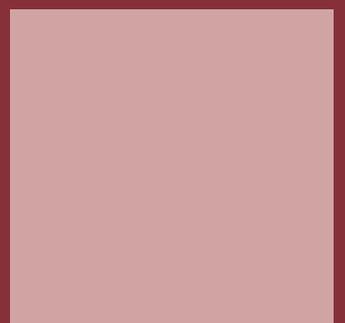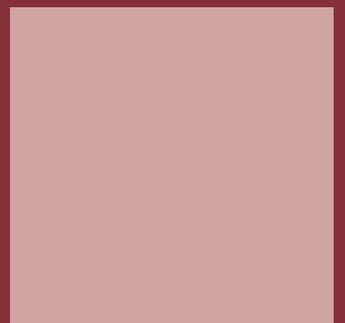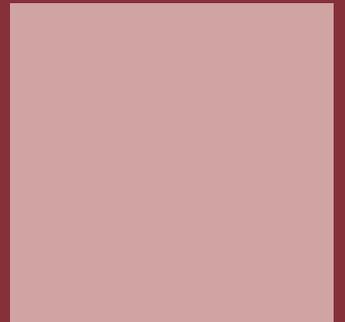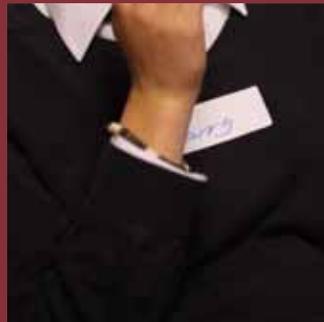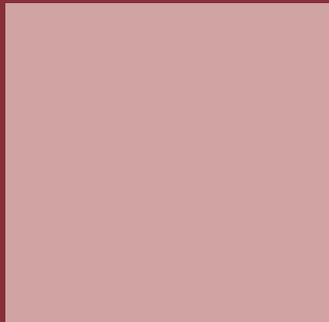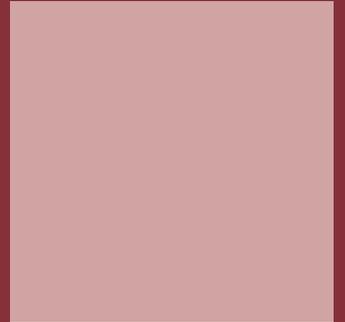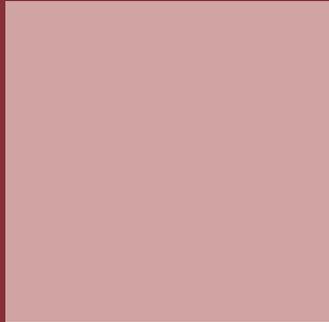
CHAPTER 4:
CONCLUSIONS
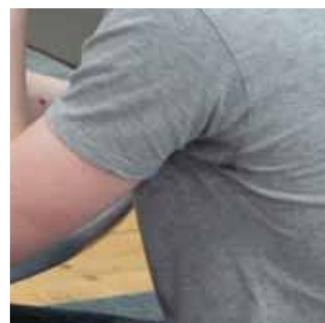
From the dialogues with groups of students from different communities across England, this study raises significant questions regarding the development of policy in the area of vocational education and training.

Moreover, from the literature review, it is clear that in recent years 14-19 policy, in particular the introduction of the Diploma (DfES, 2005), has been intended to bring about a position where vocational qualifications have parity with academic credentials. This study demonstrated, however, a paradoxical dichotomy between the regard the young people had for their programmes and the low value they believed was placed on such programmes by a society which values a traditional curriculum. This was illustrated in comments such as 'A Levels mean more' (Liam, School B) and 'people think we're really thick because we're doing beauty therapy' (Jane, College A). These comments suggest that attempts to achieve parity have been unsuccessful so far.

It would appear that current policy in this area so far has taken insufficient account of extant 'power practices' (Kögler, 1996) and the hegemonic and normative discourses in which the young people are variously positioned in discursive practices over which they have little control. For example, Liam from School B was the son of a musician and a 'businessman'. He anticipated a future as either a musician or a 'businessman', and aspired to do a degree to help achieve this, whilst Kate, a hairdressing student from College A, was the daughter of non-working parents and was optimistic about her future in developing a career in hairdressing. These cases illustrate the way in which young people are already socially positioned by their circumstances and background to pursue particular

routes that are not meaningful choices in many cases, but pragmatic decisions made within limited horizons for action (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1993; Hodkinson et al., 1996). Recent 14-19 policy, structured around models of instrumental or technical rationality (Wright, 2005, p. 9; Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 120), mistakenly assumes that all young people have the ability, support and understanding to make an informed rational and unconstrained career choice from an almost infinite range of possibilities. This study illustrates that, whilst there is significant and effective support in schools and colleges, young people are most significantly and contingently constrained by gender, social class, habitus, and local employment and educational opportunities.

Thus, policy which is predicated on the belief that young people make rational choices and have linear trajectories has had the effect of making their social positioning more deterministic rather than opening possibilities and increasing life chances, thus raising the question of whether a different and more radical policy approach is required.

The 'messy' trajectories experienced by these young people included moving from school to work and then back to college following redundancy, 'progression' at the same level but across vocational areas, and enforced education due to limited availability of apprenticeships and many unforeseen contingent events, as well as much-extended transitions for those who began a post-16 trajectory at level 1. It was also evident that the choices made were heavily gendered; for example, all the beauty students were female, the technologists were male, those involved

with construction male and the childcare students were exclusively female. Similarly, the occupations and education they aspired to were reflective of classed stratification; for example, amongst the young people at School A all those with parents from professional classes aspired to go to university, whilst Jenna (College A, a childcare student), who belonged to the local white working-class community, said 'I wouldn't go to university – I don't know why'.

These stories accurately reflect the model of Pragmatic Rationality proposed by Hodkinson et al. (1996). Whilst a more technicist model may be an effective way of rationalising resource for careers advice, there is always the danger that the failure to recognise the multiplicity and complexity of trajectories may lead to the non-availability of information, advice and guidance (IAG) at a point where a young person is in need of guidance, or to IAG which is predicated on assumptions that the young people are able to make informed decisions about a range of possibilities: this is an important point. We spoke to these young people at the end of the academic year. Many of them alluded to friends or peers who had 'dropped out', and it was very clear that those who had stayed on their programme were the successful students. It seems likely that during a recession, at least some of the young people who withdrew will have joined the Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) category, whilst others may have engaged in low-pay, low-skill work with few opportunities for training or progression. Policy makers may wish to consider the possibility of challenging and working with these young people – who are significant in number – within their own settings and communities, and to explore their reasons for withdrawal from vocational programmes. This would inform future policy debates and understanding about the experiences and trajectories of young people who have been unsuccessful at school and who are subsequently, in educational terms, unsuccessful in vocational education.

Whilst those who had stayed, and were about to complete their programmes or progress to a second year, may be regarded as successful, it was clear that their lives were mediated by contingent and serendipitous events, such as David's visit to his local college, undertaken because his sister asked for a lift. Despite, or perhaps because of, such uncertainties around the decision-making process, it was evident that the young people were continually searching for ways of making their way in the world and building for themselves a secure trajectory; a significant aspect of this in all cases was the importance of building relationships – with peers and teachers – that are meaningful to them in their world. Such relationships also mediate the connections that they make with vocational education and training and enable them to construct meaning, each in their own unique world.

The competitive education marketplace has a clear impact on IAG received by the young people. Whilst IAG was readily available from a range of professionals in all the institutions the researchers visited, comments from the young people, such as 'I think in schools they don't really advertise colleges' (Chloe, College A), illustrated that individual institutions tended to advertise themselves as centres for particular types of education, rather than collaborating with each other or advertising educational routes across institutions. This highlights the essential contradictions between the policy imperatives for partnership and those for competition within the 14-19 sector. For young people to receive comprehensive and objective IAG there needs to be greater emphasis placed upon partnership within districts, and the tensions in current policy need to be resolved.

Related to this, work experience undertaken at school might inform future course choice, especially if undertaken in association with objective and comprehensive IAG. However, it should be noted that for many young people, work experience is already structured around choices that have been made for them. This study illustrates the significance to young people of informing their choices on the basis of experience within workplace settings. This raises questions about the boundaries of schools and colleges, and calls for a more radical conception of school or college and their relationship with industries and commercial organisations which are able to provide realistic work experiences for young people and their teachers. Implicit in the data is that the teachers are themselves positioned to reiterate the current status quo. Many teachers themselves, particularly in schools, have only experience within education. Comments from the young people suggested that they recognised, and valued, the industrial experience of their teachers which made a positive contribution to their understanding of their course and the industry to which it was related. This was powerfully illustrated by George's comments. George, an engineering student at College B, described the relationship the staff team had with industry, which led to exhibitions and demonstrations in college and which the staff related to possible future university courses.

Regarding the development of policy in vocational education and training, both the literature review and data analysis for this study identified six areas which are pertinent to key stakeholders. These are:

- parity of esteem
- transition
- identity formation
- social class
- gender
- assessment.

This study, whilst specifically exploring perceptions of vocational education, again illuminates powerfully many of the themes emerging from earlier studies. This study has shown that contemporary policy so far has been unsuccessful in addressing issues of parity between vocational and academic education, and that these issues of parity are closely intertwined with transition from school to work, social class and issues around gender.

This is illustrated in the serendipitous nature of many transitions, as exemplified by David who left school at 16 to work at Woolworths in a low-pay, low-skill role. He was made redundant when the company went into liquidation and was unemployed. His sister asked for a lift to enrol on a college course, and whilst there he was invited to enrol on an IT course, which he did. David liked the idea of doing a course with 'no exams' and of learning on the job: he had not known that he could enrol at college at his age (21), or that financial support was available, reflecting the limited cultural capital at his disposal and the lack of earlier effective IAG. The college was local to his home, so convenient for him – he would not have undertaken a course further away.

The study suggests that one of the reasons young people liked their vocational programmes was the lack of terminally examined content – there was a feeling that course work, whilst perceived as demanding, supported the development of study and research skills and enabled the young people to achieve better outcomes than an examined process.

In developing policy, this positive view of the assessment process may warrant further investigation, since the assessment processes of vocational awards have been subject to extensive criticism (eg Hayward et al., 2006; Bloomer, 1997; Ecclestone, 1997). However, it is notable that these comments were all made by young people on higher level (level 3) programmes, rather than those on lower level programmes, and were not reinforced by the younger students in the schools. In addition, there was also some evidence to support earlier work, suggesting that leisure identities are a fundamental aspect of overall identity formation for young people (eg Ball et al., 2000).

Finally, in developing future policy it is important to note that vocational education is perceived as valuable, important and significant in the lives of young people pursuing vocational education and training programmes. In developing policy there is also a need to consider the extent to which industry stakeholders may be encouraged to work with schools and colleges in developing further opportunities of a vocational nature which are of value to them in strengthening their future workforce and current organisation. The importance of vocational education and training to young people is drawn from their perception of its exchange value as a credential, and from the opportunities it is seen to offer to build self esteem and develop confidence. It is important to note that such programmes also provide the opportunity for a measure of success for young people who, particularly at lower levels, have often had little previous experience of success in the education system.

The vocational qualifications were largely perceived positively for reasons associated with the forms of learning which involved practical activities, and, for higher level students, for reasons around the forms of assessment which they regarded as easier to achieve, and as being a better preparation for the future, than traditional, examined programmes such as A Levels. Furthermore, all the young people in this study had a perception that the vocational programme they were undertaking was clearly related to the world outside and thus provided possibilities for employment and future careers. These perceptions were consistent across age groups, local environments and all subjects. From a policy perspective the evidence here points to a need to facilitate connectivity between schools, colleges and industry at a local level as the basis for moving from a position where IAG is focused on providing information to students about choices they can make, to one which takes seriously the fact that young people want to be challenged by gaining experience of different commercial and industrial environments, and creates grounds for informing their career choices.

CHAPTER 5:
RECOMMENDATIONS

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RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are structured around, and take cognisance of, the following issues which have emerged as themes from this study and preceding literature. These themes include social class, gender, parity of esteem, transition, assessment and identity formation. They are contextualised in terms of recommendations for policy and recommendations for future research and have been foregrounded by some more general recommendations which relate to aspects of contemporary 14-19 policy, particularly that concerned with IAG.

POLICY

In accord with the findings of this study the authors would like to make the following recommendations in terms of policy:

1. Policy makers should urgently address the imperative for an integrated model of 14-19 education which meets the needs of all young people and addresses some of the issues around parity of esteem. In doing so, they could usefully take cognisance of the comprehensive and constructive proposals made by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education (Pring et al., 2009, p. 206).

2. Policy makers across government departments should consider ways in which the profile and esteem of practical, craft-based courses and the occupations they lead to might be enhanced. This could include developments such as the integrated model of 14-19 education arising from recommendation (1), involvement of representatives from such occupations in school/college decision-making processes, or exploring media opportunities for raising the profile of such occupations in the public mind. Such opportunities might include anything from advertising to using characters in popular soap operas to raise the profile of a particular occupation.

3. Policy makers should re-examine the interplay between Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) policy and Department for Education (DfE) policy. Whilst there are clear distinctions to be made between education and industry, vocational education occupies a space between the two departments which is currently not sufficiently addressed by a policy which encourages further synergy between the two at a local level.

4. Policy makers must address the dislocations created by conflicting policies and the competitive education market place, which create tensions between the compulsory, post-compulsory and higher education phases of education.

5. Policy related to both Careers Education and Guidance (CEG) and Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) should be developed within the framework of a less technicist model, taking cognisance of the 'messiness' of the trajectories of many young people, particularly those on VET programmes. This could be achieved in a number of ways. For example, by avoiding the categorisation of young people, by recognising aspects of progression and development beyond a limited range of courses, and by providing clear and unambiguous guidance which clarifies potential career pathways.

6. CEG/IAG policy could make use of the work experience undertaken by young people as a means of informing future educational choices.

7. Policy makers should consider ways of creating more synergy and parity between compulsory phase and post-compulsory phase teachers to ensure that all vocational programmes are taught by tutors with appropriate experience and expertise. This study demonstrates that young people draw on the industrial experience of teachers to inform not only their understanding of the subject, but also their ideas and decisions about future courses and career options. This highlights the need for all teachers involved in the 14-19 agenda to have the necessary commercial or industrial expertise to facilitate this. Whilst, in general, this is the case in colleges, it is not always the case in schools.

8. Policy makers should re-consider current assessment regimes, which are designed around centralised outcome-based requirements. This re-examination should take cognisance of current literature in this area and of the value placed by young people on practical learning and continuous assessment demonstrated in this study.

9. Policy makers should re-consider the way in which VET is marketed. The young people in this study had seen no advertising for vocational courses. Adverts through the Sector Skills Councils, which use practising professionals to illustrate the opportunities and potential educational routes to specific occupations, could be helpful in attracting young people to particular occupational areas.

RESEARCH

The foregoing study, like many earlier studies, has served to illuminate the complexities of decision making and the need for further research which will focus specifically upon how decisions are made by particular individuals and groups when they opt for vocational programmes. The study opens further questions concerning the way this complex process of decision making mediates young people's understandings of their achievements, their own sense of community, and their dispositions to develop as young professionals within a variety of work-based settings. In summary, the study highlights the need for further research in the following areas:

1. *Class fractions:* Further research is needed to examine the impact of class fractions and the implications these may have for achievement, (gendered) choices and trajectories through vocational education.

2. *Classed and gendered stereotypes:* Further research is required to consider the impact of gendered and classed stereotypes in educational and employment choices made at 14+, with particular reference to the impact of social class on gendered dispositions.

3. *Decision making:* Further research should explore the under-researched area of decision making, choices and opportunities for young people who participate in the alternative curriculum and their trajectories through vocational education. This could only be explored through an extended, longitudinal study. Such a study could also draw comparisons between decision making at 14 and subsequently at 16+ and 18+.

4. *The influence of schools, teachers and families:* Further research is needed to explore the influence of schools, teachers and families in the decision-making process. This study suggests that these influences are more significant than those of careers advisers and services.

5. *Identity formation*: Further research into young people's developing identities is required which seeks to uncover the ways in which their dispositions and choices influence their transitions from school to work.
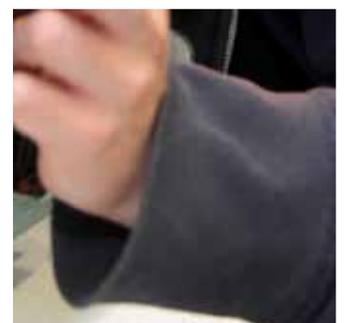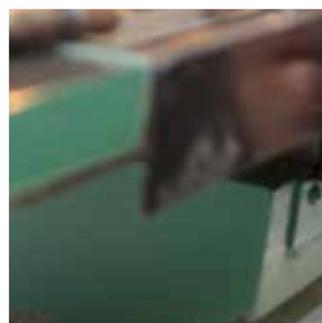
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GLOSSARY

BTEC   Business and Technical Certificate

CPVE   Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education

DES   Department of Education and Science

DFES   Department for Education and Skills

FE   Further education

GCSE   General Certificate of Secondary Education

GNVQ   General National Vocational Qualification

IAG   Information, advice and guidance

MA   Modern Apprenticeship

MSC   Manpower Services Commission

NEET   Not in Employment, education or training

NVQ   National Vocational Qualifications

TVEI   Technical and Vocational Education Initiative

VET   Vocational education and training

YOP   Youth Opportunities Programme

YTS   Youth Training Scheme