The Retention of Advanced Vocational Students at a College of Further Education: A Case Study

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Contents

4. Methodology

List of Tables and Charts in Chapter Five

List of Tables and Charts in Appendices

List of Abbreviations

AVCE   - Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education

BTEC   - Business and Technology Education Council

DES   - Department of Education and Science

DfEE   - Department for Education and Employment

DfES   - Department for Education and Skills

FE   - Further Education

FEDA   - Further Education Development Agency

FEFC   - Further Education Funding Council

GCSE   - General Certificate of Secondary Education

GNVQ   - General National Vocational Qualification

HE   - Higher Education

HMI   - Her Majesty's Inspectorate

ISR   - Individual Student Record

LSC   - Learning and Skills Council

LSDA   - Learning and Skills Development Agency

NAO   - National Audit Office

NVQ   - National Vocational Qualification

OFSTED   - Office for Standards in Education

RCU   - Responsive College Unit

TEC   - Training and Enterprise Council

UCAS   - Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Abstract

Focusing on first year Advanced Vocational students from the year 2000-2001 and drawing upon the Fairfield College experience, this thesis sets the case study within the context of existing research findings and engages with matters of current national interest as part of the wider debate about the retention of students within the post compulsory sector.

An introductory chapter focuses mainly on the local context, whilst in the following section issues and events that have arisen within the further education sector are discussed in some detail. Within Chapter Three consideration is given to existing literature and previous research, in order to elicit any relevant theory and in order to identify any appropriate models relating to student retention.

Moving on to the actual research undertaken at Fairfield College, Chapter Four focuses on 'methodology' and the research methods used. This includes comparative analysis and the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data from various sources. Relevant findings are presented in Chapter Five with the most significant influence on retention being the primacy of course choice.

A final chapter examines the various influences on withdrawal. Findings are considered within the developing national context and are strengthened, wherever possible, by the findings of previous research. It is concluded that influences on withdrawal relate to course choice and commitment which, in turn, appear to be affected by the culture of this highly successful College. Possibilities for further research are put forward including topics such as decision making, the status of the new vocational courses, student preferences for practical courses, differing college cultures and isolation on vocational courses.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 The Context

During the early nineties, many changes took place within the further education sector, especially with regard to funding and inspection frameworks. At the same time, increasing numbers of young people were participating in full time education and there was great concern about the 'wasting' of public funds. In particular, student 'drop out' or 'non completion' was and still is seen as a major problem. This, together with the development of performance tables and the *linking* of funding to achievement and retention, has resulted in many FE colleges having to pay more attention to the many reasons for non-achievement and 'drop out'.

During the academic year 2000-2001, a college of further education, henceforth referred to as 'Fairfield' College[1], was the subject of a case study. The research had as its main focus the 'retention of 16-19 year old Advanced Vocational students' and followed on from previous research at the college, which had resulted in an 'action plan' being designed and partially implemented in order to improve retention rates.

1.2 The College

The College, which has recently been awarded Beacon Status, is a large tertiary college situated in an area where over two thirds of the labour force is engaged in service activities and where in 1999 66% of 16 year olds stayed on in education or entered training (FEFC, 2001:2). Full time students attend the College not only from local areas but also from further afield and many travel

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[1] *Although it is possible that the true identity of the College might be recognised from any characteristics described in this thesis, the name 'Fairfield' has been used in place of the College's real name in order to provide anonymity.*

to the College by bus and remain there throughout the day. The College receives no additional funding for "widening participation".

At the College's main site approximately 3000 full time 16-19 year old students follow courses at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Levels. Advanced Level courses are divided between A levels and Advanced Vocational courses. A significant factor for this study is the level at which students are allowed to begin their studies. This is usually determined by their GCSE grades. For example, a student has to obtain at least four 'B' grades to study A levels and at least four 'C' grades to study at Advanced Vocational. A recent inspection report commended the strong commitment of the staff and summarised several other factors that were thought to have contributed to the quality of provision:

> the proportion of lessons judged to be good or outstanding is 12% above the national average. Student achievement rates are high on most courses. Attendance rates are above the national average. There are excellent and well co-ordinated systems for supporting learners (FEFC, 2001:1).

Whilst achievement rates at the College are high and a high proportion of non-vocational A Level students are retained successfully, the College has had some concerns about the retention of its vocational students. Therefore, in 1999 -2000, in an attempt to improve standards, the College employed a researcher in order to investigate 'drop-out' amongst the vocational student population.

1.3 The Research

Previous research at the College into the retention of *all* 16-19 year old vocational students had resulted in the creation of an action plan, which contained strategies aimed at reducing student 'drop-out'. Initially, therefore, the main focus of the newly commissioned research was to provide an evaluation of the implementation of this action plan.

However, whilst investigations were taking place during the early part of 2001, and *despite* the implementation of some of the strategies within the action plan, the College discovered that there was an unexpected increase in student numbers 'dropping out' from *Advanced* Vocational courses, such as Advanced Vocational A Levels (AVCEs), National Diplomas, the CACHE Diploma in Nursery Nursing and the Advanced Secretarial course. This sudden increase in 'drop-out' coincided with the introduction of Curriculum 2000 and it was thought that many of these students were enrolled on the new AVCEs, which had replaced the old Advanced GNVQs.

Therefore, in March 2001, the College indicated that they would like to see the research focusing on a group of 125 student 'leavers' from the first year *Advanced Vocational* courses, who left the College between 1st September 2000 and 31st March 2001. The following questions were raised:

- **Why have these students withdrawn from the College?**
- **Why have the recently introduced strategies failed these students?**
- **In what way is the College not meeting the needs of these students?**

Within the context of Fairfield College and its recently developed strategies, the research addressed these questions by investigating the reasons for withdrawal amongst these 'early leavers'. Fieldwork, including data collection and evaluation, took place at the College and whilst giving due consideration to any existing literature that was found, information, conclusions and recommendations were presented to the relevant managers there, together with a full technical written report.

1.4 The Researcher

Having worked in a large further education college for several years, mainly in the area of basic skills, cross college support and support for students with specific learning difficulties, the researcher has a professional interest in the

topic of 'retention', together with some personal experiences. The research project, which was a collaborative venture between the College and the awarding body for this MA (by research), has provided the researcher with a studentship opportunity, which allowed research to be undertaken for the Further Education College and also for academic purpose. With approval from the College, the data used for the study, which took place between 12th February 2001 and 30th June 2002, is used here, by the researcher, for the completion of an MA in Education (by research).

Chapter 2. The National Context

2.1 Introduction

The retention of further education vocational students is a complex topic that cannot be examined in isolation and issues such as recruitment, selection, achievement and support also need to be considered. In particular, the historical developments that have produced or resulted in the current 'system' can be described in some detail, not only to set the scene but also to illustrate the reasons why there is an increasing emphasis placed on the retention of students.

2.2 The Academic and Vocational Divide

The education system has certainly undergone many changes since 1944, when the Butler Act allowed for the expansion of education in England and Wales. However, reform has taken a long time and slow development with regard to participation rates and poor structures in terms of 'early selection' have been compared less than favourably with the education systems in European or other industrial countries. (Chitty, 1999:59; Edwards et al., 1997:169). Unlike Scotland, which has a more unified approach, England and Wales have always had academic and vocational pathways within the post compulsory sector. Historically, only minorities of 'able' students were considered suitable for an academic route, which might involve the pursuit of A Levels, a place at university and/or professional training. On the other hand, those considered 'less academically able' would proceed straight into the workforce, with a proportion of them receiving some kind of vocational training from bodies such as the City and Guilds of London Institute or the Royal Society of Arts (Tomlinson, 1997:3).

2.3 Early Days

Participation rates in post compulsory education in England and Wales have been an issue since as far back as 1959, when the Crowther Report

recommended that the number of students in further education should double by the end of the 70s. Perhaps to encourage the take up of provision it was also recommended that the leaving age should be raised to 16 for 'compulsory' education, together with an increase in external examinations at that age. However, the raising of the school leaving age did not take place until 1972 and significant expansion in further education did not begin until the 1980s, when Britain experienced a period of high unemployment, leaving many young people with little alternative but to remain in education.

As more students remained within the system, changes to the curriculum and to qualifications were required but these were fairly limited, especially with regard to the A Level, which the Conservative government wished to keep as the 'gold standard'. Following the Higginson Report in 1988, the optional Advanced Supplementary (equivalent to half an A Level) was introduced, but take up was very low (Tomlinson, 1997:5). Also in the late eighties, a more significant change was made to vocational qualifications. The much criticised competence and work based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were introduced, in order to fill the gap left as the craft apprenticeships all but disappeared.

2.4 More Expansion

During the nineties, in the midst of an economic recession, it was the state of the economy that prompted a more planned or strategic expansion with regard to both participation rates and also qualifications. It was recognised that much more investment would be required to educate and train the workforce in order to reverse the trend of low skills, low wages and low productivity (White Papers 1991 and 1994 in Gleeson,1996:513). New qualifications were needed to meet the growing numbers of students. However, policies implemented throughout the nineties had to pass through the consultation and planning stage and there were those who suggested radical reform. According to Chitty (1999:61), who argues for a *late selection, high participation* system, appropriate to the needs of the twenty-first century", the newly created

Institute for Public Policy research published their paper, *A British Baccalaureat*, which argued for an end to the divide between the academic and the vocational by proposing a single less narrowly focused advanced diploma. At an institutional level they also suggested increased collaboration and common curricula and qualifications.

However, it was not to be. The Conservatives decided to keep the two pathways and introduced the General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), which were to provide a pathway through college for the increasing numbers of 'non academic' students. According to Abbott, these new qualifications appear to have been influential with regard to expansion:

> General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) have been one of the educational success stories of recent years in terms of the large increase in the number of schools and colleges offering GNVQ courses, and the rapid growth of student numbers since pilot programmes were first introduced in 1992 (Abbott, 1997:617).

Nevertheless, their value or status has remained questionable. The Advanced Level GNVQ was intended to be the vocational equivalent to the 'A' Level but this has always been a controversial issue and the following observation raised by the Northern Examination and Assessment Board perhaps highlights the complexity of the situation:

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

2.5 New Labour

Participation rates continued to increase and by the end of 1997, 69% of sixteen-year-olds were in some form of post-compulsory education (Morris et al.,1999). One in three students were pursuing A Levels, whilst Advanced GNVQs had "secured a niche in the market more rapidly than their promoters initially expected" (Edwards et al. 1997:170). The same year saw the election

of a new government and 'New Labour' appeared keen to develop and fund further education, as can be concluded from the following passage by Baroness Blackstone:

> The government has made a clear commitment to support the development and expansion of the further education sector in the United Kingdom. It is a sector which is crucial to the economic and social well-being of the country, and we will continue to support it as it seeks to meet the challenges which lie ahead (Baroness Blackstone, Minister of State for Education and Employment in James, 1998 FEDA Report: 5).

According to Shaw (1999:137) western politicians have become increasingly aware of an urgent need "to reform their national education and training systems in line with new national and global socio-economic requirements" and it was probably this growing sense of urgency that prompted the new government to implement the many changes that they have introduced in what could be considered to be an extremely short space of time.

2.6 Curriculum 2000

With regard to qualification reform for 16-19 year olds, the seeds had already been sown by the previous Conservative government and Sir Ron Dearing had been given the somewhat complex task of finding a flexible approach, whilst still keeping the 'A' Level as a gold standard. (Chitty, 1999:64). His solution was to keep the academic and vocational routes separate, whilst giving them some kind of equality. It was recommended that the existing A Levels should be given more breadth, whilst advanced GNVQs should be developed for increased status, with a new name to match. In addition to this, a new national certificate, key skills and more staff development were proposed in order to complement the changes that were designed to "raise achievement, to reduce wastage and secure good value for money" (Dearing, 1996:135). Although there were still some concerns expressed about the academic and vocational divide, Dearing's Report was seen in a positive light by many and received "full cross-party support" according to Estelle Morris (DfES News Centre, 2001).

New Labour's election manifesto had suggested that "the focus must be on levelling up, not levelling down" (Labour Party Manifesto in Chitty 1999:3) and this concept was at the top of the agenda as they approached the task of developing a new qualifications framework. The consultation paper *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE, 1997) sought to raise standards, build upon the Dearing reform, and also on:

> how to implement our manifesto commitment for qualifications – to broaden A Levels and upgrade vocational qualifications, underpinning them with rigorous standards and key skills (DfEE, 1997:2).

Further deliberation led to the reform of qualifications that were to be introduced in September 2000 and the aptly named Curriculum 2000 included changes mainly for the A Level and Advanced Vocational qualifications. A Level study was given a broader, modular approach with the availability of new A/S Levels, whilst GNVQs were revamped and renamed – Vocational A Levels or AVCEs. This new vocational qualification was also to be modular and it was hoped that the new grading system and the more rigorous assessment regime would give it credibility for progression to Higher Education and would also help with *combining* academic and vocational studies. Indeed, it was thought that the new A/S choices would help to reduce drop out, by giving students more choice and flexibility.

Another development was the introduction of *compulsory* key skills. These qualifications, which were previously incorporated into the original GNVQ for some vocational students, were introduced as a *separate* qualification for *all* students, including the established BTEC National Diplomas.

2.7 Lifelong Learning and Widening Participation

With the publication of the Kennedy, Dearing and Fryer Reports (in Tight, 1998:473/485) and, coinciding with the election of New Labour in 1997, the

new (and current) concepts in post compulsory education have become those of 'lifelong learning' and 'widening participation'. According to *Creating Learning Cultures: Next steps in achieving the Learning Age* the former, may take place in either formal or informal settings:

> Lifelong learning ranges from the most highly formal and structured educational activities to the most informal and tentative explorations of understanding. Lifelong learning also quite properly encompasses many different Levels, purposes, contents, outcomes and motives for learning (DfEE, 1999).

From this rhetoric, the vision appears to be an idealistic one, with learning related to an individual's requirements. Additionally, some developments appear to be aimed at social cohesion. For example, "citizenship and community capacity building" is another topic addressed in *Creating Learning Cultures: Next Steps in achieving the Learning Age* (DfEE 1999). There also appears to be a connection between the promotion of lifelong learning and economic requirements:

> There is an increasing emphasis on lifelong learning as a major strand in an economic competitiveness discourse, which, in its crudest forms, assumes a simple equation between learning, skill and economic growth (Ball,1991; Dearing,1996; DfEE, 1998 in Hodkinson et al., 2000:187).

Progression to Higher Education is seen as a key priority, especially for those with a disadvantaged background (DfEE, 2000). In order to create economically viable lifelong learners, major expansion in the form of 'widening participation' has become the requirement, applying not only to the further *and* higher education sectors but also to work based training. For example, foundation and advanced modern apprenticeships are now available that can lead to a nationally recognised, high level qualification (NVQ Level 3). Moreover, a new two-year work based Foundation Degree will also be delivered by further education and higher education.

With an emphasis on equality of status between academic and vocational routes (including work-based learning) the sector has been flooded with many new developments. These are designed for increased participation and,

perhaps in order to reinforce the ideology behind the design of the new changes, new agencies have been created, and old ones have been renamed and rearmed, with an emphasis on 'learning and skills' rather than education or employment. The new Learning and Skills Council of England (LSC) (with its equivalent in Wales) is wholly responsible for the planning and funding of all post compulsory learning (not Higher Education). It replaces the national Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) as well as the local Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs).

Responsibility for the inspection of further education colleges has moved from the FEFC to the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and in the new era of 'widening participation' this regulatory body, together with the new Learning and Skills Council, appear to have a difficult task ahead. The major challenge will be to provide a catalyst for growth, whilst at the same time ensuring that public money is well spent and quality is maintained and enhanced.

2.8 Audit, Accountability and Retention

As participation rates increased, concern was expressed about 'value for money' with regard to the spending of public funds. The education of more young people was generally seen in a positive light, whilst lack of achievement, poor results or 'early leavers' were most definitely not. The term 'drop out', originally applied to university students who did not complete their courses, was now used in the further education sector and the retention of students and non-completion of courses became a serious financial issue.

According to Martinez (1995:2/3) there had been several early reports that had focused on performance in education, including the HMI report *Student Completion Rates* (DES, 1991 in Martinez, 1995:3). However, it was the publication of the two reports, *Measuring Up: performance indicators in further education* (Scottish Education Department, HM Inspectorate, 1992) and

12

Unfinished Business: Full time educational courses for 16-19 year olds (Audit Commision/Ofsted,1993) that highlighted the variations in performance between institutions and the need for change.

Poor performance was seen as a major problem that could be addressed by institutional 'accountability' and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 provided the necessary legislation to transform the inspection, funding and reporting frameworks. The Further Education Funding Councils of England and Wales were created to take on the responsibility of inspection and funding, whilst financial management was granted to individual colleges, which became 'incorporated' bodies.

As well as the creation of competition and 'market forces', institutional performance was *linked* to funding mechanisms that rewarded good performance and penalised poor. Consequently, the recruitment and the retention of students became significant factors in a 'numbers' game, in which "outcome based rather than process based considerations" are paramount (Gleeson,1996:524). Colleges were expected to be more efficient and, on describing these developments in 1995, Martinez (1995:3) proposed that we had seen "something of a revolution in perspectives on non-completion". Indeed, a year later one of Dearing's recommendations, under his section on removing barriers to achievement, was that:

> The Government departments, regulatory and awarding bodies, Further Education Funding Councils, FEDA and other appropriate bodies should further investigate reasons for non-completion of awards (including the influence of external factors such as financial pressures, employment circumstances, personal problems, and the quality of the learning experience). They should improve the reliability of information on completion and destination of all leavers (Dearing,1996:151).

A similar theme continued in the consultative document *Qualifying for Success*:

> All too many young people drop out of education or training, without any evidence of their achievements or failing to reach their full potential (DfEE,1997:4).

Local firms and even multinationals, were also concerned about staying on rates (James,1998:17) and, as numbers were still rising and targets and 'failures' were made more explicit, real concern was expressed about:

> the amount of resources devoted to enrolling on courses people who ultimately do not achieve any level of certified outcome (Fielding et al.,1998:487).

This was compounded by the fact that there were some colleges with "persistent problems of low achievement and retention rates" (Green paper, *The Financial Times* 25/02/98) and, as there were cost implications for the government's intended 'widening participation' agenda, standards were to come under the spotlight yet again:

> A cross party committee of MPs expresses alarm today over standards in further education colleges, which will be among the main beneficiaries of the Government's rise in education spending .... the MPs' report comes as the Government prepares to invest heavily in the 443 further education and sixth form colleges in England. They are expected to create more than 400,000 additional student places by 2002 (O'Leary, 1998, *The Times* 7th Aug).

With regard to *achievement* rates, 'value added tables' have been developed for A Level courses, "proving value for money to an external audience and improving performance" according to some (Barnard et.al.1998:4). Furthermore, standards have recently been set from a slightly different angle, with the creation and promotion of 'best practice'. Beacon awards are now presented or Beacon status is granted to successful 'well managed' colleges and, in the same vein, the first sixteen Centres of Vocational Excellence were announced quite recently (DfES, 2001)

2.9 Alternative Approaches

On a more personal level, financial support for students has been considered and, with regard to younger students, pilot schemes are currently underway which provide some students with a means tested education maintenance allowance, intended to encourage more young people to "stay on in learning

beyond 16". (DfEE, 2001). Additionally, a change or extension to the career service has been implemented, with the creation of a new youth support service operating under the name 'Connexions'. (*Guardian*, June 30th 1999). The new service, which will apply only to students in England, aims to support disadvantaged students' or 'potential drop outs' by providing them with personal advisers and is currently being piloted in several areas.

In recent years, there have been changes in funding mechanisms for support within colleges, although there appears to be no consistency of approach. According to Barwuah et.al. (1997:9) the methods used for calculating additional support claims vary, as different interpretations are placed on the FEFC guidelines. In the drive to 'widen participation', extra funds are available for "recruiting students from designated deprived areas" (*Guardian*, May 8th 2001). However, the recruitment of disadvantaged students appears to be at odds with 'financial survival' at the institutional level and there is some evidence that there is funding pressure on colleges to select only those students who will enhance retention and achievement rates (McDonald et al., 2000:377). Notably, this is an issue that will be considered in later chapters of this thesis.

2.10 Drop-out, Retention and Retention Rates

The whole issue of 'retention' and retention rates is somewhat complex due to the differing definitions that exist. When looking at student drop-out, withdrawal, early leaving or non-completion, it is often the *individual* students that spring to mind, i.e. whether they have left in the first few days, the first few weeks or months or even after completion of a full year. Most of the terms used, when applied to individuals, appear to indicate some kind of 'failure' on their part, even if they have not 'dropped-out' of education altogether but have moved on to another institution or have even moved into employment with training. Martinez (1995:4), discusses these terms in an early review of 'retention' literature. He suggests that in the further education sector "gaining

employment does not constitute progression and/or a positive outcome from the learning programme", whilst another opinion highlights the stress placed on statistics, perhaps at the expense of a truer picture:

> Retention exists as a statistic in its own right, but we should always remember it summarises events in peoples' lives (Kenwright,1997:17).

Martinez (1995:4) suggests that the word 'retention' is synonymous with completion and persistence. However, again, the latter word suggests some kind of internal quality that an individual student might possess.

From a college perspective retention could perhaps be more simply defined as keeping students at college to complete their courses or more precisely their qualifications. In fact, this is the stance taken when performance indicators are compiled as often students do not 'drop out' completely but drop one or more of their qualification aims. Therefore, the benchmarking performance indicators published by the Funding Councils reflect retention and achievement in terms of individual qualifications or programmes of study that a student completes.

The national benchmarking data, which is reliant upon the individual student records (ISR) being provided by institutions, does allow the overall performance of the sector to be considered. It also highlights variations between types of colleges. However, the data has some limitations such as:

- **local comparisons are difficult if not impossible**
- **by the time it gets to publication the data is quite old especially as it is the completion of courses that is considered.**
- **if a student withdraws from a qualification before the first 'census' date of 1st November that qualification is never included in the statistics.**
- **if a student withdraws from a college before the first 'census' date of 1st November none of that student's qualifications are included in the statistics.**

According to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)(2001:2/4), the variation in achievement between colleges is becoming smaller as colleges with the lowest levels of achievement rates show the highest level of improvement. However, the overall mean *retention* rates in Further Education have remained stable at around 79% for long qualifications (over 24 weeks) between 1997/98 and 1999/2000 (LSC 2001:2-4). With regard to Level Three qualifications for 16-18 year olds, the latest mean figure was 78% (see Figure 1, Appendix 1). A variety of qualifications and colleges are included, which perhaps explains the fairly large *range* from 72% - 83% (LSC 2001:15).

2.11 'In-Year' Retention Data

Statistical first releases and performance indicators are provided by the funding councils three times a year and the 'Full Year Statistical First Release' gives estimates of 'in-year' retention. This shows counts of enrolments on to qualifications for a *particular college year* and the data is presented in terms of the numbers expecting to complete their qualification. The latest publication from the LSC (2001) containing statistical information up to and including 1999/2000 suggests that 85.6% of full time full-year students had completed a qualification or were continuing on it at the end of 1999/2000 (all ages, see Figure 2, Appendix 2). This 'in-year' retention figure is higher than the aforementioned benchmarking average of 79%, which may be due to the inclusion of part-time courses within the benchmarking statistics or the exclusion of any qualification aims which students have abandoned during previous years.

Other breakdowns are also given. For 1998/1999 and 1999/2000 'in-year' retention was higher at sixth form colleges at over 92% as opposed to a rate of approximately 85% at general and tertiary colleges (see Figure 3, Appendix 3). For the same years, but at course level rather than college Level, A Level courses had a higher retention rate at over 90% than the GNVQ rate of approximately 86% (see Figure 2, Appendix 2).

17

2.12 Destinations

The full year statistical first release gives information with regard to student destination, although as can be seen from Figure 4, Appendix 4, almost 60% of destinations were unknown in 1999/2000. Therefore, it would seem wise not to make any inferences from the information that is available. Although specific to progression to HE, UCAS statistics appear to be more comprehensive and a comparison can be made between A Level and GNVQ students. According to their figures (see Figure 5, Appendix 5) there have been increasing numbers of GNVQ students applying for and being accepted onto HE courses. From 1996 to 2000 A Level 'accepts' have increased from approximately 160000 to 180000 whilst GNVQ numbers have been rising steadily from approximately 13000 to 25000.

2.13 Conclusions

There is no doubt that the FE sector has undergone great change, particularly with regard to the massive increase in the numbers of participating students. It appears that the drive for economic advantage has fuelled this growth which, in turn, has resulted in changes to the curriculum. However, the vocational and academic divide has remained for many years with new vocational qualifications created for those considered less 'academic'.

In more recent times, alongside the developing concepts of widening participation and lifelong learning, a New Curriculum for the year 2000 has been introduced, with the intention of providing more breadth, choice, flexibility and, notably, equality for students. However, New Labour were unwilling to abandon the Conservative's plans to retain the much regarded 'A Level'. Therefore, some doubt still remains as to whether 'parity of esteem' between the academic and vocational pathways has been or will ever be achieved.

These developments in the FE sector, as well as similar developments in other sectors, have resulted in increased costs to the taxpayer. Therefore, value for money has become an important issue that has resulted in the growth of an audit culture in which accountability and performance at many levels are much scrutinised. Retention is one of the factors taken into account with regard to the funding of institutions and this is made complex due to the various definitions of withdrawal. Whilst there is a focus on the *students*, especially in relation to widening participation and lifelong learning, there is also a focus on the completion or non-completion of individual qualifications and the resources used to achieve these ultimate goals. Nevertheless, within the new audit culture, FE colleges have had to accept and implement many structural and organisational changes and, as highlighted in the following section, retention has become a key issue not only for managers but also for researchers.

Chapter 3. A Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

Previous research or literature regarding the retention of FE students can be difficult to find. As pointed out in a recent Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) report (Martinez, 2001a), in comparison with schools, the post-compulsory sector is relatively under researched. Most of the *national* 'retention' research is easily accessible to the public and this, usually funded by national agencies, tends to be either survey based or developmental in approach. At the other extreme, *single college* studies are often part of institutional or collaborative 'action research' or are sometimes completed as part of academic studies by practitioners and, according to Martinez (2001a:1), much of this research is not in the public domain.

Within this chapter reference is made to empirically based research, together with other literature which draws upon existing bodies of work. Additionally, despite the existence of different education systems, some transatlantic and Higher Education literature is considered. It is significant to note that literature from other sectors can also be difficult to find and according to Yorke (1999), who is concerned with retention in the HE sector, there is still little evidence available. However, research from other sectors appears to have developed at a greater pace. This can be found mainly within the post 1995 section of this chapter helping to illustrate the variety and complexity of 'retention' issues, as well as demonstrating the development of various concepts.

Based mainly on evidence provided by Martinez (1995), a brief outline of the situation in the UK before the mid-nineties is first presented. At this earlier time, before the incorporation of colleges, the collection of data from students was under-developed and there was much emphasis on the withdrawn student rather than *all* students. Additionally, it appears that there was a culture of 'blame' aimed very much at these withdrawn students.

Following incorporation in 1992, there was an emerging belief that colleges themselves could be in some way responsible for 'early withdrawal' or 'non-completion' of courses. The development of an audit culture together with performance indicators led to an increased interest in the FE sector, which was obliged to take retention more seriously. Consequently, in response to the needs of the sector, and although still fairly scarce, an increasing amount of literature *has* emerged since the mid-nineties and this forms the main part of this chapter. The work of Martinez appears to dominate FE research in this area. Nevertheless, there have been several national or large-scale surveys undertaken or commissioned by various bodies or agencies. Moreover, in 2001 the National Audit Office (NAO) undertook yet another project on retention and achievement.

The retention picture emerges as diverse and complex, with much additional discussion emerging from smaller projects. Empirical studies raise and emphasise a variety of factors but to date no single clear consensus has emerged. However, there has been a move away from merely blaming the student to the identification of a range of internal and external factors, with some under the control of the institution. This is a situation also apparent in *the actual take-up* of post-16 options according to a literature review by Brooks (1998) which covers a wide range of topics relevant to the issue of young people's choices at sixteen. Whilst acknowledging "interaction", her comprehensive review summarises levels of influences including: the system level, the local level and the individual level, in which social class, gender, ethnicity and subcultures are found.

Whilst most researchers into 'retention' issues note the complexities of the situation, individual factors considered to influence withdrawal are still examined, sometimes with great difficulty, and possibly in an *attempt* to break down the 'bigger picture'. Whilst these factors do not fit neatly into clear categories, this chapter endeavours to provide some structure to the literature.

21

Finally, before conclusions are drawn, the previous research undertaken at Fairfield College is also considered.

3.2 Pre-1995

Before the incorporation of FE colleges and the subsequent changes in the funding and inspection framework, there was little literature available about the *retention* of further education students in the UK. On reviewing the evidence for The Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), Martinez, gives examples of "theoretical model building" (Gunny, 1987; Whittle, 1988; Kember, 1990 in Martinez 1995:2) or "personal and deeply felt accounts based upon individual experiences but lacking any substantial survey background" (Hibbert 1978, Purcell 1991 in Martinez, 1995:2). Despite this previous research having been undertaken without the driving force of 'accountability' and the possibility that it may have contributed to further development, Martinez appears to dismiss these studies on the following grounds:

> At the risk of over generalisation, what work saw the light of day before the publication of *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission / Ofsted 1993) did not, in the main, serve as a guide or prompt action (Martinez, 1995:2).

Although providing valuable evidence of how the 'situation' was perceived at that time, one significant problem with pre-incorporation research is that it often 'postulates' that drop out is outside the control of the institution. For example, according to Gunny (1987) there is no easy solution to wastage, which is thought "to be due more to socio-economic forces than to college inefficiency". This also appears to have been the approach of many government reports, which:

> drew attention to the limiting factors which impacted on the performance of the education system: home background, social class and poverty (CACE 1954, and 1959, DES/CLEA 1980 in Martinez, 1995:2/3).

With regard to data collection methods that were used around this time, Martinez (1995:4) also uses unpublished empirical research to highlight significant weaknesses. There appears to have been an "exclusive focus" on early leavers, with little attention paid to the attitudes and experiences of students who had not withdrawn (Martinez,1995:4). Seemingly, the DES/Welsh Office recommended model (DES/WO, 1987 in Martinez,1995), often used by many colleges to record details of 'leavers' only sought one reason for withdrawal and, in all likelihood, a member of staff would have 'estimated' this. Consequently, the reason would in all probability have been attributed to the student rather than to the course or college.

In order to emphasise this point Martinez offers a contrasting piece of research (Cardy, 1994 in Martinez, 1995: 4-5), that uses open-ended direct survey methodology, in which students themselves were asked to give two reasons for withdrawal. This study certainly demonstrated the emerging complexity of 'withdrawal':

> Decisions to leave were caused by a number of often interrelated factors. Many of the withdrawals were prompted by the interplay between personal and course related reasons (Cardy,1994 in Martinez,1995:5).

Seven other surveys (Bale, 1990; DES, 1991; BTEC, 1993; FEU, 1994a; Cass, 1994; CSET, 1994; FEU, 1994c in Martinez, 1995), some of which allow for multiple responses, are criticised for lack of rigour, researcher bias or for denying students an opportunity to identify problem areas (Martinez,1995:5-7). Nevertheless, from these surveys Martinez identifies three main causes or reasons for withdrawal:

- · employment related reasons
- programme related reasons
- family, health and finance-related reasons

(Martinez, 1995:6)

3.3 Post-1995

3.3.1 Some National or Multi-college Studies

In the late nineties, several large-scale studies were undertaken within the FE sector and one leading market research study was that of the Responsive College Unit (RCU) (1998). This totally quantitative study, which highlighted the importance of a clear induction programme, had an unusual approach with regard to the collection of data from students. Questionnaires were completed at the beginning of their courses and, therefore, *before* any impact from college could influence responses. Although it is acknowledged within their report that retention rates *are* a product of internal and external factors, this change from the more usual practice of chasing up 'withdrawn' students produced some valuable data. One of the most significant and clearest findings from this study is that:

> Even at the start of a course, many students can predict their own non-completion (RCU, 1998:39).

Another large study from the late nineties also worthy of consideration was that sponsored by the North Yorkshire Training and Enterprise Council (Kenwright, 1997;1997a). This regional, collaborative and longitudinal three-year project involved the development and testing of strategies to improve retention. At around the same time, Martinez and Munday (1998) also conducted a large-scale study, which involved over 8500 students completing questionnaires and was entitled, '*9,000 Voices: student persistence and drop out in further education.* Whilst being predominantly survey based, the strength of this study was that thirty-one mainly urban colleges were also examined on a highly qualitative 'consultancy' basis. In addition to examining college records, data was obtained from students, staff and management, with the evidence triangulated in order to provide a "reasonable" analysis at a *local* level according to the researchers.

With projects of this magnitude methodological difficulties were perhaps inevitable. Kenwright, reporting on the North Yorkshire Study, discusses problems experienced with college records and, in particular, the recording of reasons for drop out:

> It would appear that college records tend to overemphasis secondary reasons, while underestimating major reasons (Kenwright, 1997:30/31).

Likewise, Martinez and Munday (1998) report that management information systems often failed to supply data and that this was compounded by inadequacies identified in data collected from the FEFC, a problem recently acknowledged by the National Audit Office (2001). Within Martinez and Munday's project, although the main focus was on full time younger students, some colleges were allowed to sample other groups. Similarly, within the RCU survey, some sixth forms were allowed to define their own samples (RCU,1998).

Another problem or weakness that arose for Martinez and Munday (1998), and also for Barwuah et al. (1997:68) in a smaller but similar survey, was that of low responses. Contacting withdrawn students proved difficult and resulted in more information being gathered from 'completing' students, a rather ironic situation considering that this latter group of students had often been ignored in the past. Low response rates from withdrawn students prevented any firm conclusions being drawn at 'course' level (Barwuah et al.,1997:94). However, according to the RCU (1998), and in complete contrast to this, course specific problems were difficult to identify due to the massive size of their study. Kenwright, whilst reporting a good response rate, also expresses much concern with regard to variations and the apparent difficulty that this causes:

> It should also be noted that similar courses and qualification aims vary in content and style, as well as delivery and recruitment, between colleges. This makes it difficult to produce any general strategy to improve retention at a stroke (Kenwright, 1997a: 34).

25

Similarly, the problems encountered when striving to draw any firm conclusions at a *national* level were recognised within Martinez and Munday's (1998) survey. On evaluating his own research in a later publication, Martinez suggests that whilst an attempt was made to identify patterns of drop out, any generic trends that were identified did not really add to existing knowledge (Martinez et al., 1998:113). Nevertheless, as recognised by the researchers themselves, (Martinez, 1996; Martinez and Munday 1998) the 'wide variation' between colleges *is* an important discovery itself.

This was recently recognised by the NAO (2001) who, despite the apparent difficulties of researching retention at a national level, have recently undertaken a major project in which it was found that achievement rates have improved whilst retention rates have not. Within their national study a third of all colleges were surveyed and eight were visited. Useful information or data was also obtained from other sources. For example, much quantitative data was made available from the funding agencies and both quantitative and qualitative data was also examined from previous research projects.

3.3.2 Course/College Variations and Ability

At institutional level there is a recognised need to examine retention and achievement on separate courses, often within the context of target setting. An early American author Toy (in Noel et al.1985) highlights a driving force within many institutions:

> The highest priority will be given to those tasks perceived to carry the greatest weight in the reward system. To make retention a serious matter at any institution, retention related activities requiring faculty input will thus have to be given a degree of prominence in the decision-making processes for tenure, promotion, and salary increases (Toy, in Noel et al. 1985:399-400).

However, according to Fielding et al., (1998) using individual qualifications for performance indicators can be misleading:

> It is not unusual for a league table position of an institution based on entrants' average grades or points scores to be inflated by the presence of a number of high quality students pursuing four or even five A Levels with high grades in all (Fielding et.al. 1998:495).

Although focusing solely on 'academic' A Levels and the *cost-effectiveness* of 16-19 colleges, their study raises the importance of distinguishing between course enrolment loss and student loss. They found that most dropouts were *full* rather than partial dropouts, meaning that the students had left the college rather than just 'dropping' some qualifications. Fielding et al. (1998) argue, that the propensity to 'full' dropout pertains much more to the individual's decision about education than about particular classes, by which they mean individual subjects studied. Using the Audit Commission's 1993 findings to lend weight to their findings, Fielding et.al.(1998) further conclude that students' prior attainment at GCSE is a major explanation of the rate of dropout and is more important than effects that may be attributable to individual colleges. More recently, the NAO (2001) also notes an apparent lack of variation between subjects. Furthermore, their recent report highlights differences found between *levels* of courses, which might suggest that ability is a key issue:

> Retention rates are generally higher for courses leading to higher level qualifications but there are no marked differences between subjects studied (NAO, 2001:11).

With regard to 'level', several studies have focused specifically on *vocational* courses and having the ability to cope with the demands of GNVQs is an issue raised by some (Myers, 1997; Rowland, 1997). One valuable and specific project, (Davies et al.,1998) undertaken for FEDA on behalf of the DfEE, examined the factors involved in student withdrawal from intermediate or advanced GNVQs. The project leader Davies (1997:28) suggests that variation by level was accounted for mainly by the relationship between successful completion and ability. Also, he suggests that the workload involved in producing the portfolio evidence for GNVQs is the main cause of drop out (Davies, 1997:31). However, in a later study the impact of paid employment is also considered:

> Whilst engagement in work for a limited number of hours each week (up to 10) does not appear to have any great negative impact...beyond this level there is a strong negative correlation between hours worked and examination grades (Davies 1999).

In addition to linking study difficulties with the demands of part-time work, Davies et al. (1998:3), reporting on the FEDA study, conclude that retention and achievement *are* linked to prior GCSE attainment. They also argue that rates of dropout and unsuccessful completion on GNVQ courses vary considerably within and between centres in ways that cannot be explained by differences in student intake. As supported by the aforementioned national studies, there is a suggestion that there are factors affecting retention at the institutional level and, indeed, students and sometimes tutors (Barwuah, 1997:11) refer to these. In Kenwright's (1997) study, students' main criticisms, apart from concerns with course content, were with teaching, tutor advice & learning support. Similar factors also arise within a recent literature review for the DfEE:

> The research suggested that students' withdrawal from further education courses were primarily related to concern about course content and timing, teaching quality and social relationships (Morris et al., 1999).

Furthermore, the National Audit Office report that:

> Colleges with higher inspection grades for their curriculum areas (representing better teaching and materials) had higher retention rates (NAO, 2001:12).

3.3.3 Socio-economic and Demographic Aspects

In contrast to earlier findings and beliefs, there is now some evidence to show that socio-demographic factors are not so crucial. For example, the RCU (1988) found that the more easily measured factors of travel and gender were not significant. The one exception to this was with regard to gender when males or females were a minority in specific programme areas. The NAO (2001:11) reports that gender and ethnicity are not significant and in a study focusing on vocational students in Northern Ireland, Adamson and McLeavy (2000) found no evidence to suggest that pre-entry characteristics have any influence on persistence or withdrawal. Davies (1999a:8) although focusing on

'finance' rather than social class also found little in the way of demographic differences between two groups of students that would allow for 'at risk' students to be identified at enrolment.

With regard to finance, there appears to have been conflicting evidence since 1995 as to whether students give up further education due to any financial hardship. Despite no comparisons being made between withdrawn and completing students, a study by Callender (1999 in Davies, 1999a) suggests that finance was an issue for many students. Furthermore, according to Kenwright, persisting students are more likely to have finance from a job or money from parents (Kenwright, 1997). However, following a survey at a college with large numbers of students from poor family backgrounds, Davies (1999 & 1999a), argues that earning money in the UK, whilst studying full-time, is used to maintain a preferred life style rather than as a result of any financial deprivation.

> There is an increasing range of evidence to suggest that young people in the UK are significantly more economically active than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, including huge percentages in (supposedly) full-time education who devote lengthy periods each week to paid employment (Davies, 1999:2/3).

Davies (1999a) does acknowledge that some financial hardship may exist and, indeed, the National Audit Office highlight the fact that colleges with higher proportions of students from deprived areas have lower retention rates (NAO, 2001:12). However, according to Davies (1999a) withdrawn students who participated in his recent study were concerned with aspects such as teaching, the course or administration and were no more concerned about financial hardship, financial assistance and conflict between work and study than any other students. He argues that due to the large differences between achievement and retention in similar colleges in similar areas of deprivation, the major influences must be at college level:

> Although financial difficulties are a common trigger of student drop out, in general withdrawal appears to result only in cases where students have

doubts that they are on the right course, are concerned about the quality of the teaching and are unhappy with the support they are receiving for progression. Where students are fully satisfied in these areas they appear to be prepared to ride out the financial problem and to stay the course successfully (Davies, 1999a:10/11).

3.3.4 The Value of the Course

With reference to the labour market, it has been suggested that the perceived benefits of a full-time job may be more appealing than the costs of attending an educational institution (Mallette & Cabrera, 1991 in Adamson & McLeavy, 2000:549). Similarly, the cost implication of progression to HE in the UK is a related factor raised by both FE and HE researchers:

> The financial implications of progressing to HE and scepticism about the market value of a degree cause some students on advanced-level courses to leave (Barwuagh et al., 1997:11).

> The difficulties are not only to be found at the point of choice of university but in assessing the costs and benefits of higher education in a fluid labour market (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998:330).

Similarly, the *relevance* of the course to the world of work is thought to be critical (Sprandel, in Noel et al.,1985:317) and according to some researchers (Cope & Hannah, 1975; Sakar, 1993) leaving college is thought to be a positive move for some students:

> Non-completion may be a positive decision taken by students, which may be indicative of a mismatch between their perceived needs and their particular educational programme (Adamson and McLeavy, 2000:550).

The term 'dropout' together with its negative connotations is questioned by most authors with the suggestion that students do not always drop out of 'education' but sometimes transfer to other institutions or courses, either immediately or at some later time in their lives. An alternative term such as 'stop out' (Cope & Hannah, 1975; Sarkar, 1993) is put forward for describing this type of student. Tinto, who rightly differentiates between voluntary leavers

30

and forced leavers, even challenges the formality of some educational systems:

> Perhaps the unrestricted use of the term dropout in higher education reflects our own underlying belief that the only proper place to acquire education is within the formal boundaries of the higher educational system and that other forms of learning are less desirable (Tinto in Noel et.al. :42).

Within Page's (1996) single college study, conducted in the UK at a FE college, more specific terms are suggested. With the exception of 'family relationships' and what Page describes as a 'true drop out', (i.e. the life crisis drop-out due to accident, ill health or misfortune) three new types of dropout are identified, which are suggestive of individual students making decisions based on what is 'available' in the 'market place'. These new 'types' are the 'opportunist' drop out who has nothing better to do, the 'early drop' out who is on the wrong course and the 'consumer' drop out who leaves when skills are acquired.

With regard to funding and performance issues, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001:117) suggest that English policy assumes that retention and qualification achievement rates are appropriate measures of learning and educational provision. Moreover, the quality of the *process* and the value of learning whilst at college should be considered according to some. For example, an American author, Noel (1985), suggests the need for colleges to focus more upon 'competencies' learned and the students' personal growth and development. Similarly, with a focus on vocational students and provision, Adamson and McLeavy recommend partial accreditation and flexibility:

> There would appear to be both a functional and justifiable rationale for accrediting students who partially complete: for example, those students who leave college to take advantage of an employment opportunity—flexible provision and partial accreditation could also be conceptualised within and contribute to the 'widening participation' perspective (Adamson and McLeavy, 2000:550).

With regard to the issue of 'process' within a specific level of course, Davies et.al. (1998) highlight what they consider to be positive approaches by staff and students and the possible benefits of a GNVQ experience:

> Even over a third of the non-completers and unsuccessful completers were engaged in further study or training and under a quarter were unemployed. GNVQs therefore did appear to lead to progression, and to convey some added value even to those who did not gain the full award (Davies et al.,1998:26).

On the other hand, Davies (1997) points out that student experience does not always match expectation and that "educational aspiration" and "clarity about future intentions" are significant factors on GNVQ courses. Other researchers raise concerns, too. For example, from a management standpoint, Myers (1997) describes some staff antipathy towards GNVQs. Moreover, Rowland (1997) considers parental attitudes as to the value of these courses, which could have some influence on retention if the findings of Davies et.al. (1998) are considered:

> Negative attitudes about the quality of the course are one of the best early indications of students 'at risk' of withdrawal (Davies et.al., 1998:4).

3.3.5 Choice and Selection

Davies (1997:31) suggests *attracting* more able students and improving the design and delivery of the courses, in order to improve the status of GNVQs. Myers (1997), within his unpublished dissertation, highlights alternative but not dissimilar solutions. He describes the advantages of converting what he describes as "marginal" (at risk) students into non-marginal students or even reducing the numbers of these students. The disadvantage of this 'selective' approach at enrolment is considered in the context of the funding situation. Myers recognises that this needs to be balanced against the risk of low student numbers overall and, consequently, the resultant lack of funding. This dilemma is also recognised by Davies et al. (1998), who point out that financial

pressure to recruit may conflict with student needs. Similarly, faced with the specific task of raising the volume of students, the recent Welsh development project highlights the need for a review of the current funding methodology for post-16 education, with a suggestion that retention issues should be considered within the context of widening participation (Overton et al.,2001:46/52).

Across the Atlantic, and as far back as 1975, the selection of students and self-selection into a college and programme of a student's own choice were important issues for Cope and Hannah (1975). Similarly, the students' vocational identity, career goals or a thwarted career choice due to selective admissions standards were issues for Gordon (in Noel et al.,1985:134). More recently, problems with recruitment and selection have been recognised within the British HE sector. For example, although response rates were low, data from an interesting qualitative case study by Ozga and Sukhnandan allows them not only to highlight the *changing* context of HE in the UK, but perhaps more importantly the market place in which this is situated. In addition to recognising the resultant practice of selection they also raise the important issue of 'choice' for students.

> Moving to a mass system within a managed market has encouraged institutions to adopt highly developed promotional strategies. This has produced some contradictory messages for consumers, and requires considerable sophistication in the calculation of best choice by the student... the strength of the market position sustains a continuity of practice that ensures compatibility through selection (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998:330/331).

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) argue for the reform of the process of choice, as they describe the proactive choices made by some students in comparison with the reactive choices of others. With regard to retention, they consider finance, academic relations and social experiences to be secondary factors, whilst the main drivers are thought to be whether the students expectations are met and whether they obtain a preferred choice (often affected by selection procedures).

With regard to making choices, it appears that lack of information and guidance in FE is a similar problem. For example, the RCU (1988) concludes that lack of pre-course information and late application (linked with lack of information) affects student retention. Moreover, even from a teacher perspective, poor student guidance and choice of courses are identified as leading to withdrawal for GNVQ students and significantly more so than for A Level students (Sharp, 2001).

3.3.6 Motivation

Motivation, a complex topic in itself, is obviously a key issue, if examining withdrawal from the student perspective. In a DfEE literature review focusing on young people's attitudes towards education, employment and training Morris (et al.1999) conclude that "there are a number of levers that appear to be successful in creating positive attitudes to education". As in previous studies (Fielding et al., 1998; Audit Commission, 1993), prior achievement was found to be an important factor but other *influences* were also identified:

> Attainment at 16 appeared to be the strongest predictor of staying-on rates, but these were also influenced by sex, ethnicity and social class as well as the nature of the wider economic and education system (Morris et al.1999).

With regard to previous FE research, Barwauh et al. (1997:94) argue that with regard to younger students, the most significant reasons for leaving are motivation and commitment, with self-esteem and confidence being a requirement for success. Kenwright (1997) is more specific and links motivation with pleasing parents and progression aims or lack of them. More recently, lack of motivation and commitment from FE students is addressed within Bloomer and Hodkinson's impressive four-year longitudinal study, in which they examined 50 students' 'learning careers'. (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997,1999). This highly valuable and qualitative study looked at transition from secondary school, in addition to associated factors such as perceived student

need, student choices, status, career plans, student strategies and retention. Bloomer and Hodkinson, who appear to have taken a 'holistic' approach with each of their *individual* participants, recognise the importance of this and argue that:

> Different theoretical stances afford different insights but they also conceal others (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999:13).

Similar views are also found within the HE literature. For example, Walker (1999) discusses the psychological and sociological theories of motivation and argues that these depend partly upon the viewpoint on which they are based. (Walker 1999:230). The longitudinal study of Walker (1999) focused on students in a pre-university summer school, which aimed to widen access for non-traditional students. With a reasonably well defined sample of students it was presumed that:

> Successful students could not have been predicted from the commencement of the study based on background information such as previous qualification, family tradition of higher education or initial aspirations (Walker,1999:217).

Finance, in this instance, was found to be a critical *contributory* factor but Walker concludes that the *main* differences between completers and non-completers lay in their attitude and motivation-personality, linked with integration and commitment:

> Drop-out/continuing behaviour is closely related to motivation and integration into the institution as well as commitment to the goal of graduation (Walker, 1999:217).

Although not actually determining any attitudinal and behavioural characteristics, possibly due to the 'individual' nature of the problem, Walker (1999:231) recommends these as a basis for identifying students at risk and for taking positive action within the academic environment. Drawing upon qualitative data Mackie (2001), another HE researcher addresses a closely associated theme and illustrates the differences in levels of *commitment* to the

university experience. Taking this one step further it is argued that levels of perceived control over events and alienation are related factors that need to be considered:

> They actively consider alternatives to staying as it is the perception of leavers that their problems can not be resolved (Mackie, 2001:271).

Mackie (2001) suggests that all students arrive with the same level of commitment and without attaching any blame to the student states:

> We succeed, for some, in turning this 'expectant hope' into 'fears realized' and may have failed to exploit the potential within that initial commitment (Mackie, 2001:275).

3.3.7 Complexities

By looking at *individual* experiences Hodkinson and Bloomer (1997,1999) were very effective in highlighting the complexity and variety of student experiences in FE. At a later date, using the rich data available from their study, key questions were raised about what the categories of completion and drop out actually mean. The difficulty in defining drop out was stressed, as was the importance of focusing on the *students* rather than their individual courses (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001:117).

> The causes of dropping out are shown to be much more complex than many contemporary studies claim, and policies imply...Current policy and funding practices assume that many of the causes of non-completion lie within college and control influence...we argue that non-completion is best understood as involving complex interactions between college provision and external factors. The balance and relationship between the two varies considerably from person to person and even from place to place and time to time, in ways that are partly idiosyncratic (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001:133/134).

The complexity of the situation and the existence of multiple factors or influences are readily acknowledged within most of the literature. This has become a key issue in recent times, especially within the HE sector, and there are some researchers who specifically examine or address this complexity. In particular, the concept of 'external' problems or factors is discussed,

particularly with reference to Tinto (1987;1993), who provides us with one of the few theoretical models on retention. Tinto bases his model upon Durkheim's theory of suicide within society and gives much emphasis to the concept of incongruence that is, whether or not students 'fit' in or integrate (socially and academically) *within* their institution. However, Tinto's model, much used as a basis for exploration, has been found lacking. For example, within one overview Yorke (1999) expresses concern with regard to its level of generality and also with regard to the differing systems present in the UK and USA. As pointed out by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998:317), Tinto's approach is that personal attributes and background characteristics affect only initial levels of commitment to the course and institution. They suggest that:

> The causes of non-completion are best understood as a complex social process in which the main factors are *student preparedness and compatibility of choice*—these factors should not be regarded as a problem originating with the student but more as a result of interaction between student and institution (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998:316).

Adamson and McLeavy (2000) are also critical of Tinto's model. Their recent study is valuable in that it has a distinct focus on FE & HE *vocational* students in Northern Ireland. Despite experiencing low response rates, they argue that support *outside* college is important and can compensate for a lack of social support within the college. Additionally, they emphasise the growth in numbers of *vocational* students and recognise the diversity of student expectation, aspiration and need that is not evident in other sectors. They suggest the need for a theoretical model that relates specifically to the vocational sector:

> Non-completion [is] not driven by pre-entry deterministic factors, but, rather, appears to occur as a result of a complex decision-making process with an array of factors impacting on the student (Adamson and McLeavy, 2000:535).

Whilst not 'testing' Tinto's model, McGivney (1996), concerned with the retention of adult students, emphasises the increase in non-traditional students in the UK and suggests that in an era of widening participation, many

institutions enjoy a much more diverse student population than Tinto could perhaps have ever envisaged. The changing profile of students is also recognised by Abramson and Jones (2002) who apply Tinto's model to students with *vocational* qualifications at a summer school at a new university. Whilst their case study provides an informative insight into the progression of vocational FE students, they also highlight the model's:

> Failure to acknowledge the importance of external factors both *before* entry into HE as well as *during* HE (Abramson and Jones, 2002).

3.3.8 Strategies for Improvement

With regard to the interplay between the multiple factors, several FE studies have focused on how negative factors may be counteracted. For example, Davies (1999a:8), whilst considering the external factor of finance, supports the notion that students can lack *confidence* in the quality of support at classroom level and suggests that if this is of a high quality it can provide a "powerful support mechanism" to counteract any external problems. Myers (1997) also suggests that positive factors found *within* a college may counteract any negative ones and similar effects are also identified in another thesis by Rowland (1997), a vocational tutor in a large FE college:

> We may tend to assume that students who 'stay the course' must generally have positive attitudes and experiences. In reality, students who complete programmes of study may have negative perceptions but overcome these. It is feasible to surmise, however, that where students feel that 'college does not care enough', there is a real danger of dropout or de-motivation leading to possible achievement problems (Rowland, 1997:10).

Despite the complexities, following incorporation and within an 'audit' culture some informed *action* needed to be taken by colleges, in order to improve performance. One of the first researchers to produce a publication on strategies to combat retention was, perhaps not surprisingly, Martinez' (1996), who uses four case studies to evaluate "tentative" or "experimental" strategies. Despite the descriptive nature of the research, Martinez (1996) recognises that ownership by and support from senior managers is important. Moreover,

college transformation and cultural change are seen as critical factors in the process of change:

> All of the case study colleges have ended up with addressing issues of cultural change, staff and student expectations and basic taken-for-granted assumptions about college mission and purpose (Martinez, 1996:37).

Quite recently, Hodkinson and Bloomer have added some weight to this perspective. Within their highly qualitative study, they suggest that the differing *cultures* of the three participating colleges had affected some of the students' decision making and their disposition to learning (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2000). At a later date Martinez et al. (1998), published more strategies for staff development and also more recently in another publication (Martinez, 2001a) that focuses much more on the staff rather than the students. Drawing upon worthwhile qualitative project development work with teachers and managers, he stresses the importance of a shared approach in order to strike the right balance between high expectations and developing, reinforcing and deepening student motivation. This strategy, also included in the recent NAO (2001) report as sharing 'best practice', includes the sharing of practitioner knowledge between curriculum teams, even when practitioners transfer between colleges. Martinez suggests that:

> It demands a skilled exercise of judgement to select and adapt strategies that have been developed elsewhere (Martinez, 2001a).

Other researchers have recommended strategies for retention. For example, a self-help manual for colleges was produced by Kenwright (1997a) following the North Yorkshire project. This recommends the development of retention improvement teams, and also, promotes, in parallel, the notion of developing *'at risk'* profiles. Notably, the theme of *action* planning, research and developing 'at risk' profiles of students has continued to the present day. For example, a collaborative action research project in Wales has recently been implemented by twelve colleges in order to provide strategies to help to raise both the volume of students and their achievement (Overton et

al.,2001:46/52). Within this study, there was a particular focus on the retention of students, with an element of *identifying* vulnerable students. This was done in terms of ensuring they were on the right course, and were receiving successful induction, support and feedback. Perhaps drawing upon the work of Martinez, Overton et al. (2001:46/52) suggest that all staff must be involved in the process with a clear coherent overall retention management system.

Within the NAO's recent publication, *Improving Student Performance: How English further education colleges can improve student retention and achievement* (NAO, 2001), several key areas are addressed within their recommendations. For example, the importance of choosing the right course is highlighted in addition to induction and support, teaching and learning methods and assessing performance. Moreover, within the design of this major study, focus groups of *'specific'* students were invited to participate. Therefore, it perhaps comes as no surprise to find that the NAO (2001) also makes a strong recommendation to identify 'at risk' students.

3.4 Previous Research at Fairfield College

Much of the previous research has recommended strategies for retaining students, some of which have been implemented by Fairfield College. Concerned with improving the retention rates of vocational students, and recognising that factors affecting retention may be context specific, the College commissioned its own research project in 2000 (Sharpe, 2000). It was noted that the College already performed above national average retention rates. Nevertheless, it was thought that some factors on which Fairfield College could feasibly take action might be identified (Sharpe, 2000:3). Within the previous case study, an attempt was made to provide a qualitative analysis of data obtained from teaching staff, persisting students, withdrawn students and their parents. However, it is disappointing to note that managers were not

interviewed as a separate group and also that the data was presented in a somewhat quantitative format, with percentages applied to the rich data.

The final report of the project acknowledged that, *"the decision to leave involves a very individual and complex decision process"* (Sharpe, 2000:3) but several themes arose from the study. Factors such as travel, personal problems and opportunistic offers of employment were raised and it was suggested that the College could take some positive action with regard to the following:

- **Males being more likely to leave than females**
- **Absenteeism increasing the risk of withdrawal**
- **Issues relating to motivation**
- **Student perception of the value of Advanced GNVQ**
- **Issues surrounding recruitment and selection**
- **Workload**
- **Isolated students**
- **Relationships with tutors and teaching methods employed**

Following recommendations made in the research report, an 'action plan' containing numerous strategies to improve retention on vocational courses was developed. However, it appears that no one in the College had specific responsibility for the implementation of these strategies. Rather, the subject of 'retention' is often raised by management as an important issue and individual members of staff are expected to identify and implement strategies as they see necessary. It was thought that few of the strategies had actually been followed through. Nevertheless, an initial 'informal' evaluation highlighted that some positive action was taken and some strategies appear to have been implemented. These included:

- **an 'at risk' database**
- **some increased promotion of 'vocational qualifications' including a guaranteed place at the local university for successful students**
- **the opportunity to study for one or two AS Levels alongside their 'main' qualification (known as mix and match)**

- extra taster or sampling days and additional interviews for some students at enrolment
- more time for personal reviews
- the opportunity to change courses
- staff development for revision and exam techniques
- male under-achievement support projects
- more vocational workshops for advanced vocational students

3.5 Conclusions

Before 1995 literature from the FE sector suggests that, at that time, much blame was attached to students who withdrew, often with the mistaken belief that socio-economic factors were of much importance. With the possible exception of finance, these were later shown to be of little significance. Moreover, the data collection methods used at that time appear to have been inadequate, particularly with regard to documenting the many reasons for withdrawal. In more recent times, whilst data collection from colleges' manual and computerised systems appears to have remained problematic, allowance has been made for multiple reasons for withdrawal. Even the views of persisting students have been included in some post 1995 studies.

After incorporation, expansion in student numbers and the growth of an audit culture has prompted further research and there has been a significant shift away from blaming students, with many studies aiming to improve college systems or practice. Much of the FE research tends to be developmental in approach; a positive factor according to Martinez (1995) if *action* is to be taken. However, some of the larger FE studies have experienced methodological difficulties, not least with regard to data collection, college and course level variation. Despite these difficulties, and although recognising the complexity of withdrawal, students have been identified as being 'at risk' in an attempt to improve retention in FE colleges.

With regard to the level of qualification aimed for, 'ability' appears to be an important factor and, consequently, vocational students have been targeted for research, including those who have progressed to HE. Vocational courses such as GNVQs have been highlighted for paying due regard to 'process' but there appears to be some doubt as to the value of these qualifications. Significantly, in the competition to recruit higher numbers of students, information, choice and selection appear to be of much consequence, especially with regard to who is doing the choosing or selecting. Moreover, the recruitment and retention of what are considered to be 'at risk' students appears to be problematic.

As some of the more recent research section suggests, external as well as internal factors may be responsible for withdrawal and the interplay of both positive and negative factors is considered to be an important aspect. These are often linked to motivation or attitude, especially within smaller and more qualitative studies, which recognise the complexity of withdrawal and highlight the need to examine 'individual' situations or students and the 'changing' nature of these.

No real theory has emerged from the review of FE literature. The only models to be found are those which relate to HE or transatlantic systems. The retention of students appears to be a complex issue with multi-layered and multi-faceted reasons for student withdrawal. Whilst taking this into account and building upon the previous research undertaken at Fairfield, the following section outlines the methodology and research methods used in this study.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three, literature regarding the retention of students has been considered in some detail, particularly with regard to the themes that have emerged from previous research. Due to the complexity of the topic, previous research methodologies have been varied and appear to have been dependent upon the aims and objectives of the research. Survey based or quantitative approaches have been taken when individual factors or causes have been sought, such as that of the RCU (1998). On the other hand the highly qualitative approach found within the Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) study, was more descriptive, as it focused on the learning careers of students.

In this chapter the methods and procedures used to investigate the concerns of Fairfield College are outlined and organised in the following way. The first section relates to and justifies the use of a case study, which served both the needs of the College and the purpose of the academic research. The section following this draws upon best practice and relates to the methodological choices made and details collection and analysis methods. A final concluding section summarises the decisions and actions taken with regard to methodology and also identifies some weaknesses.

4.2 The Case Study

4.2.1 Aims and Objectives of the College

It is important to make explicit the reasons why this research was ever considered at all. As Yorke (1999) points out, the time and resources available or the needs of others need to be taken into consideration:

> The method chosen for a piece of research is strongly influenced by a number of considerations such as the resources and time available and the needs of a sponsor (Yorke, 1999:28).

From Fairfield College's perspective, the desire to improve their retention rates was the most obvious intention. Moreover, the research which followed on from a previous project at the College was part of the College's own action research. This relates to and is part of their continual quest for improvement, where eventual outcomes or solutions to problems are desired. As described by Bell:

> Practitioners (sometimes with researchers from outside the institution) carry out the research because the research is directed towards greater understanding and improvement of practice over a period of time (Bell, 1993:8).

In addition to considering their position in any performance related league tables, evident concern with student dropout (including those who withdrew before Nov 1st), as opposed to qualification attrition rates, was also indicative of staff concern for the *actual* students attending the institution.

This quest for improvement had resulted in the previous research at Fairfield, in which 16-19 year old vocational students were the main focus of a case study (Sharpe, 2000:3). At that time, a research assistant employed by the College undertook this previous research. However, in this instance, an outside researcher was commissioned in the form of a studentship, which in turn also provided an opportunity for academic research. The studentship resulted in a commitment to the College in the form of the provision of interim findings, an executive summary, a full technical report and a business presentation. Additionally, a steering group was set up, within which the College had some influence upon the methodology used, especially with regard to the sampling of students.

4.2.2 The Main Focus

Initially, as with the previous research at Fairfield and at the request of the College, the focus was to have been on vocational students from Foundation,

Intermediate and Advanced levels. However, following discussions with the steering group, and as a result of a developing situation, it became a priority for the College to address the problem of student dropout from the *Advanced Vocational* courses. The introduction of Curriculum 2000 meant significant changes to the curriculum and these *appeared* to be having a detrimental effect upon the first cohort of students.

The increased rates of dropout created a 'sense of urgency' within the College. This, together with other time constraints, meant that a cut off point was required for the collection of data from withdrawn students in the academic year 2000-2001. This meant that the 125 Advanced Vocational students who withdrew during the first half of the academic year 2000-2001 were to become the main focus of the study. From the data collected the College requested that the research should address the following questions:

- **Why had these Advanced Vocational students withdrawn from the College?**
- **Why had the recently introduced strategies failed these students?**
- **In what way was the College not meeting the needs of these students?**

4.2.3 An Academic Approach

The work undertaken for the College had a clear purpose. It was to be instrumental with regard to the improvement of retention rates. Staff within the College were not interested in any previous literature, theories or models per se and, therefore, the focused approach made little reference to these.

On the other hand, the studentship involved the production of this thesis, which meant relating answers to the aforementioned questions to previous research or literature. For the purpose of academic research the use of a case study would also require some justification. Significantly, after considering the literature and previous approaches to research on retention, it

became very clear that a case study approach provided depth, rigour and focus.

With regard to previous research, quantitative or survey-based approaches to the complex issue of retention and withdrawal have suffered from some methodological problems, especially in their attempt to identify specific factors or variables. Martinez (2001a) suggests that:

> It is not possible to identify in a systematic way the variables which colleges control and which distinguish high from low performing colleges, nor to identify the variables which are most critical (Martinez, 2001a:11).

Additionally, as pointed out by Martinez and Munday:

> Data aggregated at national level can sometimes conceal more than it reveals (Martinez and Munday,1998:8).

In cross college surveys, and also in studies that examined factors across ability levels, variations were found to cause complications. In support of a single college or 'individual' institution approach taken at Fairfield College, Adamson and McLeavy conclude that:

> Withdrawal may not be fully understood through examination of factors at the macro level of analysis (across college), but may be better understood by examining aspects of withdrawal at the micro level of analysis, that is the individual college level (Adamson and McLeavy, 2000:549).

Despite the difficulties in identifying individual variables, a significant development within action planning. approaches has been the identification of 'at risk' students followed by the development of strategies to improve their retention. However, data from initial surveys have usually been followed up within the process by interviews or some other qualitative method. For example, Martinez and Munday's (1998) major survey was supplemented by extremely qualitative individual college studies. Indeed, Martinez (1996), had previously completed four case studies of individual colleges and, in recognising the value of this approach, he undertook several more (Martinez,

47

2001) but with a particular focus on teachers and managers. According to Martinez (2001:3) case studies do have weaknesses such as lack of methodological rigour, not always identifying cause and effect relationships and the problem that they cannot necessarily be transferred to other contexts. However, he also points out their strengths which include a focus on solving specific problems, empirical evidence of successful strategies, a high involvement of practitioners and reflection on the process of improvement.

Notably, within the previous research at Fairfield College, 'at risk' factors were identified. Therefore, within the context of Fairfield's action planning approach, the case study that was eventually undertaken was a logical progression. More importantly, however, was the need to understand the contextual complexity of the situation as experienced by the Advanced Vocational students at Fairfield College. It was apparent that in order to understand student decision making more deeply or to understand the context of the situation more fully, a much more qualitative or holistic approach was needed, such as that used in a case study approach and as summarised here by Bell:

> The great strength of the case-study method is that it allows the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation and to identify, or attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work. These processes may remain hidden in a large scale survey but may be crucial to the success or failure of systems or organisations (Bell, 1993:8).

The need to incorporate qualitative data relates to the inability of quantitative approaches to provide answers and subsequent solutions to what is perceived to be a complex social problem. Moreover, it is now recognised that with regard to data collection methods there is a need to allow for multiple reasons for student withdrawal. Whilst not ruling out the possibility of a single factor occurring within his study, Myers (1997) describes the need for a greater understanding of the multiple factors relating to withdrawal and of the decisions made by students. On describing his methodological choices he, too, suggests why he chose a case study approach:

> To develop a deeper understanding of the issues that lay behind GNVQ withdrawal decisions, thereby enabling the development of workable and effective counter withdrawal strategies (Myers, 1997:27).

Another complexity that needed to be considered was the possible difference or differences between persisting students and leavers and this was incorporated into the methodology at Fairfield. With regard to the selection of students, using a comparative sample has not been included in the design of some studies, for example, Adamson and McLeavy (2000). However, others now recognise this as an important feature as, for example, identified by Davies (1997) during the early stages of the study of GNVQ students.

> Only by considering the comparative profile of students who succeed could the influences on failure to complete be understood fully (Davies, 1997:27).

Myers (1997) also included both withdrawn and persisting students and other researchers from the HE sector have also incorporated a comparative analysis of leavers and persistors believing this to be the most robust approach (Walker, 1999; Mackie, 2001). HE researchers (Walker,1999; Ozga and Sukhnandan,1998) have also recognised the benefits of a case study approach, which allows the researcher to examine contextual factors in any given situation. Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) highlight the importance of the changing contexts within the HE system and in order to accommodate these they suggest that:

> It was necessary to understand the issue of non-completion as part of a complex social process of student-institution negotiation. Our approach thus meant that we gave equal weight to both the student and the institution as actors, perceiving them both as contributing to the process of retention and withdrawal (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998:319).

The case study undertaken at Fairfield College certainly allowed for an *interpretation* of events within the context of a Further Education college and also the wider social and historical context. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that it was not possible to look at the 'complete' picture. For example, participants may have excluded certain information. Also, due to the

emphasis on College improvement, external pressures from outside the College where not considered in any great depth. Nevertheless, with regard to design, data collection and analysis within this case study, an attempt was made to draw upon best practice from previous research and many aspects of the 'context' or 'situation' were included using both quantitative and qualitative methodology.

4.3 Methodology

4.3.1 Choices

Page (1996) highlights some of the problems of conducting research within an FE college, including the considerable pressure placed upon her to deliver solutions and explanations (Page, 1996:205). Also, according to Page (1996:209) "the college, and practitioners in the field have a preference for 'hard' data". Indeed, within Fairfield's *previous* study the data was qualitative in nature, yet this had been converted to percentages and presented in a tabular format. To a certain extent the steering group at Fairfield College did have some influence with regard to collection methods. For example, due to the problems of student dropout from the *Advanced Vocational* courses following the introduction of Curriculum 2000, the College determined the choice of cohort from which students were sampled. This was the Advanced Vocational Cohort that enrolled in September 2000. This proved to be a positive factor, as including more than one level of course had not proved beneficial in previous research. Moreover, this kept at least one variable to a minimum and provided an opportunity to examine the first cohort of a new curriculum. The College also determined the sample of withdrawn students who were to be sent a questionnaire. This was all of the 125 withdrawn students who had left before the end of March 2001. It is significant to note, at this point, that this included those students who had left before the first census date of 1st November 2000.

Nevertheless, as the case study would also have to stand up to the rigour of academic assessment, some freedom was given to the researcher to make methodological choices and these stemmed from adapting a case study approach. Therefore, drawing upon the best practice from previous studies and with the aim of a deeper understanding of the complexities of the situation at Fairfield, the data collected from students was mainly qualitative and the data collected from tutors and managers was *all* qualitative. As pointed out by Easterby Smith, qualitative data is rich data:

> Qualitative methods might concentrate on exploring in much greater depth the nature and origins of people's viewpoints (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991:1).

However, some quantitative data was collected from the College and from the students and this was done for the following reasons:

- to provide some hard data for the College.
- to identify any significant or obvious trends.
- to help with the format of the questionnaire in order to encourage completion
- to add strength to the overall case study.

4.3.2 Withdrawn Students

With regard to the collection of data from withdrawn students, availability and responses rates have been problematic in some previous studies. However, as the College wanted to include the first cohort from the New Curriculum and many of these students had already left, a postal questionnaire appeared to be the best, and possibly only option available. Yorke (1999:29) suggests that responses could be affected by the passage of time or the need to present the reasons for withdrawal in the best light. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that questionnaires could only be posted out to students towards the end of the summer term. However, it could also be argued that withdrawn students who are approached some time after withdrawal have had more time for reflection and may, therefore, have a deeper understanding of their own situation.

51

Before any questionnaires were mailed an attempt was made to contact withdrawn students by telephone. This was successful in the majority of cases and was done *not* for the purpose of interview but for the following reasons:

- **to give the students prior warning about the questionnaire**
- **to reassure students about confidentiality**
- **to emphasise the researcher's position as a student and not an employee of the College**
- **to give students an opportunity to ask any questions about the research**
- **to encourage participation**

The response from the telephone calls was encouraging with many students readily agreeing to participate. Background information was also gleaned from conversations with some parents. Although 125 students had withdrawn within the time frame, only 122 questionnaires were sent out to the leavers. This was because one student had died and two had left home. A covering letter, a copy of which can be seen in Appendix 6, was sent in order to encourage participation further and a successful response rate of over 45% was attained with 58 leavers returning their completed questionnaires.

Although the resultant sample was self-selected, as can be seen from Figures 6-9 in Appendix 7, a representative sample of withdrawn students was achieved. However, the subject area of Drama was not represented at all and the reason for this was unknown. On reflection, the Drama students that had withdrawn could have had further contact from the researcher but this may have been inappropriate or intrusive as two contacts had already been made.

4.3.3 Persisting Students

In order that comparisons could be made with persisting students, a sample of persisting students from the same cohort was required to complete questionnaires. It was hoped to have captured a large group, or the whole cohort, from which a matched sample could be selected and the intention was

to use form tutor time for the completion of questionnaires. However, the College expressed concern for staff time and pressure on students at a difficult time in the academic year. Consequently, some restrictions were imposed and therefore some flexibility and innovation was called for in the form of an alternative approach.

During the course of one day, towards the end of the academic year, persisting students were approached, at random, in the many social areas within the College. The majority of qualifying students who were approached agreed to complete a questionnaire and a total of 74 questionnaires were completed. From these 58 were randomly selected in order to match the number of those received from the leavers.

4.3.4 Design of Questionnaires

Taking into account many of the issues raised from the informal evaluation of the College's action plan, together with observations from the College student data, questionnaires were designed and piloted for the leavers and persisting students. These can be found in Appendices 8 and 9. Their design allowed for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data and the sequencing of questions related to the students' experiences from pre-enrolment to departure or up to the time of completion. There were slight variations between the two designs. For example, the persisting students could only be asked why they thought other students had left the College.

Many of the initial questions required only yes or no answer. The purpose of these was not only to provide some useful qualitative data which could be easily coded, but for ease of completion in order to encourage participation to possibly increase the number of respondents. Likert-type responses were incorporated into the second part of the questionnaire in order to "build in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response whilst still generating numbers" (Cohen et al., 2000:253).

Some questions that required factual answers were included. For example, those regarding part-time employment or destinations. Several open-ended questions were also used. Some of these only required a short response and were included within the first half of the questionnaire. This was done not only to keep up respondent interest but also to gather valuable qualitative information. Indeed, some of this information proved to be the most valuable during analysis, especially with regard to choices made by students as they enrolled.

The main open-ended question to withdrawn students was placed towards the end of the questionnaire. Drawing upon lessons learned from previous studies this did allow for multiple reasons for withdrawal and at the very end of the questionnaire students were invited to make any further comments. Cohen and Manion put forward several points in their argument for the open-ended question to be included in a questionnaire:

> The open ended question is a very attractive device for smaller scale research or for those sections of a questionnaire that invite an honest, personal comment from the respondents in addition to ticking numbers and boxes...it is the open ended responses that might contain the 'gems' of information that otherwise might not have been caught in the questionnaire...it puts the responsibility for and ownership of the data much more firmly into the respondents hands...an open ended question can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour (Cohen et al., 2000:255).

Significantly, it was these latter qualities that were required within the case study in order that the context of the situation could be examined in some depth.

4.3.5 Interviews with Managers and Tutors

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and prompts were held with a representative sample of managers. A sample of approximately 10% of managers was aimed for and 6 managers were selected from a possible total of 51. Those with no connection to vocational courses or students were left out

of the selection process, as were recently appointed staff. This left several mangers (Heads of Schools and Studies) with responsibility for particular subject areas but very few 'general' managers. It was decided, therefore, to select three managers at random from the first group and three 'general' mangers on the basis of relevance.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and prompts were also held with tutors. A representative sample of approximately 10% of Advanced Vocational tutors was achieved. As can be seen from Figures 10-14 in Appendix 10, several factors were taken into account. Proportions were estimated from the whole group of Advanced Vocational tutors but participants were selected from teaching staff with over two years experience at the College and who also taught first year Advanced Vocational students.

In addition to general questions about retention and students, other questions were designed to address issues surrounding vocational qualifications, Curriculum 2000 and factors that might affect students as they passed through the College. The same open-ended questions and prompts were used for both managers and tutors and these can be seen in Appendix 11. Although the questions were semi-structured, the open ended question approach meant that participants were free to express their views as they wished, as with the open-ended questions posed to students in the questionnaires.

With regard to the design of the interviews and the delivery of questions, it is important to acknowledge that some researcher bias may have been present, especially due to the researcher's prior knowledge and experience within the FE sector. Nevertheless, on a more positive note, this previous experience coupled with the status of an independent student appeared to break down barriers and allowed the researcher to empathise not only with tutors and managers but also with students. This ability, according to Eisner and Peshkin (1990), can be considered beneficial:

Empathy might be every bit as important for cognition as detachment
(Eisner and Peshkin, 1990:12).

With the permission of participants, each interview was taped for later transcription but, due to lack of time and resources, participants were not offered the opportunity to later amend any of the information given. Confidentiality was assured and on the whole interviewees appeared to be fairly relaxed and outspoken. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes but varied between participants. Significantly, the tutors' interviews were of a longer duration, which suggests that they were either more knowledgeable or more willing to talk about the issues in greater detail.

4.3.6 College Data

In an attempt to provide a numerical 'snapshot' of the situation, some secondary data collection took place from various sources within the College and also from external agencies. Although previous research has attached little importance to socio-demographics, these were included, where available.

Retention data for various cohorts, including level three students, was abstracted from the College's Management Information System (MIS). In addition to informal discussions with staff, which provided valuable background information, other hard data was acquired from the College including information abstracted from the MIS regarding the whole Advanced Vocational September 2000 cohort. Data specific to the 125 leavers was also abstracted from MIS, enrolment forms and leavers' forms.

Various departments within the College also provided access to information from enrolment forms, the 'at risk' register, a 'leavers' database, a 'support' database and an 'enrichment' database.

4.3.7 Initial Analysis

Either manually or with the help of computer software, College data was analysed in order to identify any significant trends or differences between the leavers and the whole cohort.

The questionnaires completed by withdrawn and persisting students provided some quantitative data that was analysed using SPSS software, enabling comparisons to be made. Due to the fairly small sample sizes, the variety of responses that were sometimes made and also the lack of responses for some questions, it was not possible to draw any statistically significant conclusions from this data. Nevertheless, it did provide some valuable information that was fed into the qualitative data during analysis.

Following the completion of questionnaires to students and the transcription of interviews to managers and tutors, a significant amount of qualitative data was acquired from the following four groups:

- **withdrawn students**
- **persisting students**
- **managers**
- **tutors**

Qualitative data does need validity and reliability. Therefore, within this case study the data was analysed in as rigorous a way as possible whilst trying not to lose any of its 'meaning'. Initially, whilst keeping each of the data sets separate, *all* of the qualitative data was compiled and coded with the help of a coding frame, an example of which can be found in Appendix 12. The coding frame allowed for expected categories, as determined by the semi-structured questions and the design of the questionnaires and it also allowed for new themes to emerge more naturally from the responses given.

57

4.3.8 Comparative Analysis and Triangulation

After coding, the quantitative and qualitative data from the withdrawn students was compared to the data from the persisting students. The two data sets were merged to provide a new set of student data, within which similarities or differences were identified. The data set was reduced to key points or findings and was written up as part of the process and as part of the technical report for Fairfield College. Relevant data from some of the respondents was cited.

Key points and findings were abstracted from the remaining data sets and were written up with selected citations, again as part of the process and for inclusion in the business report. At this point the data from tutors was kept separate from the management data but, before any conclusions were drawn, the next procedure was to compare and contrast the findings from the three groups, i.e. the students, the managers and the tutors. Any significant agreements or differences were noted and this corroboratory process resulted in and gave strength to the *overall* findings, which also gained some added strength from the hard data gathered from the College.

This process of triangulation meant that the overall findings within this case study were constructed from multiple sources of evidence, an important component of any robust and well-received case study, according to Yin (1994:92). Triangulation is a process that was also used in several previous retention studies. For example, within Martinez and Munday's (1998) major survey the data was triangulated in order to provide some reliability and validity. Page (1996:209) also describes her "holistic approach" which unifies all the information in order "to give it all equal weight and credibility" and to allow the "natural emergence of conclusions":

> Triangulation ensures that the shortcomings inherent to any one method can be compensated for by the strengths inherent to the others (Page, 1996:198).

58

4.3.9 Semi-structured Interviews with Leavers

Unfortunately, due to lack of time and resources it was not possible to follow up each questionnaire with an interview. As pointed out by Bell (1993):

> The interview can yield rich material and can often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses (Bell, 1993:90).

However, in order to provide some 'whole accounts', a sample of leavers were invited to participate in a taped semi-structured telephone interview lasting approximately twenty minutes. Four students with varied abilities, experiences and leaving dates participated. Unfortunately, these were all females, as recruiting male participants proved to be difficult. The open-ended questions, which can be seen in Appendix 13, were designed to address either issues arising from the research or to fill any gaps that were identified. Following transcription, the interviews were summarised and can be found in Appendix 14. For illustrative purpose key points from these interviews can be found at the end of the next Chapter.

4.4 Conclusions

Within this Chapter, the aims and objectives of the research have been considered on two levels. Firstly, from the College's perspective, which included what was to be the main focus of the study and, secondly, for the purpose of academic research. A case study approach was considered to be the most appropriate for the purpose of the 'consultancy' project. Moreover, after giving due consideration to the strengths and weaknesses of previous methodologies used, a case study approach was not only justified, but was considered to be the 'best' approach, providing the depth, rigour and focus needed to examine the retention of students within the context of an individual institution. The resultant case study also included a comparative analysis of withdrawn and persisting students, considered to be an important factor when researching the retention of students.

A variety of both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used, in order to gather data from various sources i.e. the College systems, managers, tutors and students. A comprehensive approach resulted in a wealth of relevant data. However, on reflection various aspects of the methodology could have been improved upon. For example, a more thorough pilot of the questionnaires may have improved their design. In particular, more effort could have been made to identify students who had progressed from intermediate level and a more inclusive approach could have been made with regard to the various types of courses at level three. Additionally, had time allowed, the lack of participation from the subject area of Drama could have been investigated and, despite the need to respect students' privacy, further returns could perhaps have been encouraged with a follow up telephone call.

Moreover, with regard to the sampling of persisting students, it was disappointing not to have obtained a matched group. Nevertheless, in order to add weight or credibility to the overall findings, the data obtained from the multiple sources was triangulated, a process used within previous methodologies to provide reliability and validity. Following triangulation the key findings were recorded and are presented in the following Chapter.

Chapter 5.   Key Findings

5.1 Introduction

Following the triangulation of data from multiple sources, the key findings were collated from the overall data and are presented here in this Chapter. Despite the recognised 'individual' nature of withdrawal, appropriate headings are used, in order to reflect the main themes arising within this study. Initially, the often-related factors of socio-demographics and data collection are grouped together. The findings in these two areas perhaps demonstrate some of the difficulties faced by the researcher as attempts were made to identify any significant trends within the College.

Following sections relate more to influences on retention, with the first relating to the students choice of College and the second relating to the Curriculum. Further sections also address themes regarding student level issues such as prior achievement and commitment. However, later sections highlight themes at the institution level such as, enrolment, induction, 'at risk' registers and the support of students. The last theme to be found in this Chapter is that of isolation which was a significant factor for several students at this College.

Finally, before any conclusions are drawn key points from the four leaver interviews are presented, in order to further illustrate the individual nature of withdrawal.

5.2 Socio-demographic Factors and Data Collection

5.2.1 Gender

There were no significant differences with regard to gender. At 54% of the whole cohort more females were enrolled and as can be seen from Figures 16 to 18 in Appendix 15, similar proportions of females left out of the 125 leavers

and also from the leavers for the whole academic year; i.e. 54% and 53% respectively.

5.2.2 Travel/Location

Students with a *very* local postcode appeared less likely to leave the College (unable to show table as it may identify the College). However, due to the problems of defining postcode areas and the low numbers involved from each postcode area, it would probably be unwise to place any reliance upon this finding.

5.2.3 Ethnic Minorities

The identification of ethnic minority students was not possible due to the poor level of information recorded on the enrolment forms of leavers. Only 60 identification codes were found out of a possible 125.

5.2.4 Prior Achievements

Due to poor or insufficient information held on either manual records or the MIS it was not possible to examine prior achievement or students who had progressed from intermediate courses in any great depth.

5.2.5 Leaving Dates

An attempt was made to identify when the 125 leavers left the College. However, it became apparent that the information held on the College's management information system (MIS) might not be accurate. It appears that the head count system relies upon information being passed on, or input by members of staff, both accurately and in good time. To further illustrate this problem, two 'no shows' (students who enrolled but never attended) were recorded on the system in March 2001. Moreover, it became apparent that the information from the leavers' forms may not be reliable, as often students are only identified as leavers following the completion of learner agreements by tutors (usually November, January and also at the end of the year).

5.2.6 Transfers

Similarly, problems arose with regard to numbers of students who had changed courses either to or from A Level courses. 'Transfers in' usually relate to students who have transferred to Advanced Vocational courses from A Level courses and five of these included in the whole cohort data did not appear on the system until March 2001. Two other 'transfers in' were recorded *very late* in the academic year and appeared on the MIS *after* information about the whole cohort had already been obtained and analysed. The very late input of these figures supports the notion that data is not being passed on or, alternatively, not being input correctly and in good time. Another possibility for the two late 'transfers in' is that they are for the *next* academic year and have been input onto the system too early.

An attempt was made to trace these 'transfers in' in order to add the students' information to the data but this proved to be extremely difficult. Therefore, although the College's retention rates quoted later in this section *do* include these *two* transfers in, the data presented in this Section *does not*.

Figure 5a: Changes in numbers of first year Advanced Vocational Students during the academic year 2000 -2001

Enrolments	707
Transfers In (noted on system in March 2001)	5
Transfers out	0
Total number of whole cohort (does not include the 2 late transfers in)	712
Total number who left during 2000-2001*	157
Number of 'no shows' (students who enrol but never attend)	7
Remaining students (does not include the 2 late transfers in)	548

(Data taken from MIS - Executive Report)
* *Although 157 leavers were recorded on the management information system's executive report, details of only 156 leavers were obtained and there were only 156 leavers on the leavers' database produced by the faculty office.*

With regard to transfers in and out, Figure 5a below shows that whilst there were several 'transfers in' *to* Advanced Vocational courses during 2000/2001 there were no 'transfers out', which suggests that there were no transfers from Advanced Vocational courses to AS courses. Changing to courses of the same type are not recorded.

5.3 Retention Rates and Choosing the College

5.3.1 Retention Rates

Retention 'rates' and their definitions are complex and within the College there is some doubt as to the accuracy of data relating to this. A recent inspection also highlighted some problems within some of the pre 2000 Individual Student Record (ISR) data:

> particularly in respect of student retention rates, and inspectors used data provided by the College to help them form their judgements (FEFC, 2001:3).

Nevertheless, according to the inspection report, the College is very successful with regard to achievements and whilst retention rates have "not improved overall" they do appear to be above the national average on many courses (FEFC, 2001:26-27).

Whilst records relating to individual qualification aims remain questionable, Fairfield College's Management information System records actual student numbers and with regard to the aims of this study these statistics have more relevance. Significantly, as can be seen from Figures 5b and 5c, the exclusion of the numbers of students who have withdrawn before the first census date of 1st November can increase retention rates by up to 10%. Nevertheless, as can also be seen from Figures 5b and 5c, Fairfield's rates, based on actual students, are above the overall national average of 79%. Notably, A Level students are retained very successfully and the percentages for first year A Level students have remained fairly stable and high at above 90%. In comparison, the Advanced Vocational rates are lower and appear less stable.

64

Figure 5b: 'Student' retention rates as at 31st March 2002 for 16-19 year old first year students

A level	by cohort	2001	2000	1999
	of initial intake	95%	92%	96%
	excluding students who left before 1st Nov	97%	94%	97%
Advanced Vocational	by cohort	2001	2000	1999
	of initial intake	87%	81%	89%
	excluding students who left before 1st Nov	90%	89%	93%

(data taken from MIS)

Figure 5c: End of year 'student' retention rates for 16-19 year old first year students

A level	by cohort	2000	1999	1998
	of initial intake	91%	91%	92%
	excluding students who left before1st Nov	93%	95%	96%
Advanced Vocational	by cohort	2000	1999	1998
	of initial intake	79%	83%	76%
	excluding students who left before 1st Nov	86%	90%	86%

(data taken from MIS)

Nevertheless, with regard to 'in-year' retention for level three vocational courses, the national rate increases to 85% and Fairfield's rates for first year students in this category are still slightly higher than this, even at the end of the academic year 2000/2001. With regard to the rates given for the whole year, the percentages for the September 2000 intake are actually no less than for the September 1998 intake.

With regard to staff, mixed views were expressed about the College's retention rates, sometimes depending upon whether overall rates were being

65

considered (including the A Level rates) or whether vocational rates were being compared with the A Level rates. Nevertheless, the majority agreed that the pro-active 'culture' of the College helped with retention, together with positive factors relating to the College experience. Most managers suggested that the reasons for the College's good overall retention rates were informing students, getting them on the right courses and allowing them to change courses. However, only two tutors agreed with this. Moreover, according to *many* of the leavers, the course they were on was the main reason for their withdrawal.

Figure 5d: Chart to show 'Leavers' *first* mentioned reason for withdrawal

Initial reasons given
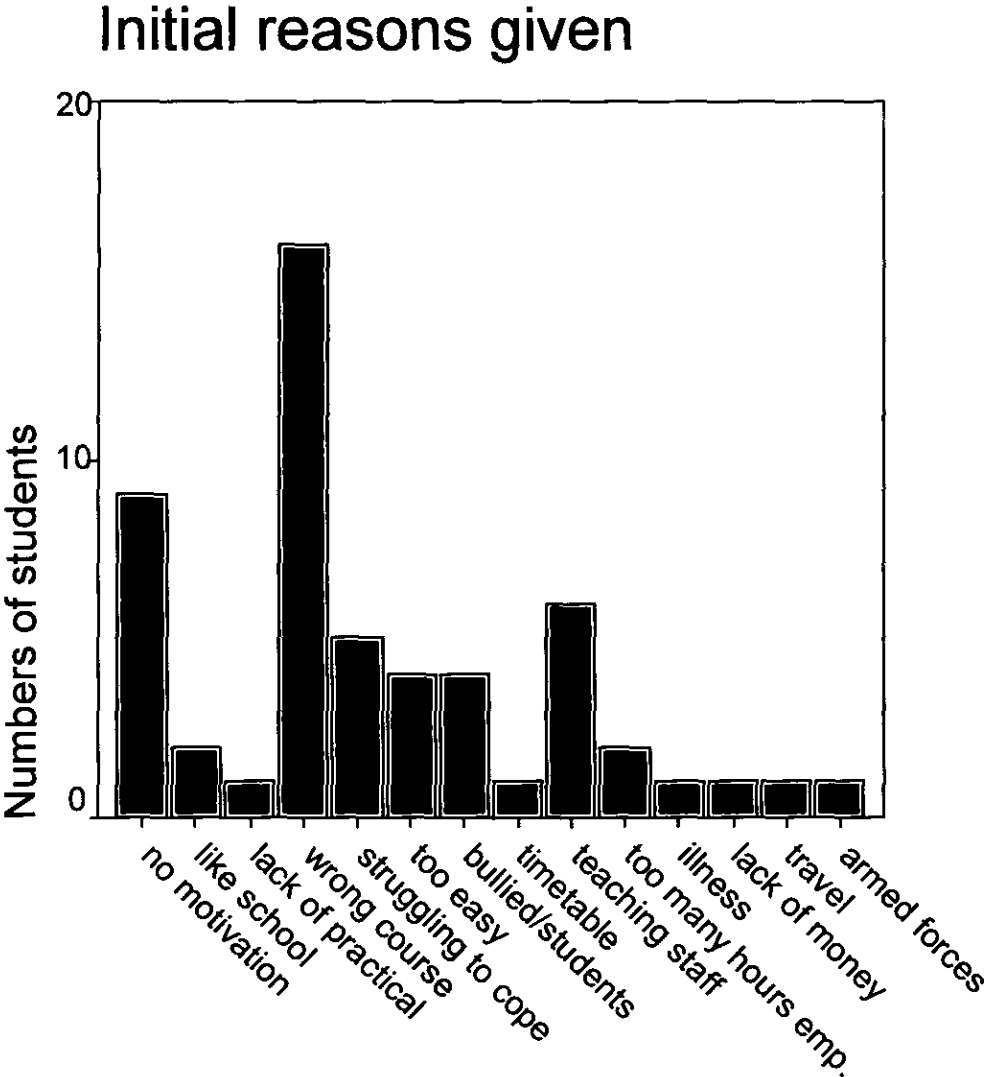
Whilst the majority of leavers gave several reasons for withdrawal and although the percentages are too small to mention, Figure 5d shows the *first mentioned* reasons for leaving and notably 'wrong course' was the most frequent response.

5.3.2 Marketing and Choosing the College

According to the majority of staff, reputation was perceived to be the *main* reason for choosing Fairfield. Results, league tables and A Level achievements, according to one tutor, were significant contributors and according to one manager are used deliberately within a marketing strategy that highlights top achievers:

> "We operate a top 5% strategy in marketing and the rest will follow. So Fairfield is a fashionable and desirable commodity among opinion formers among the high achievers in school." (manager)

Figure 19 in Appendix 15 shows that 35% of withdrawn students and 40% of persisting students had considered other colleges. However, *after* considering other colleges, differences in the qualitative responses between the two groups were apparent. Key factors for leavers for choosing Fairfield were 'location', and 'reputation' and twice as many leavers as persisting students cited these. In comparison, twice as many persisting students than leavers chose Fairfield for the courses or the facilities that were available, perhaps demonstrating that some thought had gone into their choice of course.

Similarly, Figure 20 in Appendix 15 demonstrates that almost half of *all* students had specific career plans. However, Figure 21 in Appendix 15 shows that slightly more of the persisting students knew which course or subject they wanted. Their fairly high level of non-committal answers suggests that some of them may have had an 'inkling' of what they wanted to do, whilst the leavers appeared more likely to find choosing a course difficult. Notably, from a total of eleven leavers who suggested that they would return to vocational courses in the following year, six students stated their intentions to return to Fairfield.

5.4 The New Curriculum and Status of Courses

5.4.1 Curriculum 2000

As can be seen from Figure 22 in Appendix 15, less than half of *all* the students knew the difference between the new Vocational A Levels and GNVQs and many students, including almost half of the leavers, were not told anything about the new Vocational A Levels before enrolment. However, Figure 23 in Appendix 15 suggests that there were mixed views with regard to the perception that traditional A Levels are more difficult than vocational courses. Notably, some *persisting* students recognised a possible gap in provision and thought that the New Curriculum was "tougher" and "too much of a jump" from intermediate courses. Two *persisting* students even suggested a return to GNVQs. Several managers and tutors also expressed similar concerns:

> "Widening the gap between advanced and intermediate...what about the student who gets three Cs....I think there's going to be a gulf and it's going to get wider....colleges, not just us, will probably jack up the entry requirements."
> (tutor)

Some tutors stressed the added burden of compulsory Key Skills for students and Figure 24 in Appendix 15 shows that a high percentage of *all* students did not enjoy these. External examinations were also thought to have added to the difficulty, yet only one persisting student and one leaver mentioned these as being a problem.

A negative impact on teaching quality was suggested especially with regard to external examinations and examination board problems. Two tutors described their imaginative attempts to increase motivation, whilst several others felt they needed more time and resources:

> "The reason lessons aren't good enough is because staff haven't got the time to do them....I know there's a financial implication...but....if you reduce teaching hours lessons would improve and if lessons improved retention would improve which would save the College money....they should look at the big picture." (tutor)

68

Figure 25 in Appendix 15 shows that almost three-quarters of persisting students thought the teaching was good in comparison with less than half of the leavers. Figure 26 in Appendix 15 shows that similar proportions found subject tutors helpful, although a third of the leavers were 'dissatisfied' and several recognised the problems of being on a 'new' course:

> "Too many new staff. Tutors need to listen to us or more people will leave. Most of the class wanted to leave. The course was new and none of the tutors had any idea what they were doing. There was so many problems with this course." (leaver)

Significantly, as can be seen from Figure 27 in Appendix 15, sixteen students withdrew from the Public Services course that was new in 2000 and this was recognised by one of the tutors. With regard to other newly introduced qualifications, as can be seen from Figure 5e forty eight of the 125 students who left up until 1st April 2001 were *not* on Vocational A Level courses. This equates to almost 40%, which is a higher percentage than within the whole cohort. This means that slightly less of the Advanced Vocational A Level students left than those on the other level three vocational courses.

Figure 5e: Percentage of leavers compared to whole cohort by type of course

Courses	Whole Cohort	% of total	Number of 'leavers'	% of total
Vocational A level courses	486	68%	77	62%
National Diplomas, CACHE & Advanced Secretarial	224	32%	48	38%
TOTAL	710*	100%	125	100%

(Information taken from College information systems)
* *discrepancy of two from information provided by College*

5.4.2 Status of the Courses

Figure 28 in Appendix 15 shows that there were mixed views amongst both groups of students about the status of vocational courses. No more than two thirds of *all* the students felt that they were equal to A Levels and at least 20% of the withdrawn students felt that they had a lower status. The main view from both managers and tutors was that, despite some improvements, vocational qualifications were still less valued, even within College, a situation not helped by the strict entrance requirement of four grade B's at GCSE level for A Level courses:

> "I fully take the Principal's point that A Levels are the flagship of the College....but I know that some of our students on vocational courses, despite all of the efforts of the staff and what they've said, tend to perceive themselves as second class citizens." (tutor)

5.5 Lack of Course Choice due to Prior Achievement

5.5.1 Perceived Purpose of Advanced Vocational

Figure 29 in Appendix 15 shows that most students recognised a difference between Advanced Vocational and A Level courses and both tutors and managers suggested that the courses were 'different', with some recognising the concept of transferable skills. It was generally thought amongst both managers and tutors that vocational courses were good for those *without* academic ability. They were described as less academic/ theoretical and more informal or coursework based.

> "They're more likely to be the type of person who doesn't like examinations and prefers coursework - they just can't do the memory test that an exam is and write an essay .... it's a pretty artificial thing." (manager)

One manager felt that GCSE grades reflected the ability or the potential of the students to achieve in external assessments, whilst one tutor, who highlighted

some students' lack of maturity, pointed out that coursework may still require academic ability:

> "Why don't you do very well in exams? It's not possibly because you're better at doing coursework...maybe it's just you don't do very well academically."
>
> (tutor)

With little difference between the two groups, Figure 30 in Appendix 15 suggests that over 60% of *all* students did prefer coursework to examinations. However, examinations did not appear to be a major issue for either group of students and approximately 20% of all students actually preferred them. Additionally, Figure 31 in Appendix 15 shows that there were students from *both* groups, who did not know how their work was going to be assessed and this figure was as high as 60% for the leavers.

As can be seen from Figure 32 in Appendix 15, almost two thirds of all students wanted to progress to HE. The majority of tutors and one manager supported this and had a *very* positive attitude with regard to students with specific goals, although one manager thought progression to employment was the only valid reason for choosing vocational provision.

> "I think they're a completely different type of student to an A Level student. So their view of what they're wanting out of life is quite different ....they're more likely to be people who aren't gonna go on to HE, although a lot do, a lot drop out when they get there." (manager)

5.5.2 Lack of choice due to prior achievement

Most managers felt that Advanced Vocational students sometimes enrol onto their courses *"by default"* due to low GCSE grades. One manager highlighted the problem of subject choice if there is no vocational alternative. For example, if a student wants to study languages, there is not a vocational alternative to A Level. Many tutors agreed and it was suggested that some students have a negative attitude.

> "Deep down inside their head there is this 'I want to do AS-s. I didn't want to do this course'. So, once the hard work starts and once you get into the courses they are not as motivated as they should be." (tutor)

71

As can be seen from Figure 33 in Appendix 15, whilst there were slightly more persisting students, over a third of *both* groups had considered A Levels. Some students from both groups had made a positive choice about vocational courses but almost twice as many leavers had enrolled onto Advanced Vocational courses solely because of their lower GCSE grades. There was also a marked difference in attitudes. Persisting students made comments which suggested that they 'accepted' the situation. In comparison, many leavers seemed to feel that they were 'pushed' into doing something they did not want and expressed dissatisfaction or bitterness towards the College. Notably, five of the withdrawn students had enrolled onto A Level courses at other colleges.

> "Fairfield couldn't offer me A Levels as they wanted Bs whereas the college I'm at now accepted me with the C grades I got. Fairfield only want the best so they can boast when they get the good grades." (leaver)

5.6 A Lack of Commitment together with a Preference for Employment, Training and Practical work, possibly due to Lack of Ability

5.6.1 Parental Influence on Commitment

As can be seen from Figure 5f, whilst almost all persisting students and over three-quarters of the leavers had wanted to go to college, the rest were not fully committed.

Figure 5f: Table to show students motivation

I very much wanted to go to college	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	76%	9%	15%	100%	58
Persisting Students	93%	5%	2%	100%	58

Both tutors and managers thought there could be parental pressure to enrol and two leavers admitted that this was the case. Figure 34 in Appendix 15 suggests that parental influence was stronger for persisting students but with over 20% of the leavers not having any 'influence' to enrol from 'others' this might suggest lack of support rather than pressure. Indeed, whilst tutors valued parental support and encouragement, some suggested that this does not always happen.

5.6.2 Late Enrolment and Preference for Employment

Only two tutors and one manager, who had course responsibilities, mentioned late enrolees as being problematic. This was surprising because , as can be seen from Figure 35 in Appendix 15, over 40% of leavers and almost 30% of persisting students had made what they considered to be a last minute decision to enrol. The key factor for both groups related in varying degrees to lack of commitment or direction. Several leavers were more specific about preference for employment or not wanting college and two thought FE was going to be the easier option.

5.6.3 Employment, Finance and Cost

With regard to paid employment whilst at College, Figure 5g shows that 21% more of the persisting students than the leavers were in some kind of employment.

Figure 5g: Table to show percentage of students who were in employment whilst at College

Were you/Are you in any kind of paid employment whilst at College?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	65%	35%	100%	57
Persisting Students	86%	14%	100%	58

As can be seen from Figures 36-38 in Appendix 15, there appeared to be more persisters working a lesser number of hours than many of the leavers. One tutor felt that some students were unwilling to reduce their part time hours and two leavers did experience problems due to the high number of hours that they were working.

> "I was finding it hard to do college during the day and work 6.00pm –11.00pm daily. Telling the college this, they were unsupportive." (leaver)

Most managers suggested that some students left College because they really wanted employment and taking advantage of employment 'opportunities' was mentioned. Some persisting students also thought that leavers may have wanted employment and some suggested that leavers might find their courses too easy or not challenging enough. One even suggested that they might have even finished their course:

> "Some courses are so easy it takes a lot of determination to continue. More challenging courses will help prevent students from leaving. It will make students more motivated." (persisting student)

One leaver was enjoying work more than their course and several others compared employment with course dissatisfaction. A fairly high number of leavers felt their courses were not 'challenging' enough and some of these appeared keen on professions such as the armed forces, the police and nursing:

> "Course was too basic - Presently employed in RAF on 9 year contract – completed 7 weeks basic training and studying electronics – as per college course." (leaver)

> "I didn't get on with the students in my class. I didn't agree with doing key skills that were below GCSE standard when I got all As and Bs at GCSE level. It was a long way from home. And I didn't feel I was as good as the others at practical sessions. I also decided I wanted to become a nurse and therefore this course was not appropriate." (leaver)

74

As can be seen from Figure 5h, over 60% of *all* students felt that they had known about employment and training opportunities before they enrolled. However, lack of awareness with regard to this issue did appear to be more of a concern for some leavers and one or two suggested that if they had known about other options, or if employment had been available, they may not have enrolled. As can be seen in Figure 39 in Appendix 15, more leavers went on to employment than to other full-time courses.

Figure 5h: Table to show students' prior knowledge of employment and training opportunities

I knew all about employment and training opportunities before I chose to enrol	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	61%	10%	29%	100%	58
Persisting Students	61%	30%	9%	100%	57

Tutors agreed that students may have preferred employment but also mentioned lack of financial support at home and students wanting or needing money. Several persisting students also felt that money may be an issue and two gave examples of their own difficulties. In comparison, several leavers related what they were doing on their courses to what they wanted to do or thought they would do after College. They appeared to be 'weighing up' the 'cost' or 'value' of their course with regard to the time, effort and finance (travel) that they were putting into their education. Coupled with this appeared to be a sense for some that their courses were not worthwhile because they did not enjoy them.

"Even though the subject tutors were helpful, polite and friendly on the course I felt that the course that I had chosen was not the right one for me. I enjoyed most of the lessons I had, but others I felt were not relevant to what I wanted to do. I also felt that these same lessons were very dull and not in the least bit exciting." (leaver)

The only withdrawn student to mention money difficulties was one 'older' student who had progressed from intermediate level:

> "Struggling for money.....There wasn't a guarantee that I'd pass ...two years....long time to waste.....I would consider another course in the future, depending on my situation and commitments." (18 year old leaver)

5.6.4 Expectations and Reality

In general, tutors and managers agreed that Advanced Vocational students may not be fully aware of what their course involves especially with regard to the lack of practical work, the amount of theory involved and the amount of effort required. It was also thought that some students might not have the skills to meet deadlines and determine priorities, especially for Advanced Vocational courses.

> "There's no deadlines .... what's happening with the coursework it keeps coming in and they haven't got the criteria, so it goes back again and it's in and out and in and I mean the workload that it puts on the staff as well." (manager)

As can be seen from Figure 40 in Appendix 15, over half of the leavers did not find their course interesting. Two had concerns with the content. For example, one female had concerns about a male dominated syllabus. Others, expressed lack of commitment, interest or motivation, sometimes with regard to the College or education in general. Figure 41 in Appendix 15 shows that over half of *all* students expected more practical sessions but the strength of feeling about wanting more 'training' or practical work appeared greater amongst the leavers. Some felt there was too much theory or that the lessons were inappropriate for them and several admitted to falling behind.

> "I was on the wrong course, I felt like it was not the time for me to be in education, I needed a break from it." (leaver)

> "I didn't like the way I was being taught....copying of acetates and worksheets." (leaver)

76

In comparison, although not having the same strength of feeling, over a third of the persisting students did not think that their course was interesting either. Whilst most of the many leavers comments were fairly specific, persisting students made more general comments about "boring" courses and many gave general opinions about them not being as expected. Moreover, Figures 42-44 in Appendix 15, suggest that persisting students are more likely than leavers to find the work difficult as well as being less likely to consider that they had good time management or writing skills. Persisting students gave numerous opinions about assessments and workload. They were concerned with how hard the work was, when it is given, the amount of work and lack of time.

5.6.5 Time Management or Gaps in Timetables

Only one manager gave an opinion about timetables and referred only to overloading and the availability of mix and match within the New Curriculum. Indeed, one leaver had experienced difficulties with this. However, a total of nine leavers were critical of timetables. Moreover, the tutors, the persisting students and leavers *all* identified problems relating to travelling in for long days with large gaps in timetables:

> "There's a lot of gaps in the timetable and enrichment is not there to fill it ... they've got such large gaps in the timetable and they haven't got the ability yet to fill it themselves constructively...Their day needs to be structured at 16 years old. They need someone to tell them what to do and when to do it and we do that with the lessons but the lessons only take up 50-60% of the time." (tutor)

The tutors' main concern was that some students could not manage their time effectively and some leavers appeared to make little use of their time to study because they either found this difficult to do 'at College' or they preferred a more structured day.

> "I felt there was a lot of time wasted within the day as I only had on one day 2 hours work and I was waiting from 9.00am until 5.30pm for buses. I had realised that after travelling both from and to the College would take time but I thought there would be a lot of work within a day but many hours of the day

were wasted with free periods. Also, the enrichment activities were more geared towards those doing 'A' levels as when my course had lessons the activities were taking place." (leaver)

As can be seen in Figure 45 in Appendix 15, this situation appears to have been compounded by lack of participation in enrichment activities. Popular with those who did partake, participation rates were low especially for the withdrawn students.

5.7 Enrolment, Induction and 'At Risk' Students

5.7.1 The Right Student on the Right Course

Both managers and tutors were in agreement that there was conflict between recruiting numbers of students and giving them a realistic picture. They agreed there was a lack of time and that misunderstandings could occur. Managers recognised this problem within the marketing process. However, with regard to enrolment, managers had different opinions with regard to responsibility for enrolling the right students onto the right courses and how this could be achieved. One manager placed the responsibility firmly at the tutors' door:

> "They'll not admit to the enrolment process where they enrol the students as being their responsibility and a crucial bit that they themselves might be getting wrong .... staff at enrolment must understand that they are enrolling for their own bread and butter for next year and it's not just the number they get, it's the quality."

> "Students before they actually set foot in an Advanced Vocational class are enrolled by Advanced Vocational staff who somehow vet them....or assess them or certainly enrol them." (all data from same manager)

Several tutors were critical of the unrealistic picture given to students and suggested more liaison or awareness from marketing and/or more tutor involvement, especially when professional standards are required from students. Many of the tutors found enrolment problematic especially with regard to lack of time:

"It's like being in a market and you can't have a one-to-one with that person try as you might and you've got about five minutes because you've got queues...let's be honest, nobody's going to confide heart to heart and we do get students changing at enrolment." (tutor)

Opposing views were given regarding the well known phrase of 'bums on seats' and several tutors expressed differing views with regard to how much information to give students, sometimes depending on whether their courses were popular or not. For some tutors, even on popular courses, there appears to be a conflict between recruiting fully informed 'right' students or 'at risk ' students that may be helped to achieve.

"I think students need to be more aware of what will be involved in College. The dilemma there is that, if we make it sound too difficult, they're just gonna say hey we'll not bother coming then. Whereas if we get them in then we can actually try and overcome the problems." (tutor)

Even with regard to transferable skills, one tutor was not sure if students were aware of this aspect of their course and did not want them to be:

"We don't tend to broadcast it.... I wouldn't encourage students to come on the course, if they weren't interested in the subject, because they wouldn't last five minutes. They've got to be interested in the subject and by doing the subject they are going to learn transferable skills." (tutor)

Difficulties recruiting the right *numbers* of 'right' students onto the right courses were also apparent. Vocational choice, commitment, maturity and even disability were all issues raised regarding the selection of students. It appears that 'weak' or problem students, who are sometimes accepted reluctantly, can often be identified at enrolment and can sometimes be found on the 'at risk' register. One tutor, who appeared frustrated about ability, admitted to being slightly more selective since the introduction of AVCEs.

"Obviously it is a number cruncher exercise...you might you want to be picky in the first few days but you're beginning to wonder whether or not you're going to fill the course. So, you are in a bit of a Catch 22 situation. Do you enrol everyone who turns up in front of you and then turn away students when the course is full, which we really can't do; or do you enrol nobody? Really,

79

really, really be picky and then find at the end that no students, who are any good, arrive to fill your course." (tutor)

The theme of information also arose within the student data. According to Figures 46-48 in Appendix 15 many of the persisting and withdrawn students who had attended interviews at school or at enrolment had found them helpful. Yet, quality and availability of information was an issue for several students in both groups. One leaver appeared to be unaware that there was a business studies course and another made a positive choice about 'mix and match' but appeared to have been discouraged. Another leaver was persuaded 'away' from their original choice:

> "At enrolment, I feel it should have been easier to do what you want to do, without having to be persuaded to do something else. I was persuaded to do an AS level alongside my BTEC course in Information Technology which I didn't want to do and knew I couldn't manage. It took even longer to enrol, and I wasn't happy with the set up. I was told to sort the AS level out but was moved at enrolment from one person to the next because they didn't know what they were doing." (leaver)

Several persisting students also felt that more information should have been given, including more details about progression, and three were concerned about being misled:

> "we were told that the course was a GNVQ level course and that we would go out on placement once a week. We were NOT told that it would be changing to a Voc. A Level and the course was made out to be more than it is. Also it was tutors from Fairfield College on the open night that said that the course was more of a practical course rather than a theory based course. I have not enjoyed this course and am not surprised that people are leaving. I feel that I have wasted a year as I too am leaving." (persisting student)

Figure 49 in Appendix 15 shows that a high proportion of *all* students did state that they were committed to completing their course at the time of enrolment and at 91% this figure was 8% higher for leavers than the persisting students. However, whilst more persisting students enrolled onto a course that they had originally chosen, over a fifth of *all* students did *not*. Similarly, whilst slightly more persisting students were happy about their final course decision,

approximately 15% of *all* students were not. There were obviously some students who had not followed their original choice or were not happy.

5.7.2 Induction

One manager described induction as the opportunity to "sample" the course. Indeed, changing courses was seen as part of a process, possibly due to the way that the College recruits. The importance of not changing too late was stressed by some yet, despite these views, one manager was concerned about the volume of changes and wanted more "structure", "control" and "visibility" over the current practice. With some significant references to A Level courses, regarding process and *subject* changes, there also appeared to be a lack of knowledge regarding the issue of 'if' and 'when' to advise *vocational* students of this option. One manager suggested:

> "There could be in College ..... a notion amongst staff that once you've enrolled somebody and they kind of want to leave your course you see it as a failure on your part or your kids part and you don't perhaps facilitate a movement between courses within College.....and then they blame the marketing when the kid leaves they've got on the wrong course when really it's their fault." (manager)

Tutors had much more to say about the induction period. For example, it appears that the amount of 'theory' that students were introduced to within the induction period differed. One tutor wanted to "guide them in slowly" and another did not want to "terrify the less confident". Others portrayed induction as "a bit of an eye opener" and a time when they "can't afford to give students an unrealistic impression". Tutors felt that changing courses 'early' was beneficial to some but in addition to students falling behind, identified problems for themselves and with the student 'fitting in'. Other Issues raised included losing unsuitable students, retention of numbers on less popular courses, retention targets coupled with no incentives, informing students with reluctance and not being aware of how students knew about changing. Some thought that there was no ideal time to change courses and raised the issue of lack of direction or commitment:

"It's not the course that's putting you off it's education that's putting you off in the first couple of days.....if somebody wants to change courses in the first couple of days they are struggling for breath. They are trying to clutch at straws to get away from something and they think, well, if I go on another course maybe it'll be alright." (tutor)

From the student perspective, Figure 50 in Appendix 15 shows that almost 80% of persisting students felt they had received helpful information at the start of their course, as opposed to only 55% of the leavers. Similarly, leavers appeared less likely to know what they had to do in order to pass the course and one leaver suggested that a 'false' impression had been given at the beginning of term:

"The tutors gave the wrong impression at the start of the term, (relaxed/laid-back) which they later attempted to rectify later to no avail." (leaver)

As can be seen from Figure 51 in Appendix 15, just over half of the leavers considered leaving and a similar percentage considered changing courses. Furthermore, over a quarter of persisting students considered changing courses and yet less than 7% of *all* students actually changed courses. Not being able to change because they had left it too late or were told that they had left it too late was a problem for six leavers. Another had transferred "too late" from A Levels and another was less specific. Some of the leavers who had wanted to change seemed to feel that their courses were not challenging enough. One wanted to transfer onto A Levels, had the correct grades and had been persuaded away from this option at enrolment. Another did not like the informal lectures or her placement and appeared to be 'clinging' on to an AS level, which limited her alternative choices within a mix and match timetable. Two others wanted to change to "'higher" National Diplomas and one of these felt misinformed at enrolment and when requesting a course change. For some leavers there appeared to be a lack of knowledge and a lack of time:

"I decided I would rather do AS levels. Before leaving my course and Fairfield completely, I researched the chance of doing AS levels there. I was told I would receive information and never did so I left without further communication with the college." (leaver)

5.8 Pressure to Achieve and Lack of Support

5.8.1 Personal Tutors

All staff felt the pastoral system was important but some tutors wanted more structure, smaller groups and more time, especially for the one to one sessions. Two persisting students also thought that there should be more individual sessions for potential leavers. Several tutors thought that weaker students may be seen too late or not at all and one tutor admitted using alphabetical order for appointments:

> "Sometimes, because of the physical length of time it takes you to get round, you may lose a weaker student because they've not had that initial support in...I would like to get round the students more quickly." (tutor)

Figure 5i: Table to show percentage of students who found their personal tutors helpful

My personal tutor was helpful	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	62%	12%	26%	100%	58
Persisting Students	77%	12%	11%	100%	56

Figure 5i shows that there only 62% of the leavers had found personal tutors helpful and differences in individual tutor performance were recognised by some. Three leavers *had* experienced some significant problems:

> "My personal tutor was rude, dismissive and uncaring. I felt that because I had already been there for a year he wasn't interested... it came across that he didn't like me, as I was subjected to ridicule in class." (leaver)

Both tutors and managers identified problematic relationships and one tutor appeared resentful of spending time with students who "aren't really bothered" at the expense of others and used personal tutor time to provide subject specific support.

"It depends on your personality....I think some people are horrendous personal tutors....I just don't think they understand young people." (tutor)

It was generally felt that not working or being absent could cause students to fall behind with their work and leave and two managers highlighted the value of monitoring or 'chasing up' students. Views on the conflicting roles of monitoring and teaching were also given by tutors and one manager:

"There's more control on a voc. course .... the tutor, the personal tutor, the course leader, they are very much in control of the students and they know what is going on." (manager)

"When you're a personal tutor **and** you teach them it's a really difficult situation....you're telling them off one minute and then you're having to get them to like your subject and they've already got a stigma against you." (tutor)

5.8.2 Monitoring of Achievement and Absences

With regard to absences, more persisting students than leavers had been absent, although it must be noted that they had been at the College longer. Whereas the persisting students appeared to have had genuine reasons for absence (with the odd exception) no less than *twenty* of the leavers cited reasons for absence that reflected boredom or unhappiness with their work, the course or the college. Notably, one leaver left due to illness and was "upset" about being chased up for absence when the College had already been informed on several occasions.

Most tutors suggested that they were supportive when monitoring work or absences. However, one felt that the culture of the College with its high number of students, support, constant attention and wanting everyone to do well would not suit some students. The same tutor recognised that these students may feel pressurised and others identified the College's "school mentality". One persisting student suggested that some students may leave "because they can't handle the pressure" and others suggested that it was like being in school. These perceptions appeared to be correct as several leavers

expressed concern about pressure, the atmosphere in the College and not being treated as adults.

> "I think the kids, if they see another personal tutor warning....I'll be on the bus....for any of us, if people start laying down too many rules I think it has the opposite effect .....some of them it's like they're always forms forms forms forms forms and I don't think those kids stay if they're just constantly bombarded." (tutor)

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> "The head teacher put a lot of pressure on the students on the 2ndday." (leaver)

> "I chose to go to college as I expected it to be more of an adult learning thing rather than school all over again but when I had been there two months max I was beginning to dislike it."   (leaver)

> "It's like a cattle market." (leaver)

> "Some of the teachers get on your back for silly things."   (persisting student)

> "Teachers need to show pupils how to get the grades and what information is needed to get good grades." (leaver)

> "I was doing an advanced GNVQ in Travel and Tourism and also a A-level in music, and in February just after I had come back my personal tutor told me that because I had been away that she wanted me to drop my A - level and to carry on studying my GNVQ. So I dropped my A-level but after a week I missed music and left the college due to this." (leaver)

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5.8.3 Study Support

Managers and tutors were generally positive about study support. However, one manager described "putting" students into monitored study to "make sure that they complete their work" or "sending" them to supported self-study. Another manager felt that in-class support and the recent achievement projects had been effective. Two tutors agreed that in-class support was very effective and could lead to more referrals, but only when the support workers were 'good' i.e. working with the whole class as opposed to stigmatising individual students. Some tutors wanted more involvement, with 'drop in' sessions or subject specific support, which one tutor felt would enable a

"tighter control" on students and, indeed, some leavers had wanted more help from their tutors, or had asked them for help.

Both managers and tutors recognised reluctant students and, as can be seen from Figure 53 in Appendix 15, a high percentage of *all* students were aware that they could ask for extra support. Notably, whilst there were 16% more of the leavers, there was a significant proportion of students from both groups who stated that they did not like asking for help. Although the numbers are low, Figures 53-56 in Appendix 15 show that females, especially amongst the leavers, appeared more likely to receive support than males and were perhaps more likely to ask for help within the support system. For one manager reluctant students appeared to cause some frustration, especially when students are getting to the stage where they may be "asked to leave". *(According to one member of administrative staff, students who are not likely to achieve are interviewed usually with their parents and are sometimes asked to reconsider their position. These students, who may leave, are not identifiable from the leaver's database).* Managers had concerns about late diagnosis of difficulties, non-diagnosis from previous institutions, late referral or disregard for the system. One manager thought that there could be more A Level students referred due to support being "very much part of subject tutors spiel". Coupled with this was a perspective on some vocational areas within the College being better at referral than others. Indeed, different attitudes were found amongst the tutors with regard to referrals and diagnostic assessments. One tutor placed responsibility with the student:

> "If someone is struggling and they don't ask for help then I don't think they've any comeback." (tutor)

From the students' perspective opinions about support were given in similar proportions to finding the work difficult, with *many* persisting students making requests for more help or support, especially at the beginning of the courses and with regard to spreading the work out more. One comment appeared to relate to in-class support:

"More help should be given for each course – study support doesn't do health and social care." (persisting student)

In comparison, *few* leavers recognised that they could have benefited from some extra help and two persisting students did think that leavers might find courses *"too easy"*. Those leavers who did admit to needing some extra help were either unaware of support or asked for help (usually their tutors) and did not receive any:

"I left college last year as I felt I was too far behind in my course to catch up. I wasn't aware of the study support until it was too late and felt that the tutors didn't help me when they could see I was behind." (leaver)

Figures 56 in Appendix 15 show that a greater percentage of students from the whole cohort received some kind of support as opposed to those who left. This could mean that some of the leavers either did not need any support or that they needed support but did not receive any (it must be noted that persisting students were obviously at the College for a greater length of time than the leavers were). More crucially, however, from the leavers who *were* on the 'at risk' database only two received some kind of support. As can be seen from Figure 5j, approximately 75% of the 125 leavers were *not* on the College's recently developed 'at risk' database, which suggests that it is either difficult to establish which students are actually 'at risk' or that the process is not working effectively.

Figure 5j: Number of '125 early leavers' on *original* 'at risk' database and number of those students who received support as at beginning of April 2001

	Number of 'leavers'	%	Number who received support
Students on 'at risk' database	31	25%	2
Students not on 'at risk' database	94	75%	9
TOTAL	**125**	**100%**	**11**

(Information taken from leavers forms and original 'at risk' database as at Oct 2000)

5.8.4 Student Services

No students commented about student services and the only manager to comment appeared to have some doubt as to their role with regard to retention. In comparison, whilst one tutor suggested that staff should know more about this provision, several tutors did had positive regard for services provided such as support, careers guidance, course change advice and help with family or financial problems.

5.8.5 Feelings about Departures

Most managers and tutors were happy if leavers had moved on to something positive but several tutors were explicit about the conflict between meeting student need and the drive for retention. One student did describe being placed under pressure to stay:

> "You've got that conflict going on. What's best for the College is not always what's best for the student." (tutor)

> "I wasn't happy with the way they spoke to me when I had my leaver's interview. They tried to *force* me to stay. I told them why I wanted to leave and they said it wasn't a good enough reason! Only when my mum spoke to them they reluctantly listened. My fiancé has had the same problem with one of his 'A' level courses forcing him to leave college this year." (leaver)

Most of the managers and tutors were concerned if students had nothing to show for their time at College. Ability, commitment and provision were raised as issues:

> "What you are going to do with the qualification......it's difficult at their age to make that decision but are you being forced through this path to get this qualification.....are you going to achieve anything at university? Are you going to cope at university? Ultimately is your end goal unachievable? Are you better suited to an apprenticeship in something which you're going to be far better suited and enjoy more and achieve more in the long run?" (tutor)

On the other hand, one manager felt that the College should not accept full responsibility and several tutors also held students responsible to varying

degrees. One tutor appeared anxious about achievements and another, who agreed, was also concerned with class management and was *glad* that some students left:

> "There's some who you're quite glad to get rid of because they are a bad influence...if it were up to me they wouldn't be here ...they're fantastic the achievements and it's because we got rid of....well we didn't....they left themselves but a lot of what I call the poisoned darts .....they know that you are desperate to keep them and I mean they are not daft. I think they can see through it now....other students will think well why are they still at College because they think well if they are getting away with it why should I bother getting my assessments in on time." (tutor)

One leaver felt as though the personal tutor was glad to see them go:

> "I didn't really get on with a few teachers. They spoke to you like rubbish, I felt as though I wasn't good enough for them. When I'd left a friend told me that my personal tutor said 'All the Rubbish had gone'. I wasn't happy. That was an insult." (leaver)

5.9 Isolation

Some tutors felt that isolated students were potential leavers, especially the less able ones. One tutor suggested that students who are in one group might have difficulty in bonding, in comparison with A Level students, who have the opportunity to develop friendships within various subject or course groups. However, several tutors and managers highlighted the group or team building exercises that took place within the personal tutor system and also considered the positive side to being in one group:

> "Everybody in the personal tutor group will be on the same course whereas in A Level they could be on different courses .... it's cosy." (manager)

From Figures 57 in Appendix 15, it can be seen that similar numbers from both groups attended the College with friends and from Figure 58 in Appendix 15 most thought that the teachers did help them to mix. Nevertheless, from the ones who did not, more of the leavers appeared to have strong feelings and, as can be seen from Figure 59, there was obviously a proportion of students

who felt uncomfortable with other students. A total of six leavers had felt isolated or had experienced problems with other students.

5.10 Key points from the Four Leaver Interviews

(Fictitious names used)

Eve's Experience

- Wanted employment, independence and money from the beginning but was unaware of any opportunities
- Tried FE for parents and herself
- Thought about being a sports teacher and wanted A Levels.
- Considered other colleges, enrolled late at Fairfield which was chosen for reputation
- Asked to study A Level PE but was refused and felt that the status of BTEC was a deciding factor.
- Had enjoyed practical activities and expected more
- Was not happy with workload, timetable and pressure
- Transferred on second day to another college and completed AS levels

Jane's Experience:

- Went to Fairfield as it was local and everybody from school seemed to go
- Wanted HE and a 'practical' Art & Design course
- Was overwhelmed from the beginning and struggled with workload due to there being eight different subjects and had problems finding somewhere in College to do her work
- Did not know about support, was 'eventually' sent but did not find this helpful
- Left in January and worked full time until she could start again
- Is now doing AS levels which she finds much easier as there are less subjects so she can concentrate on more easily

Sally's Experience

- Lacked knowledge about qualifications
- Was *trying* college not to waste her GCSEs and had a second career option at the back of her mind
- Appeared to have a problem listening and understanding
- Needed to 'do' practical activities first before she could write about them
- Had a negative view of support due to her experience at school
- Would have preferred a slower start and an indication of what she would achieve.

Amy's Experience

- Had specific career options in mind and specifically chose her course for this
- Liked College except for it being a 'little bit' like school
- Expected more practical and enjoyed placements and work more than the theory on her course
- Discovered the 'quicker' NVQ route to her goal and was already working many hours a week
- Initially wondered if she was doing the right thing but is now happy and sees lots of opportunities in her career
- She sees experience as being of equal value to qualifications.

5.11 Conclusions

Some useful data was obtained from the College's newly developed Management Information System, especially with regard to retention rates of actual students. Also, valuable information was obtained from other sources within the College, such as locally constructed databases or the original enrolment forms. Although this was a finding in itself, it was both disappointing and frustrating to find insufficient or unavailable data, especially with regard to the analysis of some socio-demographic factors. Whilst gender and location were factors that could be considered, issues such as ethnicity, prior achievement, leaving dates and transfers between courses were problem areas.

Although there was some missing data from the questionnaires, for example, where students had failed to answer a question, almost all of the quantitative data from the questionnaires was included in this Chapter. However, due to the fairly low number of participants and the variety of reasons given by students for leaving, the percentages shown needed to be viewed with some caution. Nevertheless, the quantitative findings were an important part of this study, not only with regard to making comparisons between withdrawn and

persisting students, but also with regard to the interpretation of the large amounts of qualitative data, which formed the major part of this Chapter. Although few in number and, unfortunately, all from females, the key points shown from the student interviews add some support to the rest of the findings and demonstrate the complexity of each individual situation, as experienced by withdrawn students.

Obviously, these findings are unique to the Fairfield College experience. However, these can be considered within the national context and the findings from previous research can be used in order to support some of the issues raised here. The following and concluding section of this thesis draws together the various aspects of this study, in order to highlight and discuss the various influences on the withdrawal of Advanced Vocational students at Fairfield College.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This was a fascinating and challenging study, considering that Fairfield College is not one of the colleges perceived to have persistent retention problems. Indeed, having been awarded 'Beacon' status, the College is believed to have performed well in comparison with others and its proactive culture was thought to be the reason for its good retention rates. However, the complexities of data collection at a national level, including the exclusion of students leaving before the first census date each year, appears to conceal the numbers of individual students who leave at an early stage.

Despite differing aims and objectives and the use of opposing methodologies with their studies, both Fielding et al. (1998) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997,1999) highlight the need to examine individual decisions and goals rather than individual courses, classes or subjects. Indeed, the College, whilst wanting to improve their weaker 'retention' rates at vocational level, was concerned about the individuals who had left. Managers believed that there must be some action that could be taken within their institution and, following the introduction of Curriculum 2000 and a sudden rise is the Advanced Vocational withdrawal rates, the main questions raised were somewhat suggestive of College responsibility:

- **Why had these Advanced Vocational students withdrawn from the College?**
- **Why had the recently introduced strategies failed these students?**
- **In what way was the College not meeting the needs of these students?**

As pointed out by Brooks (1998) there could be three levels within which 'staying on rates' could be examined. The first two, i.e. the student and the

institution, have already been mentioned here. The third, which from a student perspective is provided by the institution, is the course or the provision available and, in this instance, the new qualifications introduced in September 2000. However, these various levels could be broken down further as there are various types of courses, colleges and students.

Dearing (1996) has suggested that more should be done to investigate the various reasons for non-completion and within this study both students and staff often gave more than one reason for withdrawal. Notably, the findings highlight the interaction that takes place between the various factors and levels, supporting the stance taken by several researchers, especially in the HE sector or in previous academic works, for example, Ozga and Sukhandan (1998) and Myers (1997).

With regard to the findings from this study, comparisons may be made with similar colleges with similar cultures. However, as discovered by Martinez (1998), the complexity of the situation, together with the use of an 'individual' institution makes generalisation difficult. Similarly, comparing or contrasting the findings from this study with the findings from any 'national' studies or studies undertaken in dissimilar institutions is problematic. Nevertheless, in order to identify influences affecting students in the context of their situation, one of the strengths of this study is its narrow focus on a specific 'level' of students within an individual institution. As long as the context of the situation is acknowledged, other studies can be considered in order to add strength to the overall findings, which in turn may add to the growing body of knowledge surrounding the 'retention' of post-compulsory students.

Only one student left for what they would describe as personal reasons and what Page (1996) would describe as a 'true' drop out. This one student had withdrawn due to a health difficulty and was intending to return to the College. With the exception of this student, the research suggests that, within the context of Fairfield College, various influences had an effect upon the retention rates of Advanced Vocational Students at the College. As highlighted

previously, factors affecting withdrawal, which often interact, are difficult to identify and cannot really be viewed in isolation. Nevertheless, in order to provide some kind of structure to this chapter 'influences on retention' are presented in separate sections. At the beginning of each section comparisons are drawn between the withdrawn students and the persisting students. Following this, whilst paying due regard to the previous literature, conclusions are drawn about the 'situation' at Fairfield and possibilities for future research are considered. Initially, however, before the key influences on retention at Fairfield are presented, various general findings regarding socio-demographics and data collection at the College need to be addressed.

6.2 Data Collection and Socio-demographics

As summarised by the NAO (2001), many previous studies have found inconsistencies with regard to the data held by colleges, especially with regard to management information systems (MIS), and this was also found to be the case at Fairfield. Dearing (1996) suggested that methods of data collection in colleges should be improved. Indeed, Fairfield had recently installed a new MIS to help with data collection and this was still being developed at the time of this research. However, the main inconsistencies were not only due to the design and capabilities of the system, but also as a direct result of data being input incorrectly or not being passed on in good time. Moreover, information was not always recorded on enrolment forms, which made collection of some socio-demographic data problematic. Nevertheless, data regarding gender was easily found and Sharpe (2000) had found that males at Fairfield were more likely to leave early. This was possibly because all three levels of vocational courses had been included in that study. Significantly, within this study of *Advanced Vocational* students, there were similar proportions of female and male students who withdrew.

6.3 Influences on Withdrawal

6.3.1 Reasons for Choosing the College

Whilst persisting students were more likely to have chosen the College for the courses or facilities, withdrawn students were more likely to have chosen the college for its reputation or location.

With regard to accountability, and from a business/financial survival perspective, Fairfield College needs to perform well. A Level courses are used as a strong marketing tool, attracting what are considered to be more able or academic students. This, in turn, raises the standard of achievement for these qualifications and A Level retention rates are much higher and have more stability than the Advanced Vocational rates. There is no doubt that the 'heavy' promotion of A Levels, together with high retention and achievement rates, contributes to the excellent reputation that this successful College holds.

As recently pointed out by the NAO (2001) and other researchers such as Davies et al., (1998) choosing the right course is very important. Therefore, there is no doubt that committed and careful 'consumers' deliberately choosing Advanced Vocational courses at a successful college with excellent facilities, contribute to the overall achievement and retention figures. In comparison, Advanced Vocational students who choose this College for its reputation or its location rather than for any particular course, or college facilities, appear more likely to leave. This suggests that for some students choosing their course is a secondary factor. Indeed, many of the vocational students at this College, who Page (1996) might describe as a diverse group of 'consumers', had much difficulty choosing a course. Being on the *wrong* course was the most common first response when leavers completed their questionnaires.

With regard to choice of course and institution, Ozga and Sukhnanden (1998:316) stress interaction with the institution and the importance of *"preparedness and compatibility"*. In this instance it would seem that some of

the withdrawn students were ill prepared and would probably have had little knowledge about the College's marketing strategies. Lack of preparation may also have been the result of interaction with previous institutions or even family members and 'informed decision making' about choice of college and course may be an area for future research.

6.3.2 Curriculum 2000 and the Status of Advanced Vocational

Although there was slightly stronger feeling amongst the withdrawn students, there were students from both groups who felt that Advanced Vocational qualifications were of a lower status when compared to A Level courses.

With regard to the New Curriculum, staff suspected that the 'more difficult' AVCEs and the introduction of Curriculum 2000 had contributed to the increased drop out rate during the first half of 2000-2001 and, indeed, several students recognised problems related to being on a 'new' course. Some persisting students appeared to have preferred GNVQs, perhaps recognising their value (Davies et.al.,1998) and despite these qualifications having had experienced problems with status in the past (Rowland, 1997; Myers, 1997).

The identification of any single or overall cause or effect is very difficult. Moreover, according to the findings of this study AVCE students appear to be no more at risk than those on other more established vocational courses. In fact, a disproportionate amount of leavers came from the new National Diploma course introduced the same year, which might suggest that the New Curriculum had made little difference at this College. Although the Advanced Vocational retention rates for 2000/2001 were no worse than in 1998/1999, there had been some improvement followed by a fall in retention rates. Therefore, it is possible that any negative effect from the New Curriculum *may* have been counteracted by the new strategies introduced after the previous research project.

Recognising a perceived lack of status within the College for Advanced Vocational qualifications, one of the strategies recommended by the previous researcher (Sharpe, 2000) included increased promotion of Advanced Vocational courses and some initiatives were implemented. However, many students knew little about the New Curriculum. Therefore, it is possible that the heavier promotion of A Levels and the strict selection policy, whilst setting a standard for students and schools to aim for, far outweighed any positive actions.

Nationally, it was expected that the improved standards and flexibility of provision would improve the status of Advanced Vocational courses, giving them parity of esteem with A Levels. However, perhaps this could only happen if the New Curriculum was *truly* embraced, with Advanced Vocational qualifications being given equal status, not only with regard to entry requirements but especially with regard to the divisive classification of 'Vocational' and A Level students. At this College, even students with mixed qualification aims were still classed as 'vocational' even if they themselves consider that a sole AS Level was their main qualification. It would be interesting to compare this issue with other colleges, which may have introduced Curriculum 2000 in a more positive way.

6.3.3 Lack of Course Choice with regard to Prior Achievement

More of the withdrawn students lacked the GCSE grades required for A Levels. Moreover, in comparison with persisting students they were less 'accepting' of their situation.

As aforementioned, choosing the 'right' course is seen as very important. Indeed, some of the withdrawn students did make a specific and positive choice. For example, there were those who could have enrolled for A Levels but who specifically *chose* an Advanced Vocational course. Others who may have been happy to choose a vocational course were possibly restricted to

certain subjects due to a lack of currency in the form of prior achievements or qualifications. The strict criteria for A Level courses meant that some students did not 'choose' a vocational course at all, and this was a possible negative factor according to some (Gordon in Noel, 1985; Cope and Hannah, 1975). For those who failed to achieve the entry requirements for A Levels and did not understand the marketing concepts, there may have been a high price to pay with regard to commitment, self-esteem and the perceived 'value' of their learning experience, factors which affect younger students according to Barwuah et.al. (1997).

Whilst persisting students were more accepting of their situation, not being able to enrol on A Level courses appears to have had a deep affect on some withdrawn students who never 'engaged' with their vocational course. They blamed the College for their predicament and, therefore, did not engage with the institution either. Mix and match within the curriculum should have offered an opportunity to counteract this but some students, who regarded their AS Level as their 'main' qualification or very important to them, were left disappointed if problems associated with enrolment, changing courses, timetables or achievement arose. This attitudinal evidence, gathered from the student questionnaires, supports Walker's (1999) notion that the difference between persisters and leavers lies in their attitude and motivation personality, linking with integration and commitment.

The strict entry requirements at the College appear to work on the principle of students with lower GCSE grades not being suited to exams. However, exams were *not* raised as a major issue for the students in this study and the coursework is no less academic than on A Level courses. Some felt their courses were not challenging enough. Indeed, many leavers considered that they had good writing ability and time-management skills, which rather suggests that some students may have been able to cope with A Level courses. In fact, five of the withdrawn students transferred to A Levels courses at other colleges.

The whole issue of selecting students for A Level courses calls into question the purpose of what are considered academic courses and vocational courses, a topic that could be researched further. Of course, vocational training was originally aimed at the 'less academic' with new qualifications introduced to meet increasing numbers of students. In more recent times, with the advent of widening participation and especially with the advent of Curriculum 2000, credibility with regard to progression is seen as a key driver. Following the national trend, almost two thirds of all the vocational students wanted to progress to HE, a concept accepted by most but not all of the staff. However, within the vocational courses, which some students do use as a pathway to employment, transferable skills were recognised by some staff as key components of the courses. Of course, transferable skills can be associated with competencies learned or the 'process' of learning and both of these are issues raised previously by other studies or academics (Noel, 1985; Adamson and McLeavy, 2000).

6.3.4   A Lack of Commitment to the Course together with a Preference for Employment, Training and Practical work, Possibly due to Lack of Ability.

Whilst some persisting students had financial concerns, withdrawn students were more concerned with the 'cost' of their commitment to the course and/or education. The value of their course was measured in terms of enjoyment and/or relevance to the workplace, especially with regard to the amount of practical activities undertaken. Lack of ability appeared to be an issue for persisting students as well as some withdrawn students.

The previous research by Sharpe (2000) highlighted lack of motivation as a key factor. Indeed, there were students who were obviously not committed, did not wish to enrol at all and, if they had been asked at the beginning of their course, as with the RCU (1998) study, may have predicted their own non-completion. Two of the withdrawn students admitted that they had enrolled to

please their parents, which supports Kenwright's (1997) claims that motivation is linked with pleasing parents. However, the data suggests lack of support rather than pressure from parents and this reinforces the view expressed by Adamson and McLeavy (2000) and Abramson and Jones (2002) that support from outside the college or 'external' factors are of some significance. This influence from parents or other external influences may be worthy of further more detailed investigation, especially if one considers the age of these students and the fact that FE is the first point at which students leave compulsory education.

Financial issues may be considered 'external' factors, according to Abramson and Jones (2002) and within this study finance can be considered alongside employment issues. More persisting students enjoyed some kind of paid employment and the hours worked appeared 'reasonable', potentially giving some kind of income whilst not interfering with their study time. In comparison, withdrawn students in employment appeared to have worked longer hours, causing difficulties on occasion. Whilst it is not known whether 'time' or 'finance' or indeed both were issues for these students, this possible 'risk' factor is supported by the work of Davies (1999) who found a strong match between the number of hours in employment (up to 10 hours) and the incidence of withdrawal.

Although high numbers stated that they were committed to completion, there were some students who would have preferred employment and some left as opportunities arose, that is, those who Page (1996) might describe as 'opportunist drop outs'. Indeed, Kenwright (1997) links low motivation with having no progression aims. Within this study, however, preference for employment was *not* expressed in terms of wanting or needing any immediate finance. Rather, once on the course the value or cost of their courses was questioned in relation to either their own enjoyment or the course's *relevance* to future employment. For these students progressing to university or even just 'staying the course' was possibly seen as a great risk within their perception of

101

the labour market, a factor noted by several other researchers, for example, Barwuah (1997) and Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998).

The students' initial commitment was, in some instances, based on their anticipated experience of a 'vocational' course. Having considered three levels of vocational students, the previous research at the college highlighted students' desire for practical work (Sharpe, 2000) and, indeed, within this study, some leavers appeared to have a strong *preference* for this. It could be said that the educational 'process' or, indeed, any 'competencies' learned are seen as important to these students, adding support to the views of Noel (1985) and Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001). Page (1996) describes some students as 'consumer' drop outs, that is, those who have gained the skills they required and indeed, within this study, some of the 'vocational' students felt that they were not gaining any skills at all.

It was not possible to link lack of interest in theory with any lack of ability. This is because the data suggests that many of the persisting students were having difficulties and many of the withdrawn students were quite able. Moreover, although some students had progressed from an intermediate level GNVQ, the College's strict entry requirements meant that the students' prior achievements should have been taken into consideration at enrolment. Some students would have preferred more structure or needed more help with time management and, in general, students from *both* groups, many of which did not participate in 'enrichment' activities, had concerns about gaps in timetables.

Many researchers have considered lack of ability and/or lack of prior achievements to be a key issue, for example, Davies (1997). However, this study, within this specific College, appears to highlight possible preferences for a 'practical' approach to learning, which may be an issue worthy of further investigation.

6.3.5 Lack of Consistency of Approach at Enrolment with regard to 'At Risk' Students

Most students were committed at the time of enrolment. However, both withdrawn and persisting students identified difficulties during the enrolment process and students from both groups felt that they had been misinformed about their courses.

Within the College, there is an emphasis on getting the right students on the right courses and many of the leavers who experienced an interview at enrolment found this helpful. Some staff and even some persisting students perceived a gap in provision and a lack of choice for some students. However, despite this, there appears to have been no consistency of approach or no obvious policy with regard to recruiting 'those who are considered to be 'weaker' uncommitted students. Responsibility for recruiting the 'right' students onto the right course and accountability for recruitment to target retention and achievement appears to have created a certain amount of tension, which in turn appears to have affected the way that some members of staff approach the recruitment, enrolment and induction processes. Some tutors appear to have been more selective than others and some students appear to have been directed onto 'appropriate' vocational courses rather than being fully informed in order to make their *own* choices at enrolment, an issue raised by the HE researchers Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998). Some students, who may or may not have been attentive, appear to have received a false impression or had little correct knowledge about the amount of practical sessions on their courses, assessments and even the New Curriculum.

The dilemma faced by colleges, as they attempt to balance student numbers and funding in the context of performance is a topic that has been discussed in the past. (Myers,1997; Davies et al.,1998). Indeed, with regard to recruitment and retention, the drive to widen participation has been highlighted as an issue that needs addressing (Overton et.al., 2001). At Fairfield, most tutors appeared happy to recruit what they considered to be 'weaker' students.

103

However, the pressure on some tutors to select students more likely to achieve and complete their courses possibly arises from the pro-active culture of the College, which, rather ironically, may be partially responsible for the College successes. After all, the strict entry requirements at this College ensure that students are selected onto 'appropriate' courses by virtue of their GCSE grades. This possibly contributes to the high levels of achievement at the College, where high proportions of non-vocational A Level students are retained successfully.

In order to improve retention, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2000) and Martinez (1996) suggest that the culture of a college may need to be considered or changed. However, it appears that the pro-active culture at this already successful College works both for and against the retention of students, which creates a possible dilemma if any cultural change is to be considered. Nevertheless, comparison with other successful colleges that have similar or differing cultures may be worthy of consideration.

6.3.6 Lack of Support and Pressure to Achieve

A smaller proportion of the withdrawn students were on the 'at risk' database and were less likely to have received support. This was possibly due to their lack of perceived need or poor referrals from personal tutors. Moreover, less than 7% of all students actually changed courses during the induction period. This was despite approximately half of the withdrawn students and approximately a quarter of persisting students having considered this. Several students who withdrew were concerned about pressure to attend or achieve, the atmosphere in College and/or not being treated as adults. These problems were also recognised by some persisting students.

The previous researcher at the College (Sharpe, 2000) had raised issues surrounding recruitment and retention and, as a result, various attempts were made to improve this process, including the introduction of an 'at risk' register, similar to those found within other developmental studies (Kenwright 1997, Overton et al., 2001). Advanced Vocational students were felt to be at risk if they had enrolled late (according to a date arbitrarily set by the College) or if they had really wanted A Level courses. However, this 'at risk' strategy does not appear to have been effective at Fairfield. About three-quarters of the leavers were not actually on the register and few of those who were on the register actually received or needed any support. Quite significantly, the only tutor to highlight the 'at risk' register did so in the context of identifying students who would probably leave rather than requesting or needing any form of help or support. Another strategy recommended by the previous research was the option for students to change courses. Although many students had considered this, few actually changed courses, which may have been due to the reluctance of some tutors to encourage or allow this. As with 'redirection' at enrolment, this inability to change course appears to take 'control' away from the students, a motivational factor that Mackie (2001) would, no doubt, support.

Whilst not attaching blame to students, Mackie (2001) suggests that initial commitment and potential may not be exploited and according to Myers (1997) 'marginal' students can be converted with positive factors, thereby counteracting any negative ones. At this College, weaker students who are enrolled obviously need some kind of support. However, although partially overcome by good in-class support and the 'male' under-achievement projects, there is still some stigma or reluctance to receive 'extra' help. Also, as with the recruitment and enrolment process, there are also some inconsistencies, in this instance, with regard to the referral of students to study support. The pastoral system within the College is obviously very effective for the majority of students with the personal tutor being a key contact. Unfortunately, however, if there are students who have to wait their 'turn' for

an individual session, an opportunity to change any negative attitudes or refer students on to support may have been missed, a theme highlighted by Sharpe (2000) who recommended more time for personal reviews within the pastoral system.

Students are constantly monitored for attendance and the previous researcher found that absenteeism increases the risk of withdrawal. Although the *reasons* for being absent differed greatly, the leavers in this study appeared no more likely to be absent than other students. Students are also monitored for achievement and, whilst being of benefit to many students, the proactive culture of the College (with its high numbers and pressure to achieve) appears not to suit all students. Indeed, there were leavers who had issues relating to the atmosphere in the College, high numbers, being like school, lack of communication and pressure to achieve. Notably, according to the NAO (2001) achievement rates have improved whilst retention rates have not. This might suggest that, with regard to the aim of providing an enjoyable learning experience and thereby widening participation, the effects of pressure to achieve on students is counter-productive.

Within the culture of high achievement at Fairfield, it is possible that the sometimes-conflicting role of supporting *and* monitoring students for attendance and achievement may have had a negative effect on some students and also may have made some personal tutors less approachable. Perhaps there is a possible connection between this and the fact that there were a small number of students who left specifically because of a poor relationship with their personal tutor, another factor previously highlighted by Sharpe (2000) at Fairfield.

6.3.7 Isolation

Although some persisting students had sometimes felt isolated, over 10% of the leavers withdrew due to some kind of isolation or problems with other students.

106

Most tutors appear to have been generally *very* supportive of students and suggested that they positively encouraged group cohesion. Despite their efforts, however, student 'sociability' was an issue raised by the previous research at Fairfield (Sharpe, 2000) and over 10% of students from this study withdrew because they felt isolated in some way. This was possibly made more unbearable by the rural location of the College, coupled with long days and gaps in timetables. Isolated students have perhaps always been at risk on vocational courses where, as noted by staff at the College, students are a member of a single group, in comparison with A Level students who may have more opportunities to form friendships from several different subject groups. This factor, which may be specific to vocational courses, may also be worthy of further investigation, especially across differing types of colleges. At Fairfield if these students could have been identified, they may have benefited from counselling or other help from student services. However, this facility appears to have a surprisingly low profile for some members of staff.

6.4 Final Words

It must be remembered that Fairfield is a very successful college that meets the needs of the majority of its students and the local community that it serves. Indeed, this research was as a result of the College's ongoing quest for improvement. However, in order to answer the questions posed at the beginning of this Chapter, the negative influences or factors shaping student decision making within this College have been considered, including those at institutional level.

Irrespective of gender, which was not found to be a significant factor in this study, the all-important person at the heart of retention issues is the *student*. After all, this is the person with or without the motivation, who, ultimately, decides whether to leave or whether to stay. Ideally, a positive choice should

be made with regard to 'staying on' in the post compulsory sector. However, as this study has shown, there were some students at Fairfield who lacked the initial commitment to FE, which no doubt contributed, to their eventual withdrawal.

External factors, such as parental influence, the attraction of or opportunities for employment and working long hours were seen to influence decision-making. With regard to lack of financial 'capital' some of the withdrawn students related this to the 'cost' or 'value' of their courses, possibly concerned about the time and effort that they would need put in and how this would help with any future employment. Indeed, some of the leavers had given much thought to their options and relevance to the world of work was given much emphasis. Notably, for some students 'doing' rather than 'learning' was a significant factor with 'skills' rather than 'theory' given much importance. This perhaps calls into question the purpose and structure of Advanced Vocational courses.

A committed well-informed and well-prepared student might make a positive choice about which College to attend. One of the most significant findings from this study was that persisting students were more likely to do this on the basis of the courses offered or the facilities which would enable them to succeed. Indeed, some of the isolated students had continued with their course, which suggests that if the *course* was the 'right' choice other potential withdrawal factors might be overcome. Withdrawn students, who were possibly impressed by the College's reputation or concerned about accessibility, were less likely to have considered courses as a primary concern. Those who had considered A Levels rather than Advanced Vocational courses had actually chosen the College first and had, therefore, accepted a second choice with regard to their qualification aims. In this respect, the College's rural location and excellent reputation appear to be have been counterproductive.

The lack of choice due to lack of prior achievement is obviously a negative factor. This is compounded by the poor status of Advanced Vocational courses

and, consequently, the poor status of vocational students within the College. Although attempts have been made to combat the lack of parity of esteem between A Levels and vocational qualifications, both nationally and within the College, this still appears to be a problem. Whilst the persisting students in this study accepted the fact that they did not have the entry requirements, some withdrawn students blamed the College rather than themselves for their predicament. Disappointment also ensued if course changes could not take place, a situation apparently outside of the students' control.

At this College, the selection of what are considered to be more academically able students onto the non-vocational A Level courses no doubt improves achievement at that level. It is not surprising, therefore, that within this culture of 'achievement' there are vocational tutors who would like to be more selective when enrolling students onto their courses, especially as some of these courses are now 'considered' to be more difficult. Whether students are selected or 'directed' onto what are considered the right courses or whether students are empowered to make their own fully 'informed' choices, is a dilemma that this College may need to address, especially in the context of widening participation. Although there were tutors who wanted to help the 'weaker' students or needed the numbers for their courses to run, the whole concept of enrolling the 'right' students onto the right courses at this College in part fails to recognise the existence of uncommitted or 'weaker' students, who may need much more support in changing negative attitudes. It may need to be recognised or 'accepted' that enrolling students of this nature may impinge on any achievement targets set and that retention rates may be affected by the pressure to achieve.

This study has shown that the Advanced Vocational students that withdrew from Fairfield during 2000-2001 did so for a variety of reasons. They appear to have had various issues to contend with such as pressure to achieve, possible isolation, being in a diverse group and having a lack of status. Whilst an attempt was made to address some of these factors within the recently introduced strategies, it is clear that for some students there was a lack of

commitment to further education which perhaps, in turn, meant a lack of commitment to course choice. Some students had little choice and/or chose the College rather than the course. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they did not value or enjoy their learning experience, especially when this was not what they expected from a *vocational* course.

Advanced Vocational tutors also had to cope with many of the issues raised. They also had the added burden of responsibility for admissions, achievement and retention but with an apparent lack of clarity with regard to policy and process, and especially with regard to widening participation. In these circumstances, the lower retention rates for Advanced Vocational students at this college are perhaps understandable and may be a partial consequence of the success the College enjoys. However, this does not mean that they are acceptable, or that there is no room for improvement.

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Figure 1: Enrolments and retention rates at all colleges on notional level three long qualifications (16-18) year olds

		97/98	98/99	99/2000
Number of starters (rounded to the nearest 100)		493,900	487,200	506,200
Breakdown of number of starters (rounded)				
GCSE A/AS levels (%)		69%	66%	61%
GNVQ and precursors(%)		18%	17%	17%
NVQs (%)		3%	3%	2%
Other(%)		10%	14%	20%
Retention rate	*mean*	**78%**	**77%**	**78%**
Retention rate	*25th percentile*	**72%**	**72%**	**72%**
	median	**77%**	**77%**	**78%**
	75th percentile	**82%**	**81%**	**83%**

Information taken from LSC Benchmarking Data (2001:15)

Appendix 2

Figure 2: In-year retention of full-time full year students (in 000s) enrolled on council funded FE provision in further education sector colleges and external institutions in England in 99/2000 by level and type of qualification

Level	Qualification	98/99	99/2000	99/2000		
		% retained	% retained	no. withdrawn	No. continuing completed	Total
Level 1 and entry	(total)	82.2%	81.0%	12.3	52.1	64.3
Level 2	(total)	82.0%	81.5%	30.4	134.4	164.8
Level 3	GCSE A/AS	92.8%	92.5%	11.3	139.9	151.2
	GNVQ Precursor	86.8%	85.4%	12.6	74.1	86.8
	GNVQ	86.6%	86.0%	12.0	73.7	85.7
	NVQ	87.1%	86.8%	2.1	13.9	16.0
	Access to HE	77.8%	78.4%	4.5	16.4	20.9
	Other	89.8%	88.7%	5.6	44.0	49.6
	(total)	88.9%	88.3%	48.1	362.0	410.1
Levels 4,5& HE	(total)	89.9%	91.1%	0.6	5.7	6.3
Level not specified		84.3%	78.9%	4.3	16.0	203.3
All levels		86.5%	85.6%	95.6	570.1	665.8

Note:
- students on programmes of less than 12 weeks in length are excluded from this table
- the data only includes data for 389 colleges and 202 external institutions
- numbers are in thousands and may not add up due to differential rounding

Information taken from LSC Statistical first release (Full year 2001)

Figure 3: In-year retention of full time full year 16-18 year old students (in 000s) enrolled on council funded FE provision in further education sector colleges and external institutions in England in 1998/1999 and 1999/2000 by institution type and age

Institution type	98/99	99/2000	99/2000		
	% retained	% retained	No. withdrawn	No continuing	Total
General FE and tertiary colleges	85.7%	84.8%	53.1	296.4	349.5
Sixth form Colleges	92.5%	92.3%	8.5	103.1	111.6
Other Colleges	89.0%	89.3%	0.9	7.4	8.3
External Institutions	80.8%	72.1%	0.1	0.2	0.2
Total all Institutions	87.4%	86.7%	62.6	407.01	469.7

Note:
• students on programmes of less than 12 weeks are not included
• the data only includes data for 389 colleges and 202 external institutions
• numbers are in thousands and may not add up due to differential rounding

Information taken from LSC Statistical first release (Full year 2001)

Figure 4: Destinations of full time full year students (in 000s) completing Council-funded programmes in FE sector colleges and external institutions in England in 99/2000 by level and type of qualification

Level	Qualification	FE	HE	Employ	Other	Unknown	Total
Level 1 and entry	(total)	11.1	0.3	2.0	1.4	30.3	45.2
Level 2	(total)	29.2	1.0	10.1	3.3	71.8	115.4
Level 3	**GCSE A/AS**	**3.9**	**24.9**	**4.1**	**2.3**	**34.5**	**69.8**
	GNVQ Precursor	**3.2**	**6.7**	**5.5**	**1.4**	**20.1**	**37.0**
	GNVQ	**2.9**	**7.5**	**4.7**	**1.2**	**20.6**	**36.9**
	NVQ	**1.1**	**0.1**	**2.3**	**0.3**	**6.7**	**10.6**
	Access to HE	**1.3**	**4.4**	**0.4**	**0.4**	**8.6**	**15.1**
	Other	**4.0**	**3.9**	**4.9**	**1.4**	**19.8**	**34.0**
	(total)	**16.5**	**47.6**	**22.0**	**7.0**	**110.2**	**203.3**
Levels 4,5& HE	(total)	0.5	0.2	0.7	0.1	3.0	4.5
Level not specified		2.6	0.1	0.4	0.4	10.5	14.0
All levels		**60.0**	**49.2**	**35.1**	**12.3**	**225.8**	**382.4**
% students		15.7%	12.9%	9.2%	3.2%	59.1%	100%
% students (98/99)		14.9%	12.3%	9.5%	3.8%	59.5%	100%

Notes:
- only includes data for 389 colleges and 202 external institutions
- numbers are in thousands and may not add up due to differential rounding

Information taken from LSC Statistical first release (Full year 2001)

Figure 5: Total number of all applicants and all accepts into HE by main qualifications

		2 or more A level passes	GNVQ	Total of all qualifications
1996	all applicants	198035	22380	364885
	accepts	**164125**	**13895**	**268289**
1997	all applicants	214862	29757	398327
	accepts	**183123**	**19334**	**303318**
1998	all applicants	213876	32715	389588
	accepts	**181459**	**22413**	**298220**
1999	all applicants	214886	33693	388691
	accepts	**183852**	**23396**	**303065**
2000	all applicants	213718	35708	389091
	accepts	**185348**	**25583**	**308718**

Information taken from UCAS Website - Facts and Figures (2001)

May 2001

Dear Participant,

Research into 'retention' issues and the Advanced Vocational courses at Fairfield College

I am currently a researcher in the Education Studies Department of the University of Central Lancashire and I am working on project at Fairfield College. This involves finding out why some students leave before completing their course. I am particularly interested in students who enrolled at Fairfield College on an **Advanced Vocational course** at the beginning of this academic year and who have since **left** College.

The research may be of national interest, due to the introduction of the new Vocational 'A' level this year and I am hoping that the findings will be of some use in helping students like you in the future both regionally and nationally.

As you enrolled for an **Advanced Vocational course** at Fairfield College this year and left the College between September 2000 and April 2001, your details and views will make a worthwhile contribution to the research project. I would very much like to consider **your** experiences before, during and after the 'enrolment' procedure.

I would be extremely grateful if you would complete the enclosed a questionnaire, which will only take 10 minutes of your time. Please answer as many questions as possible, even if your course was not a vocational 'A' level and even if you left at the very beginning of the year. It may require some thought but should be fairly easy to complete, as it consists mainly of tick boxes. There is a section at the end where you can add further comments if you wish and I would welcome this. If you have any difficulties please feel free to telephone me at the university on (phone number given) or email me at (email address given).

Please could you return the completed form **within the next two weeks** to myself at the university. I have enclosed a 'pre-paid' envelope for this purpose and I would like to reassure you that any information that you put on the form will be kept strictly confidential. That is, your name will not be used alongside any information that you have given.

In anticipation of your help, thank you very much.

Yours faithfully

Figure 6: Gender details of '125' leavers who did and who did not return their questionnaires

	Leavers who returned questionnaire *n*	%	Leavers who failed to return questionnaire *n*	%	Total Number of leavers	%
Male	25	43%	32	48%	57	46%
Female	33	57%	35	52%	68	54%
TOTAL	58	100%	67	100%	125	100%

Figure 7: Demographic details of the'125' leavers who did and who did not return their questionnaires

By postcode area (details withheld in order to provide anonymity for the College)	Number of leavers who returned questionnaire	Number of leavers who failed to return questionnaire	Totals
	33	30	62
	19	22	41
	3	5	10
	1	1	1
	1	4	5
	1	1	2
	0	4	4
TOTAL	58	67	125

Figure 8: Progression and 'at risk' details of '125' leavers who did and who did not return their questionnaire

	Number and percentage of leavers who returned questionnaire	Number and percentage of leavers who failed to return questionnaire	Total Number of leavers
Known progressed students	13(22%)	10 (15%)	23
On 'at risk' register	16 (27%)	15 (22%)	31

Figure 9: The recorded *main* qualification details of '125' Leavers who did and who did not return their questionnaires

Title of course	Students who returned questionnaire	Students who failed to return Questionnaire	Number of 'leavers'
Vocational A level courses			
Health & Social care	5	7	12
Travel & Tourism	3	9	12
Leisure & Recreation	1	6	7
Hospitality Management/Catering	1	2	3
IT	4	3	7
Engineering	2	3	5
Science	4	3	7
Business	6	4	10
Media	5	3	8
Art & Design	4	2	6
SUB TOTAL	35	42	77
Other courses			
ND Early Years	3	2	5
ND Sports Studies	5	2	7
ND Public Services	8	8	16
ND Graphic Design	1	4	5
ND Drama	0	7	7
CACHE	5	1	6
Advanced Secretarial	1	1	2
SUB TOTAL	23	25	48
TOTAL	58	67	125

Questionnaire - Withdrawn students from Fairfield College on First year Advanced Vocational Courses. *Please tick a box for your responses where appropriate*

ID.

About your general experience of applying and coming to Fairfield College

1. Please could you state which secondary school you attended *(Please give the full title)* If you were at Fairfield the year before your advanced course please state 'FAIRFIELD'	**4.** **What else helped you to make your choice?** *(Please tick all that apply)* Fairfield college brochures □ Fairfield College web site □ Open Evening □ Taster day at Fairfield □ Other *(please specify)* □	**9.** Did you understand the difference between Vocational courses and 'A' level courses? YES □ NO □
2. Did you talk to anybody about whether or not to begin (or continue in) further education? *(Please tick all that apply)* Careers Officer□ Teacher/Tutor□ Fairfield College representative□ Representative from another college□ Parent/Guardian□ Partner□ Friend□ Brother/Sister□ Employer□ Other *(please specify)* □	**5.** **If you were at school** before enrolling at Fairfield, did you experience a <u>one to one interview</u> at school with someone from Fairfield College? YES □ NO □ **6.** **Was this helpful?** YES □ NO □	**10.** Were you told anything about Vocational 'A' levels before you enrolled? YES □ NO □ **11.** Did you know the difference between Vocational 'A' levels and Advanced GNVQs? YES □ NO □ **12.** Did you know how your work was going to be assessed on your course before you enrolled? YES □ NO □
3. Did you talk to anybody to help you choose your further education course? *(Please tick all that apply)* Careers Officer□ Teacher/Tutor□ Fairfield representative□ Representative from another college□ Parent/Guardian□ Partner□ Friend□ Brother/Sister□ Employer□ Other *(please specify)* □	**7.** If you were at College before enrolling did you receive any advice about **moving on to the advanced vocational courses** before your enrolment? YES □ NO□ **8.** **Was this helpful?** YES □ NO□	**13.** If you were enrolled onto a Vocational 'A' level Course, were you aware of any options that you may have had with regard to AS level, single or double awards? YES □ NO □ **14.** Did you see the course handbook at any time? YES □ NO □ **15.** Were you aware that you could look at the course handbook? YES □ NO □

16. Did you make what you would consider to be a last minute decision to enrol at Fairfield? YES ☐ NO ☐

17. If so, what was the reason for this? ....

18. Please state the date you enrolled if you can remember? ....

19. Did you have an interview at enrolment? YES ☐ NO ☐

20. Was this helpful? YES ☐ NO ☐

21. Did anyone ask to see your records of achievement at enrolment? YES ☐ NO ☐

---

22. Did you consider enrolling at another college? YES ☐ NO ☐

23. If Yes, why did you enrol at Fairfield? ....

24. Did you consider applying for or enrolling for 'A' levels (rather than a vocational course) at Fairfield or any other college? YES ☐ NO ☐

25. If yes why did you eventually enrol onto an advanced vocational course?

....

26. When you actually enrolled, was it on the course you originally chose? YES ☐ NO ☐

27. Were you happy about your final course decision when you actually enrolled? YES ☐ NO ☐

28. Were you committed to completing the course at the time of enrolment? YES ☐ NO ☐

---

29. Please state the date you left if you can remember?..

30. Did you consider leaving during the first six weeks? YES ☐ NO ☐

31. Did you consider changing courses during the first six weeks? YES ☐ NO ☐

32. Did you change courses during the first six weeks? YES ☐ NO ☐

---

33. If you were absent from your course before you left – please could you give the reason(s) for your absence?

34. Were you in any kind of paid employment whilst you were at College? YES ☐ NO ☐

35. If YES please state average number of hours worked per week..

---

36. Did you take part in any 'enrichment' activities (e.g. football, counselling, etc.)? YES ☐ NO ☐

37. If so did you enjoy these activities? YES ☐ NO ☐

Please tick one box in each line that reflects how you feel about each statement

	About applying/coming to Further education (please think back to before enrolling at Fairfield)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither or N/A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
38	I very much wanted to go to College					
39	Other people/parents expected me to go to college					
40	Choosing a course was difficult					
41	I was happy with my GCSE grades					
42	Most of my friends were going to Fairfield					
43	Advanced Vocational courses are equal to A levels					
44	'A' levels are more difficult than vocational subjects					
45	I didn't have any specific career plans					
46	I knew all about employment and training opportunities before I chose to enrol					
47	I knew exactly which subject or course I wanted to study					
48	I want to go on to Higher Education					

	About your course and your experiences at Fairfield College	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither or N?A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
49	I received helpful information at the start of my course					
50	I knew exactly what I had to do to pass the course					
51	The teaching on the course was good					
52	I thought the course was interesting					
53	I manage my time well					
54	I was finding the work difficult					
55	I have good writing skills					
56	I prefer exams to coursework					
57	I enjoyed the key skills element of my course					
58	I knew that I could ask for extra support					
59	I don't like asking for extra help					
60	I expected more practical sessions					
61	My personal tutor was helpful					
62	The subject tutors were helpful					
63	I felt comfortable with the other students					
64	The teaching staff helped the students on my course to mix together					

About leaving and what you are doing now

65. I am aware that you may have already given a reason for leaving college but there may be more than one reason for you to have made this decision. Please could you tell me the reason(s) why you left?

66. What is your current position? (Please tick - which of the following applies)

Other College	
Full time employment	
Full time employment with training	
Part-Time employment	
Part-time employment with training	
Other (*please state*)	

67. If you are at another college please state which college and which course you are enrolled on?

College	Course

68. If you are hoping to enrol on another course next year please state which college and which course?

College	Course

Further Comments

69. If you have any comments that you think will be useful, please feel free to state them below or continue on a separate sheet:

70. Participants may be selected for an interview either in person or by telephone. If selected would you be willing to participate further? YES ☐ NO ☐

Thank you very much for your time and co-operation in completing and this questionnaire.

Questionnaire – Current Students

Name:

Experience of enrolees at Fairfield College on First year Advanced Vocational Courses.
Please tick a box for your responses where appropriate

---

1. Please could you state which secondary school you attended *(Please give the full title)* **If you were at·Fairfield the year before your advanced course please state 'FAIRFIELD'**

2. Did you talk to anybody about whether or not to begin (or continue in) further education?
(Please tick all that apply)
Careers Officer☐
Teacher/Tutor☐
Fairfield College representative☐
Representative from another college☐
Parent/Guardian☐
Partner☐
Friend☐
Brother/Sister☐
Employer☐
Other *(please specify)* ☐

3. Did you talk to anybody to help you choose your further education course?
(Please tick all that apply)
Careers Officer☐
Teacher/Tutor☐
Fairfield representative☐
Representative from another college☐
Parent/Guardian☐
Partner☐
Friend☐
Brother/Sister☐
Employer☐
Other *(please specify)* ☐

4. What else helped you to make your choice?
(Please tick all that apply)
Fairfield college brochures ☐
Fairfield College web site ☐
Open Evening ☐
Taster day at Fairfield ☐
Other *(please specify)* ☐

5. If you were at school before enrolling at Fairfield, did you experience a one to one interview at school with someone from Fairfield College?
YES ☐ NO ☐

6. Was this helpful?
YES ☐ NO ☐

7. If you were at College before enrolling did you receive any advice about moving on to the advanced vocational courses before your enrolment?
YES ☐ NO☐

8. Was this helpful?
YES ☐ NO☐

9. Did you understand the difference between Vocational courses and 'A' level courses?
YES ☐ NO ☐

10. Were you told anything about Vocational 'A' levels before you enrolled?
YES ☐ NO ☐

11. Did you know the difference between Vocational 'A' levels and Advanced GNVQs?
YES ☐ NO ☐

12. Did you know how your work was going to be assessed on your course before you enrolled?
YES ☐ NO ☐

13. If you were enrolled onto a Vocational 'A' level Course, were you aware of any options that you may have had with regard to AS level, single or double awards?
YES ☐ NO ☐

14. Did you see the course handbook at any time?
YES ☐ NO ☐

15. Were you aware that you could look at the course handbook?
YES ☐ NO ☐

16. Did you make what you would consider to be a last minute decision to enrol at Fairfield? YES ☐ NO ☐

17. If so, what was the reason for this? ....

18. Please state the date you enrolled if you can remember? ....

19. Did you have an interview at enrolment? YES ☐ NO ☐

20. Was this helpful? YES ☐ NO ☐

21. Did anyone ask to see your records of achievement at enrolment? YES ☐ NO ☐

---

22. Did you consider enrolling at another college? YES ☐ NO ☐

23. If Yes why did you enrol at Fairfield? ....

24. Did you consider applying for or enrolling for 'A' levels (rather than a vocational course) at Fairfield or any other college? YES ☐ NO ☐

25. If yes why did you eventually enrol onto an advanced vocational course?

....

26. When you actually enrolled was it on the course you originally chose? YES ☐ NO ☐

27. Were you happy about your final course decision when you actually enrolled? YES ☐ NO ☐

28. Are you committed to completing your course? YES ☐ NO ☐

---

29. Not applicable

30. Not applicable

31. Did you consider changing courses during the first six weeks? YES ☐ NO ☐

32. Did you change courses during the first six weeks?   YES ☐ NO ☐

---

33. If you have been absent from your course at any time could you give the reason(s) please?

34. Are you in any kind of paid employment?   YES ☐ NO ☐

35. If YES please state average number of hours worked per week...

---

36. Do you take part in any enrichment activities (foe example, football, counselling etc.)? YES ☐ NO ☐

37. Do you enjoy these activities? YES ☐ NO ☐

Please tick one box in each line that reflects how you feel about each statement

	About applying/coming to Further education *(please think back to before enrolling at Fairfield)*	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither or N/A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
38	I very much wanted to go to College					
39	Other people/parents expected me to go to college					
40	Choosing a course was difficult					
41	I was happy with my GCSE grades					
42	Most of my friends were going to Fairfield					
43	Advanced Vocational courses are equal to A levels					
44	'A' levels are more difficult than vocational subjects					
45	I didn't have any specific career plans					
46	I knew all about employment and training opportunities before I chose to enrol					
47	I knew exactly which subject or course I wanted to study					
48	I want to go on to Higher Education					

	About your course and your experiences at Fairfield College	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither or N?A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
49	I received helpful information at the start of my course					
50	I know exactly what I have to do to pass the course					
51	The teaching on the course is good					
52	The course was interesting					
53	I manage my time well					
54	I find the work difficult					
55	I have good writing skills					
56	I prefer exams to coursework					
57	I enjoy the key skills element of my course					
58	I know that I can ask for extra support					
59	I don't like asking for extra help					
60	I expected more practical sessions					
61	My personal tutor is helpful					
62	The subject tutors are helpful					
63	I feel comfortable with the other students					
64	The teaching staff help the students on my course to mix together					

65. Why do you think that some students leave advanced vocational courses?

(Please turn over)

66. Please state which advanced vocational course you are enrolled on.

67. NOT APPLICABLE
68. NOT APPLICABLE

69. What do you think that the college could do to prevent students from leaving?

Any Further comments:

70. Participants may be selected for an interview either in person or by telephone. If selected would you be willing to participate further?   YES ☐ NO ☐

Thank you very much for your time and co-operation in completing and this questionnaire.

Figure 10: Proportions of non-management teaching staff involved with Advanced Vocational courses, who have been at the College for *less* than two years

		Key skills and GCSE	personal tutors	course leaders	part time	full time	Totals males and females
Male	12	(3)	(3)	(2)	(1)	(11)	12
Female	30	(2)	(11)	(3)	(10)	(20)	30
Totals	42	(5)	(14)	(5)	(11)	(31)	42

Figure 11: Proportions of non-management teaching staff involved with Advanced Vocational courses, who have been at the College for *more* than two years

		key skills and GCSE	personal tutors	course leaders	part time	full time	Total males and females
Male	30	(5)	(9)	(3)	(3)	(27)	30
Female	43	(9)	(18)	(6)	(10)	(33)	43
Total	73	(14)	(27)	(9)	(13)	(60)	73

Figure 12: Proportions of *all* non-management teaching staff involved with Advanced Vocational courses

		key skills and GCSE	personal tutors	course leaders	part time	full time	Total males and females
Totals from above	73	(14)	(27)	(9)	(13)	(60)	42
	42	(5)	(14)	(5)	(11)	(31)	73
Grand total	115	(19)	(41)	(14)	(24)	(91)	115
Suggested proportions	10% = 11.5 = 11	19:96 = 2:9	41:74 = 4:7	14:101 = 1:10	24:91 = 2:9		42:73 = 4:7

Figure 13: Proportions of non-management teaching staff aimed for and proportions achieved

Number of proposed interviews: 11 tutors	to include: ➢ 4 males and 7 females ➢ 2 key skills tutors ➢ 2 part time staff and 9 full time staff ➢ four personal tutors ➢ one course leader
Proportions <u>actually</u> achieved: 11 tutors	including: ➢ 4 males and seven females ➢ 2 key skills tutors ➢ 2 part time staff and 9 full time staff ➢ 7 personal tutors ➢ 2 course leaders

Figure 14: Tutor representation achieved with regard to subjects taught

VOCATIONAL A LEVEL
IT
Art & Design
Engineering
Business
Travel & Tourism
Leisure and Recreation
Hospitality and Management/ Catering
Health and Social Care
NATIONAL DIPLOMAS AND OTHER COURSES
N.D. Public Service
N.D. Science (Sport Studies)
Vocational A level Science
Early Years
CACHE
KEY SKILLS **(key skills tutors also have contact with and teach students from other areas)**
Key Skills Maths
Key Skills IT
Key Skills Communication

Note: Every area was represented with the exception of drama, media studies, and advanced secretarial. However, several of the tutors taught key skills sometimes in addition to their specialism, which may have included other areas.

Questions (with prompts) for Semi-Structured interviews with Staff

➤ What do you think about the College's overall retention rates?

- Levels of retention across the College?
- Why?

➤ In your opinion, why do some Advanced Vocational students leave early?

- Any other reasons?
- 2 main reasons?

➤ How do you <u>feel</u> about students who leave their course of study?

- Your course - teacher's perspective?
- College point of view?
- Student's point of view?
- What the student does after leaving?

➤ With regard to this College, how do you feel about **marketing** and **the recruitment and enrolment** of Advanced Vocational students?

- Comparison - other colleges /employment
- Marketing materials
- information - quality- amounts
- How do you think that students choose their course/college
- Advanced Vocational course

➤ What is your opinion of **Advanced Vocational** qualifications?

- Purpose?
- Status/value?
- Comparison with alternatives/employment/academic
- New Vocational A level

➢ Have you any thoughts about the introduction of the new Vocational A level with regard to retention rates at this College?

- retention?
- Better or worse?
- Why?

➢ What do you think about the information that students receive during induction?

- Quality
- Amount
- Changing courses

➢ What is your perspective on student support, study support and student services in relation to the retention of students?
- How do you see the Role?
- Value
- Communication between departments

➢ What is your opinion of the personal tutor role?
- Structure or role?
- Effective?
- Have you thought about how it fits in with retention of students?

➢ Can you try and think of any examples of anything that **you as an individual** do at the moment to improve the retention rate of Advanced Vocational students?

➢ Have you any thoughts about **what you, as an individual** would like to do to improve retention rates amongst Advanced Vocational students?

➢ In your opinion what do you think **the College** could do to improve retention rates amongst Advanced Vocational students at this College?

➢ **Finally,** outside of the questions that I have asked have you anything else to say about the retention of Advanced Vocational students?

Figure 15: Initial Coding frame

Master Code	Code	Sub-Code	Tag/label	Source (Etic/ Emic)
RET			**Retention rates**	**Et**
	RETK		---knowledge	Et
		RETK/I	---issues	Em
	RETF		---feelings about rates	Et
STUD			**Students**	**Et**
	STUDL		--students/leaving	Et
	STUDF		--students/feelings	Et
MARK			**Marketing/recruitment/enrolment**	**Et**
	MARKI		---information	Et
	MARKR		---choosing college	Et
	MARKC		---choosing course	Et
		MARKC/S	----specific	Em
		MARKC/P	----package	Em
		MARKC/A	----A levels/assessments	Em
	MARKS		----suitability / selection	Em
	MARKL		----late enrolees	Em
CURR			**Curriculum 2000**	**Et**
	CURRD		---development/ general/nat	Em
	CURRV		---vocational	Et
		CURRV/S	---status/value	Et
		CURRV/P	---purpose	Et
		CURRV/A	---assessment	Em
		CURRV/AB	---student ability	Em
	CURRO		---other courses	Em
	CURRKS		---key skills	Em
	CURRT		---time tabling	Em
	CURRR		---retention	Et
IND			**Induction**	**Et**
	INDQ		----information quality	Et
	INDA		----information amounts	Et
	INDC		----changing courses	Et
	INDD		---diagnostic	Em

STAFF			Personal tutor	Et
	PT		---tutor role	Et
		PT/G	---group work	Em
		PT/A	---absences	Em
		PT/C	---chasing up work	Em
		PT/T	---time/resources	Em
	PTA		---staff skills and abilities	Em
	PTR		---retention	Et
SUP			Support	Et
	SUPS		---study support	Et
		SUPS/G	---stigma	Em
		SUPS/L	---learning difficulties	Em
		SUPS/I	---- in class	Em
		SUPS/R	----referral	Em
		SUPS/P	----projects	Em
		SUPS/C	----communication	Et
		SUPS/D	---suitability to course	Em
	SUPS/SP		---subject specific support	Em
	SUPSS		---student services	Et

Note: Additionally colour codes were used to identify the following as often multiple comments were made in these categories that were also coded as above.

- 'reasons for good overall retention rates at the College'
- 'actions'
- 'suggestions for further actions'

Semi-Structured Questions for Leavers Interviews

- Can you tell me what you think is the difference between Advanced Vocational qualifications and AS levels or traditional A levels?

- What knowledge did you have about progression to employment or HE before enrolling on your course?

- What was the deciding factor for you when you chose your course?

- How did you know what the entry requirement was?

- How did you feel during induction?

- Where you aware that you could change course? - If you thought about changing courses describe situation?

- How did you feel about the support services at the College?

- How did you feel when you left?

- How do you feel about the situation now?

- What would have made you stay at College?

- What could the College have done to improve things for you personally before enrolment?

Student interviews 'whole' accounts
Note: Fictitious names have been used

Eve's Experience

Eve was more interested in employment than going to college, wanting "*independence*" and "*money*". She was not interested in HE. She was not aware of employment or other training opportunities and her parents suggested that she should *try* FE or she might regret her decision in later life. She appeared to agree with them on this point:

> "*I also wanted to do it I suppose so I wouldn't have looked back and said oh I wish I had done that*"

She had no specific career plans and was not sure about which course or subject that she wanted to study. However, she had *thought* of becoming a sports teacher, wanted to enrol on the A level courses but did not have the right grades (her best four grades were BCCC). She described what she saw as the difference between A levels and Advanced Vocational courses:

> "*A levels you need better grades to get into A levels don't you? Vocational you go on a course where you know what you want to do if you want to become an air hostess you go on a vocational air hostess course ...A levels you do like English and stuff don't you*"

She enrolled late because she could not decide which college to attend and chose Fairfield because of its good results. She suggested that other colleges had brought down their entry requirements with the introduction of AS levels. She asked to enrol on an A level PE course but was unable to do so:

> "*went to enrol for A level PE and they said you couldn't do that because you haven't got GCSE PE or the certain grades to carry on*"

Although not experiencing an interview at school she was interviewed at enrolment, which she found helpful. When enrolling on the BTEC sports course, the deciding factor for Eve was her perception of the status of the vocational course:

> "*well it was the equivalent of like an A level wasn't it or something and it could get you into Uni. if you wanted to carry on*"

She was happy with her decision and was committed at the time of enrolment. However, she did not know how she was going to be assessed and she had expected there to be more practical activities on the course. She had enjoyed the "*open day*" when she "*had fun*" doing different kinds of sports activities. She also enjoyed the sporting activities on the first day at College.

Although she preferred coursework to exams, she did not like being given work on the first day that had to be handed in the next day. Neither was she impressed with her timetable, which gave her lots of free time between lessons but no time to go anywhere and come back again within a long day. On her *second* and *last* day at the College she also felt an element of pressure:

> *"we had like a talk from the headmaster he was saying we expect you to do this and get these grades and if you don't get theses grades we'll be writing to your parents and all this. Putting a lot of pressure on you really on the second day and you thought well you didn't really want that on your second day and everything...he kind of like made out that if you think that you are not going to be able to do it you know what are you doing here kind of thing"*

She was not aware of any support available at the College except for her personal tutor and she never thought to change courses because she knew that she would not have been able to go on to A levels. When Eve left after two days she was *"relieved"* and on the day she left she enrolled at a local sixth form, where she gained three AS levels (DDE). However, she found that A levels were not for her and did not want to continue in the second year. Therefore she gained a full time post with a finance company:

> *"my friend who I went on that course with she's still there and she's like bogged down with coursework and everything but I'm glad that I went to...because it was enjoyable there but I'm glad I've got a job now because I need the money"*

Jane's Experience:

Jane had an interview at school but did not find this helpful. She felt that everybody from her school went to Fairfield and did not receive much information about other colleges. Nevertheless, she did visit another college but felt that it was not as easy to travel to and so enrolled in *good time* at Fairfield.

Although Jane did not have much knowledge about progression to employment or HE, she did want to go to university. Her best four GCSE grades were ABCC. She had no specific career in mind and did not consider A levels, as she had her *"heart set"* on Art and Design. Although she appeared to be very keen on this course, expecting it to be practical, she had no knowledge of how her work was going to be assessed and had not seen the course handbook. Also, she had experienced an interview at enrolment but had not found this helpful. Nevertheless she stated that she was committed at the time of enrolment.

Once on her course Jane found herself struggling with the workload and with hindsight feels that this was because of the *eight* different subjects, all with what she considered to be large projects or assignments, within the course:

*"I can compare it now because I'm doing A levels...now I do three A levels but in the GNVQ I was doing like **eight** different subjects"*

Even during the induction period she seemed to feel overwhelmed:

"we were given a lot of work then we were given work before we started"

She did not know about 'support' but, with hindsight felt that it would have been better if she had been told about this. She also did not feel that she could approach any of the tutors for help. Eventually, after missing deadlines, she was sent to someone to help her with time management but this proved to be a negative experience for her:

"they sent me to this lady and she was supposed to help me with my timetables and things but...she wasn't helpful at all she was rude with me I just didn't like her and got upset with her and you know it made me not want to do it anymore and I told my tutor I didn't want to go back and see this lady anymore...in the first place she said she'd been looking for me when I didn't know anything about it...I just didn't want to take any help off her again she was like lecturing me"

She also had a problem with not being able to complete any of her work in lesson time and had problems finding somewhere to do her work. She suggested that the tables for art where not as good as the ones at her school.

Jane had made some good friends but felt that she would never catch up. She had actually thought of leaving during the first six weeks but eventually left the College in January. She obtained full time employment but always intended going back to study and was keen to attend a textile course at another local college the following year. However, this did not happen as she moved away from the area and instead is now on AS courses, which she finds much easier:

*"I'm doing A levels now and you concentrate more on one particular subject in much more detail ...it's still **less** subjects I can concentrate on each one more"*

She described the GNVQ type courses as work based where you are learning about the industry as well as about the subject and the AS levels as more specific.

Sally's Experience

Sally had a helpful interview at school, but was not very knowledgeable or aware of the difference between qualifications. She did *not* want to progress to HE but did not know about other employment and training opportunities. Although she was not a late enrolee, she experienced a helpful interview at enrolment but did not know how her work was going to be assessed, and had not seen the course handbook. She enrolled on a business studies course because:

"it just sounded interesting because I wanted to go into retail management so I though right I told them at the College and my careers advisor and she advised that course for me"

However, her reason for actually going to college was less positive as she did not want to waste her GCSE results (her best four grades were BCCC). Also it appears that she had another completely different career choice or path at the back of her mind:

"I went to really to use up my exam results because I thought I've always wanted to do hairdressing but I thought if I can get the exam results I thought why waste them. So I put it put my knowledge to use to go to college so I just found it wasn't for me"

She did look at one other local college but didn't like it and *"focussed"* on Fairfield because of its reputation. She was committed to her course but right from the beginning she *"didn't understand"* and appeared to feel 'lost' with regard to what was being taught.

"we were putting information into a database and I'd think what are we doing I didn't know what they were doing"

She did ask for *"a lot of help"* from her tutor but even when explanations were given she appeared to be non the wiser:

"she explained it but it was hard to understand I just didn't understand it at all...I don't like asking for extra help because they don't really give it you they'd explain something and it would just go right over my head"

Sally felt partly responsible and described her difficulties:

"sometimes she'd witter away and I'd just think what on earth has she just said but I didn't have you know there's sometimes...my mind would just tend to drift off and I wouldn't listen to what she was saying...I were a bad listener at school that's what they wrote on my report"

Her tutor did not send her to study support and she did not self-refer. Although admitting that she did not like to ask for extra help Sally had previously received support at school and she was concerned about any *extra work* that she might get:

"It would mean coming home with the extra work...well I was on pupil support at high school they kind of give you extra work there do you know like extra bits of homework and I had to do after school classes or...I couldn't be bothered with the extra work"

Sally felt *"relieved"* when she left in November because she thought she was *"not going anywhere"* whilst at College. Although it was three months before she secured a modern apprenticeship in hairdressing, she was concerned to point out that she had spent the time in-between productively:

"I mean had a part time job in-between as well with money and everything and it's not like I was sitting around all day"

Although Sally had been non-committal before enrolment about expecting more practical sessions, she appeared to realise *after* her experience at Fairfield and after having experienced an NVQ in hairdressing that she would have preferred these:

> "I'd rather be doing practical stuff rather than sat at a desk writing-I'd rather be doing other things academically less...I find it hard to **listen** and concentrate. I've got a really low concentration span. I don't mind doing it when I'm at work we get people in and I can do their hair for hours and I don't get bored I enjoy it"

She was finding her NVQ easier and thought the tutors were *"really good"*. However, she was *not* enjoying the key skills elements as again she was having difficulties concentrating. She appeared to be very perceptive about her own abilities and recognised that she was capable of 'theory' if the topic had already been covered by a real life or practical experience:

> "I don't mind the theory work... we have to do projects like cutting and blow drying and perming I enjoy doing them because I know what I am doing because when you know how to do it you know how to write it down. It all fits into place"

This 'practical' or 'real life experience' element appeared also to be present in the subjects in which she excelled at school:

> "I enjoyed English at school and I did cooking as well. I enjoyed doing cooking"

When asked how she felt now about leaving the College, Sally appeared to be happy with her decision and her current progress:

> I'm really glad I did it because I'm qualifying in June and everyone's saying to me you've come on leaps and bounds and with my coursework it's like you know top marks and so it's because I understand it better and I'm enjoying it where if I don't enjoy it then I don't feel like putting 100% into it

She was not sure what the College could have done to improve things for her but did not know what she had to do to pass the course and seemed to be suggesting that she did not know what the learning outcomes were on her course:

> "show us what we were going to come out with what we'd learn I mean they told us what we'd learn but it was all difficult to understand"

She also suggested a slower start with more explanations to students like herself:

> "it seemed to me as soon as we started we jumped right in at the deep end...I think they should have gone through you know we're going to do this and we're going to do that at the beginning of the lesson they should have said right we're going to do this today so explained how to do it but I thought it was I just seemed to go in class and everyone would be doing it and I wouldn't know how to do it"

Amy's Experience

Amy had experienced a helpful interview at school where she had achieved some good grades at GCSE level, her best four being A*BCC. Although she was keen to come to College she did not want to progress to HE and had not considered A levels at all. She had specifically chosen her 'Early Years' course as, at the time, she wanted to be either a primary school teacher or a nursery nurse. Although she had not seen the course handbook and did not know how her work was going to be assessed, she perceived the course to be a good one because she could go on placement and she expected there to be practical activities on the course:

> *"everything that it seemed to cover was perfect for what I wanted"*

She had looked at several other colleges but Fairfield had the course she was attracted to. She was very committed and enrolled in good time without an interview. However, although she had very specific career plans, Amy was **not** aware of other employment or training opportunities and when she went on her first placement she discovered another 'route' to becoming a nursery nurse:

> *"well when I did my first placement from College I went to [name] day nursery and the owner of the nursery told me about NVQs and things...I told them about my course and things and I just said that I liked to go into the nursery and doing work in nurseries better than I did going to College and she just sort of told me about it"*

Amy had changed her mind about becoming a teacher and was even keener on nursery nursing. Although she liked her course at College she decided that she would rather be doing the actual work and was in fact working quite a lot of hours per week as well:

> *"everything was new cos. it was this course like you'd never done it before just that...I liked it at first I liked it all the way through it was just it wasn't....the longer I stayed there it became clear that it wasn't actually what I wanted...It was just that I wanted to do a lot more actually working with... in the nursery rather than the lesson and things if that makes sense"*

She found her tutor very helpful and understanding about this and, although she had considered leaving during her first 6 weeks, she left at Christmas after arranging an interview for a modern apprenticeship. She felt that this would be a much quicker way of getting a job and also saw NVQs as a much quicker way to obtaining a qualification.

> *"I'd arranged an interview... I started College in the September and then I stayed till Christmas... didn't really know it and I'd never been to college before and it was just because it was something different. I stayed till Christmas and then made the decision that it wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't the route that I wanted to take any more"*

When she left, Amy had a *"few regrets"*, possibly wondering if she was doing the right thing but is now happy in her full-time role, gaining much experience and receiving opportunities for advancement:

> *"I don't regret it any more because like I'm employed now full time I'm special needs co-ordinator at nursery as well now ...so I don't regret it any more but at the time I was a bit unsure... I've been offered a job doing special support work with children with special needs from school!"*

When Amy was asked if the College could have done any more for her she had mixed feelings. She did have a problem with College being a little bit like school, with regard to "*having to send in letters when you didn't go in and things like that*". However, she did like the College and the people at the College. It appears that the *course* was the major problem and she described her frustration with regard to being in a classroom:

> *"perhaps if it was less...I don't want to use the word boring because I didn't find it boring...perhaps if it was less - I mean there was a lot of lectures and things. Perhaps if there had been a different way of going about learning you know where there would be a lot more hands on things and we only had one day a week in nursery. I know you do need to stay at college but... "*

She wanted to gain more experience and thought that this was no less valuable than qualifications. She considered them to be of equal importance and she felt that her modern apprenticeship had offered her this:

> *"more experience so that when we did leave we could sort of know what we were going on about rather than.... when I did my NVQ I was able to do it alongside working at nursery it's sort of both things that's actually working and being employed as well as doing the work"*

Figure 16: Gender of whole cohort

	Percentage	Whole cohort
Male students	46%	324
Female students	54%	388
TOTAL	100%	712

Information taken from MIS system

Figure 17: Gender of 125 early leavers up to 1st April 2001

	Percentage	Number of 'leavers'
Male students	46%	57
Female students	54%	68
TOTAL	100%	125

Information taken from leavers' forms

Figure 18: Gender of 157 early leavers during full year

	Percentage	Number of 'leavers'
Male students	47%	73
Female students	53%	83
TOTAL	100%	156

Note: one student leaver was missing from list of early leavers obtained from MIS System

Information taken from leavers' forms

Figure 19: Table to show whether students considered other colleges

Did you consider enrolling at another college?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	35%	65%	100%	58
Persisting Students	40%	60%	100%	58

Figure 20: Figure to show students' lack of career plans

I didn't have any specific career plans	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	43%	12%	45%	100%	58
Persisting Students	32%	25%	43%	100%	56

Figure 21: Figure to show students' motivation with regard to subject or course choice

I knew exactly which subject or course I wanted to study	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	52%	12%	36%	100%	58
Persisting Students	61%	25%	14%	100%	56
Choosing a course was difficult	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	53%	14%	33%	100%	58
Persisting Students	37%	37%	26%	100%	57

Figure 22: Figure to show students' knowledge or understanding of the New Curriculum

Were you told anything about Vocational A Levels before you enrolled?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	53%	47%	100%	58
Persisting Students	66%	34%	100%	58
Did you know the difference between Vocational A levels and Advanced GNVQs?				
Leavers	48%	52%	100%	58
Persisting Students	48%	52%	100%	58

Figure 23: Figure to show students' perception of differences in 'difficulty' between vocational and academic courses

A levels are more difficult than vocational subjects	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	40%	32%	28%	100%	57
Persisting Students	48%	25%	27%	100%	56

Figure 24: Table to show percentage of students who enjoyed the key skills element of their course

I enjoyed the key skills element of my course	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	21%	15%	64%	100%	58
Persisting Students	18% No strong	14%	68%	100%	56

Figure 25: Table to show percentage of students who felt that the teaching on the course was good

The Teaching on the course was good	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	48%	12%	30%	100%	58
Persisting Students	74%	16%	10%	100%	57

Figure 26: Table to show percentage of students who found their subject tutors helpful

The subject tutors were helpful	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	50%	17%	33%	100%	58
Persisting Students	83%	12%	5%	100%	57

Figure 27: Sub groups of the 125 Vocational A level leavers and other Advanced Vocational leavers by courses

Title of Course	Number of 'leavers'
Vocational A level courses	
Health & Social care	12
Travel & Tourism	12
Leisure & Recreation	7
Hospitality Management/Catering	3
IT	7
Engineering	5
Science	7
Business	10
Media	8
Art & Design	6
SUB TOTAL	**77 (62%)**
Other courses	
ND Early Years	5
ND Sports Studies	7
ND Public Services	16
ND Graphic Design	5
ND Drama	7
CACHE	6
Advanced Secretarial	2
SUB TOTAL	**48 (38%)**
TOTAL	**125 (100%)**

Information taken from College information systems

Figure 28: Table to show students' perception of the status of Vocational A levels and traditional A levels

Advanced Vocational A levels are equal to A levels	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	59%	20.5%	20.5% (No strong)	100%	54
Persisting Students	57%	29%	14%	100%	56

Figure 29: Table to show students' knowledge with regard to vocational and academic courses

Did you understand the difference between Vocational Courses and A level courses?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	85%	15%	100%	58
Persisting Students	90%	10%	100%	58

Figure 30: Table to show students' preferences with regard to assessment

I prefer exams to coursework	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	22%	12%	66%	100%	58
Persisting Students	21%	16%	63%	100%	56

Figure 31: Table to show students' knowledge of assessments on their course

Did you know how your work was going to be assessed on your course before you enrolled?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	40%	60%	100%	58
Persisting Students	66%	34%	100%	58

Figure 32: Table to show percentage of students who wanted to progress to HE

I want to go on to Higher Education	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	60%	16%	24%	100%	56
Persisting Students	59%	21%	20%	100%	53

Figure 33: Table to show percentage of students who considered applying for A levels

Did you consider applying for 'A' levels at Fairfield or any other college?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	36%	64%	100%	55
Persisting Students	40%	60%	100%	58

Figure 34: Table to show possible influence from others

Other people / parents wanted me to go to college	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	65%	14%	21%	100%	57
Persisting Students	76%	17%	7%	100%	58

Figure 35: Table to show percentage of students who considered that they had made a last minute decision to enrol

Did you make what you consider to be a last minute decision to enrol?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	43%	57%	100%	58
Persisting Students	28%	72%	100%	58

Figure 36: Table to show number of hours worked by leavers and persisting students

Number of Hours Worked (if stated) (n = 36)	Percentage of leavers who stated number of hours worked	Number of Hours Worked (if stated)	Percentage of persisting students who stated number of hours worked (n = 48)
1-5	3%	1-5	0%
6-10	17%	6-10	37%
11-15	22%	11-15	23%
16-20	44%	16-20	30%
21-25	8%	21-25	8%
26-30	3%	26-30	0%
31+	3%	31+	2%
Total	100%	Total	100%

Figure 37: Chart to show number of hours worked by Leavers

Chart to show number of hours worked

Hours worked per week
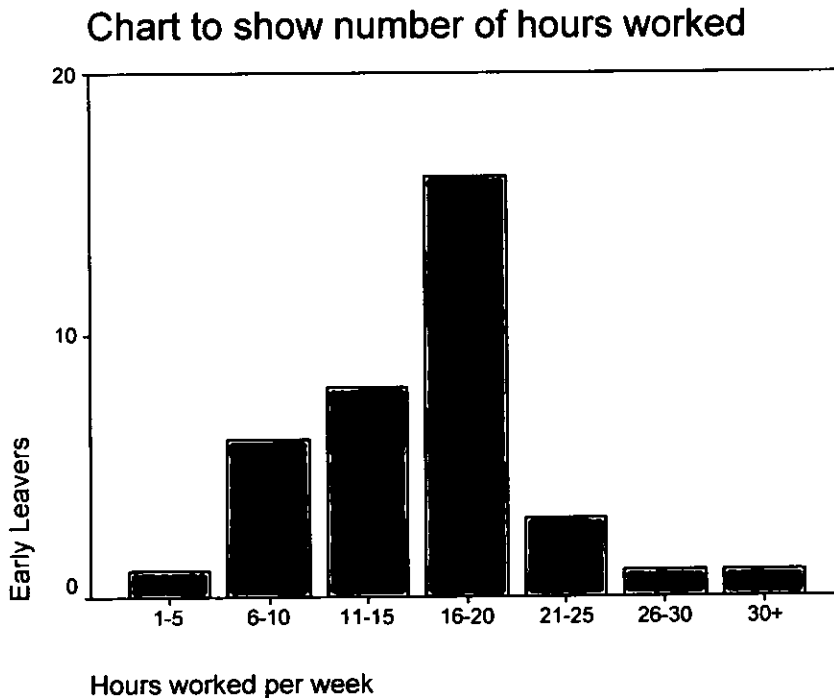
Figure 38: Chart to show number of hours worked by Persisting Students

Chart to show number of hours worked

Hours worked per week
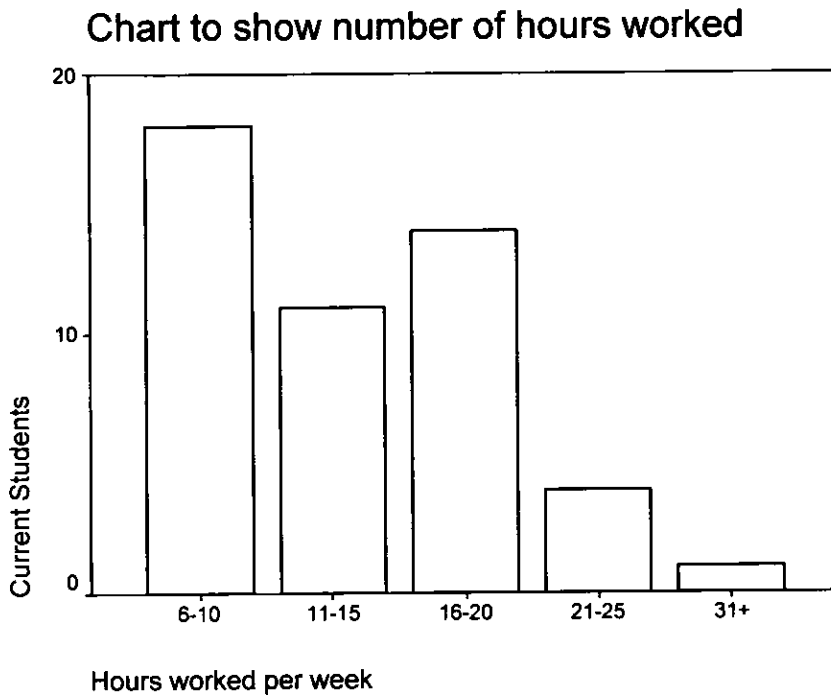
Figure 39: Chart to show destination of leavers

Chart to show destination of early leavers
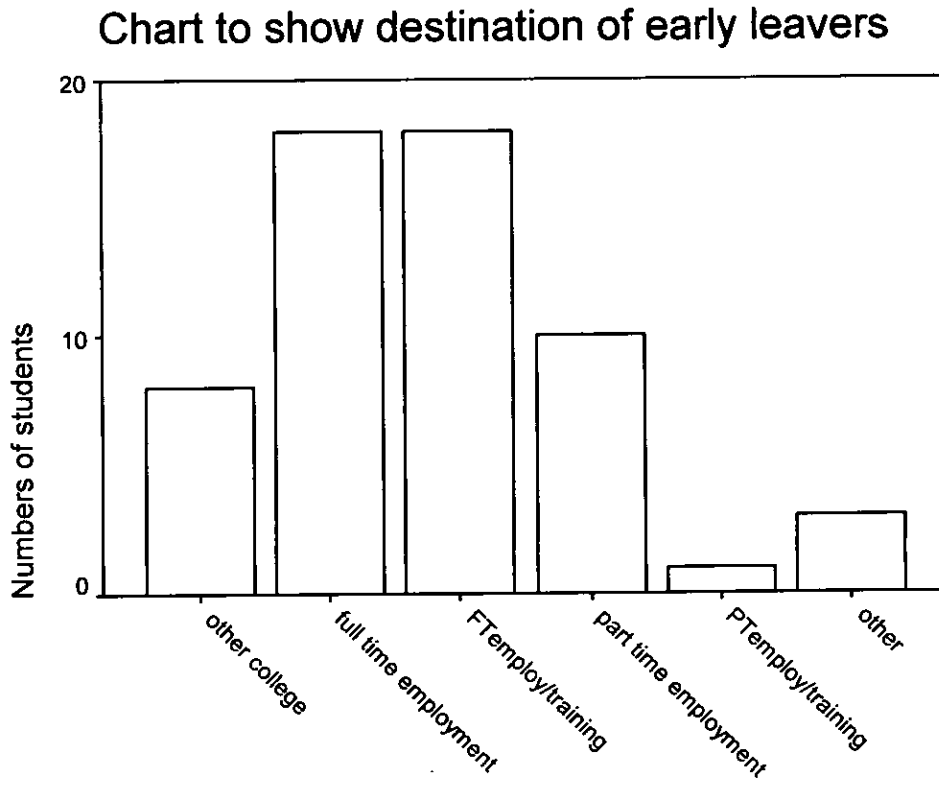
Figure 40: Table to show percentage of students who thought the course was interesting

I thought the course was interesting	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	41%	7%	52%	100%	58
Persisting Students	65%	21%	14%	100%	57

Figure 41: Table to show percentage of students who expected more practical sessions

I expected more practical sessions	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	64%	17%	19%	100%	58
Persisting Students	54%	30%	16%	100%	57

Figure 42: Table to show percentage of students who found the work difficult

I was finding the work difficult	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	19%	12%	69%	100%	58
Persisting Students	42%	36%	22%	100%	55

Figure 43: Table to show percentage of students who consider that they managed their time well

I manage my time well	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	54%	10%	36%	100%	58
Persisting Students	27%	32%	41%	100%	56

Figure 44: Table to show percentage of students who consider that they have good writing skills

I have good writing skills	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	67%	16%	17%	100%	58
Persisting Students	61%	23%	16%	100%	56

Figure 45: Table to show percentage of students who participated in enrichment activities and their enjoyment of those activities

Did you/ Do you take part in any enrichment activities?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	36%	64%	100%	56
Persisting Students	40%	59%	100%	56
If so did you/do you enjoy these activities?				
Leavers	95%	5%	100%	20
Persisting Students	92%	8%	100%	20

Figure 46: Table to show possible value of interview in school

If you were at school before enrolling did you experience a one to one interview at school?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	71%	29%	100%	45
Persisting Students	82%	18%	100%	49
Was this one to one interview helpful?				
Leavers	56%	43%	100%	32
Persisting Students	82.5%	17.5%	100%	40

Figure 47: Table to show possible value of interview at enrolment

Did you have an interview at enrolment?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	71%	29%	100%	56
Persisting Students	70%	30%	100%	57
Was this helpful?				
Leavers	70%	30%	100%	40
Persisting Students	95%	5%	100%	41

Figure 48: Table to show possible value of advice given to progressed students

If already at College did you receive any advice about moving on to Advanced Vocational?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	75%	25%	100%	12
Persisting Students	67%	33%	100%	9
Was the advice received helpful?				
Leavers	55%	44%	100%	9
Persisting Students	83%	17%	100%	6

Figure 49: Table to demonstrate percentage of students' satisfaction with course choice and percentage of students who were committed to courses

When you actually enrolled was it on a course that you originally chose?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers	69%	31%	100%	58
Persisting Students	75%	23%	100%	57
Were you happy about your final course decision when you actually enrolled?				
Leavers	84%	16%	100%	57
Persisting Students	86%	14%	100%	58
Were you committed to completing the course at the time of enrolment?				
Leavers	91%	9%	100%	58
Persisting Students	83%	17%	100%	58

Figure 50: Table to show percentage of students who felt that they had received helpful information at the start of their courses and students' awareness of what they had to do in order to pass

I received helpful information at the start of my course	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	55%	20%	25%	100%	56
Persisting Students	79%	16%	5%	100%	56
I knew exactly what I had to do to pass the course					
Leavers	62%	14%	24%	100%	57
Persisting Students	88%	7%	5%	100%	57

Figure 51: Table to show percentage of leavers who considered leaving or changing courses in the first six weeks and percentages of students did change courses

Did you consider leaving during the first 6 weeks?	Yes	No	Total	n
Leavers only	54%	46%	100%	57
Persisting Students	N/A	N/A	N/A	0
Did you consider changing courses during the first 6 weeks?				
Leavers	55%	45%	100%	56
Persisting Students	28%	72%	100%	58
Did you change courses during the first 6 weeks?				
Leavers	7%	93%	100%	56
Persisting Students	5%	95%	100%	58

Figure 52: Table to show students' knowledge of support and percentage of students who don't like to ask for extra help

I knew that I could ask for extra support	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	79%	7%	14%	100%	57
Persisting Students	86%	9%	5%	100%	55
I don't like asking for extra help					
Leavers	40%	15%	45%	100%	58
Persisting Students	24%	39%	37%	100%	57

Figure 53: Total number of students from *whole cohort* who received support and how they were referred

	Number of students who received support including 'leavers'	
	Males	Females
Students self referred for support	18	34
Students referred by personal tutors for support	22	22
Students referred by subject tutors for support	14	19
Students referred by others	5	3
Not known	4	6
TOTALS	63	84

Information taken from support database

Figure 54: Total number of *early leavers* from full year who received support and how they were referred

	Number of 'leavers' who received support	
	Males	Females
Students self referred for support	3	5
Students referred by personal tutors for support	1	2
Students referred by subject tutors for support	2	1
Students referred by other (Careers)	1	1
TOTAL	7	9

Information taken from support database

Figure 55: Total number of students from the *125 early leavers* who received support and how they were referred

	Number of 'leavers' who received support	
	Males	Females
Students self referred for support	2	3
Students referred by other (Careers)	-	1
Students referred by personal tutors for support	-	1
Students referred by subject tutors for support	1	3
TOTAL	3	8

Information taken from support database

Figure 56: Numbers of students who received study support (all groups)

	Total no. of students	Number of students who received support	Percentage (rounded)	Breakdown of those receiving support by gender
Whole cohort	712	147	21%	males 43%
				females 57%
early leavers (whole year)	157	16	10%	males 37%
				females 63%
early leavers (1st April)	125	11	9%	males 27%
				females 63%

Information taken from support database and MIS system

Figure 57: Table to show possible influence from peers

Most of my friends were going to Fairfield	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	66%	12%	22%	100%	58
Persisting Students	66%	18%	16%	100%	57

Figure 58: Table to show percentage of students who felt that teaching staff helped them to mix together

The teaching staff helped the students on my course to mix together	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	65%	16%	19%	100%	58
Persisting Students	70%	21%	9%	100%	57

Figure 59: Table to show percentage of students who felt comfortable with other students

I felt comfortable with the other students	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Total	n
Leavers	72.5%	3.5%	24% fourteen students	100%	58
Persisting Students	86%	10.5%	3.5% strongly two students	100%	57