

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 898

CE 057 792

AUTHOR Moss, Wendy
 TITLE Breaking the Barriers. Eight Case Studies of Women Returning to Learning in North London. Revised Edition.
 INSTITUTION Access to Learning for Adults, London (England).
 SPONS AGENCY Inner London Education Authority (England).
 REPORT NO ISBN-0-951-309-9
 PUB DATE 88
 NOTE 89p.
 AVAILABLE FROM Access to Learning for Adults, Marlborough Bldg., Room 306, 383 Holloway Road, London N7 ORN, England (3.50 pounds).
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)
 EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS *Academic Aspiration; Academic Persistence; *Access to Education; *Adult Education; Case Studies; Employed Women; Females; Followup Studies; Foreign Countries; Goal Orientation; Learning Motivation; Postsecondary Education; *Reentry Students; Student Motivation; *Womens Education
 IDENTIFIERS *England (London)

ABSTRACT

A study documented the expectations, experiences, and needs of eight women who entered education via Fresh Start/Return to Study courses and followed them as they moved on to further study/training. (Fresh Start was a project of the Inner London Education Authority.) A series of interviews was conducted between June 1985 and October 1986 in an open-ended question format. Findings indicated that women entered Fresh Start feeling the need for a new direction and an interest in studying, but were generally unclear about its outcomes and uncertain about their ability to go on to further study. The course helped them develop purpose and direction and gave them the confidence to continue. Relative to further education, the women found it difficult to discover study/training opportunities available to mature students; women's choice of courses was effectively narrowed by distance, child care, and financial concerns; and the shortage of places in particular courses was a major barrier. During the following year, three women continued in full-time employment due to a reluctance to leave their jobs at a time of high unemployment and hostility of their supervisors. Those who went on to courses in further or higher education faced difficulties because they had been out of the educational system for a long time and had home and family commitments. Recommendations are made to improve the quality of service offered to mature learners. (Appendixes include instruments and biographies of participants.) (YLB)

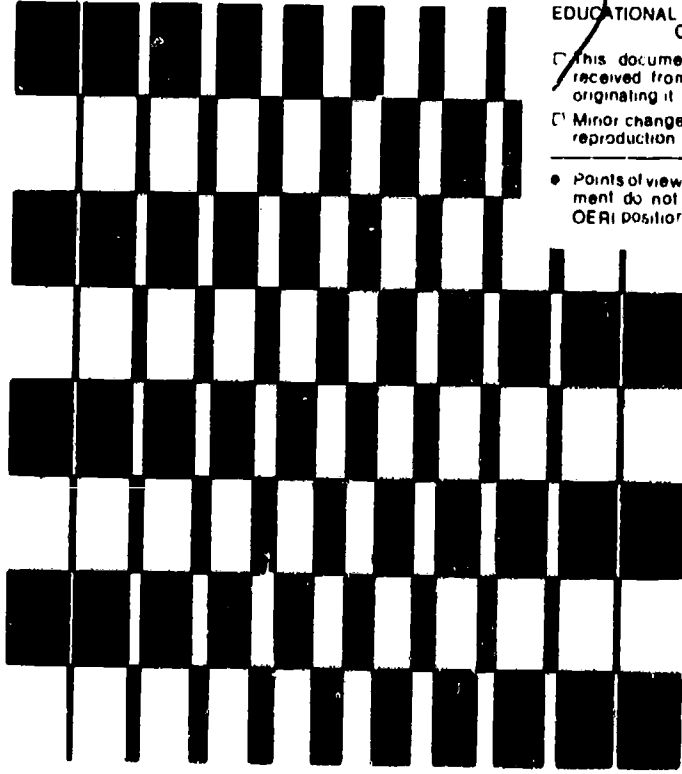
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BREAKING THE BARRIERS

**Eight Case Studies of Women
Returning to Learning
in North London**

Wendy Moss

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BREAKING THE BARRIERS
(Revised Edition)

This book was first published in 1987 by PNL Press, The Polytechnic of North London, Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB. It has been in great demand. There have been some revisions made to the text in this edition.

Breaking the Barriers

Eight Case Studies of Women Returning to Learning in North London

Wendy Moss

**ALFA
REPLAN**

Research funded by Inner London Education Authority

**Publication funded by REPLAN as part of their
Regional Staff Development Programme**

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Further copies at £3.50 from:

**REPLAN, Regional Advisory Council,
Tavistock House South,
Tavistock Square,
London, WC1H 9LR**

OR

**ALFA (Access to Learning for Adults),
The North London Open College Network,
The Marlborough Building,
383 Holloway Road,
London, N7 0RN**

**ALFA is funded by the
Inner London Education Authority**

**Published in 1988 by
ALFA**

ISBN: 0 951 309 9

**Typeset in Press Roman by
Direct Design (Bournemouth) Ltd., Printers,
Butts Pond Industrial Estate,
Sturminster Newton, Dorset DT10 1AZ**

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to ALFA, the North London Open College Network, for funding the research and to REPLAN for funding its publication; Faith Lesirge and Sue Pedder for their support and encouragement; Dee Bourne for patiently transcribing all the tapes and Barbara Schulz and Jane Mace for very usefully reading and commenting on the final draft. However, particular thanks must go to Anne, Clare, Debbie, Gillian, Holly, Laura, Marie and Monique for all the time they gave, generously and freely, to talk to me on tape, fill in questionnaires and to check what I had written. I hope I have done their stories justice.

Wendy Moss

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Foreword

Breaking the Barriers is an account of the experiences of a group of women coming into education. The researcher, Wendy Moss, was able to follow this group's passage through adult education institutes, further education colleges and polytechnics. Interviewing them at regular intervals made it possible for Wendy to draw a picture of their struggles and successes. The women describe their experiences vividly and in this report speak for themselves.

The difficulties of returning to study after periods of unemployment and home life were often handled well on their courses. At the same time, these women faced barriers within the institutions that were intending to help them. This report ends with recommendations that come from their experience. Whilst these women were largely successful in gaining access to education, others are excluded by the barriers.

This report is one of a series of development projects undertaken by ALFA (Access to Learning for Adults), also known as the North London Open College Network. ALFA has grown from a collaborative group of three institutions in 1983 and is now a consortium of 10 educational organisations in North London*, committed to improving and extending opportunities in education and training, particularly for those who have benefited least from the education system. ALFA hopes to do this by identifying and breaking down the barriers which deter or prevent potential students from entering or re-entering the education system and by co-operating across the traditional and organisational boundaries.

In its first year ALFA was able to improve access to education for adults by establishing links between colleges. It also compiled, and still produces, a Directory of courses provided in the member institutions. Whilst its initial work had encouraged co-operation between members, there was a strong wish to get feedback from adults who were using the service. ALFA therefore initiated a series of action research projects which were designed to give provider institutions the users' views of their work. ALFA hopes that by publishing this report, and encouraging adult educators to respond to the needs movingly expressed by these students, practice will improve.

Sandra Ashman, Chair, ALFA Steering Group
John Clark, Projects Worker ALFA

*Members are: City & East London College; Educational Advice Service for Islington Adults; Hackney Adult Education Institute; Hackney College; Hackney Education Advice Service; ILEA Careers Service; Islington Adult Education Institute; Kingsway College; North London College and The Polytechnic of North London.

Introduction

This is a report of a study I carried out between July 1985 and October 1986 for ALFA (Access to Learning for Adults).

ALFA is a collaborative venture amongst educational institutions and organisations in North London. It seeks to improve and extend opportunities to adults who wish to return to education or training, and to make progression routes easier across institutional and sector boundaries. Its primary concern is providing access to adults who do not traditionally enter the educational system. ALFA's work has included a directory of courses offered by all its members, and various development and research projects intended to identify gaps in provision, and improve access routes – particularly for priority groups such as women, racial minorities, those with few or no qualifications, the disabled, those with special needs, the elderly and the unemployed.

The aim of this research project was to follow up a group of adult students as they sought access into study or training opportunities in Islington; to identify, from the students' points of view, the different barriers to access across sector boundaries, and to learn from the students' experience. It was decided to do this through a series of case studies, following up a group of women who had entered *Fresh Start* courses at Islington AEI and who were interested in moving into further study/training, and assessing their experience of institutional, structural and referral encounters over a period of time. It was hoped this would provide a sharp but also human focus on the experience of gaining access for women with few or no formal qualifications.

The study began in June 1985, supported by funding from ALFA through the ILEA. I was employed to contact and interview eight women in their final term of *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* courses at Islington AEI and to interview them at regular intervals over the subsequent 12 to 18 months. This report describes the result of that study.

I should perhaps at this point explain my background as the 'researcher'. I have worked for several years as a tutor on a *Fresh Start* course for women in South East London, and many students go on from this to further study and training. Some return from there for informal support with their coursework. At the time I started the project, I was also active in a group preparing a directory of education and training opportunities for women without formal qualifications in SE London. This had involved questioning providers on their policy on access for mature students, and building up a picture of local patterns of provision. Thus, although I had never met the students or tutors on the Islington *Fresh Start* courses before, and was unfamiliar with provision in North London, I had a relevant background and understanding of what was on offer in the South East, and familiarity with the experience of other women in the same position. Lastly, and usefully, during 1985-6, I myself returned to study after a thirteen-year gap. Although I do have qualifications, some at least of what the women reported experiencing, I experienced myself.

The final report is structured as follows:

Chapter 1 describes in more detail the aims of the research project, its methodology, the nature of *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* courses, and the educational, work and life experiences of the participants.

Chapter 2 examines women's accounts of their goals and aspirations as they entered *Fresh Start*, and their overall evaluation of the course.

Chapter 3 looks at how women fared in searching and gaining access to courses in FE and HE – both at the end of *Fresh Start* and during the following year. In particular it considers information and advice services, and their experience of application procedures.

Chapter 4 focuses on three women who, during the following year, continued in full-time employment. It looks at the reasons why some decided to focus on their work, rather than further study/training, and at the problems of those who wanted to continue.

Chapters 5 and 6 detail the experience of those who went on to full-time or part-time courses in FE and HE. It looks at the particular difficulties they had in studying as mature students who had been out of the educational system for a long time and had home and family commitments.

Chapter 7 relates women's perceptions of their two years' experience of 'returning to study' and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Chapter 8 offers a summary of conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 1: The Research Project

AIMS OF STUDY

As explained in the introduction, the aim of the study was to document the expectations, experiences and needs of women adult students who had entered education via *Fresh Start/Return to Study* courses and as they moved on from these to further study/training. In particular we wanted to focus on:

- the women's evaluation of *Fresh Start/Return to Study* courses as a 'first step' for adult returners;
- the women's criteria for choosing further study/training opportunities, and their experiences in gaining access to these. We wanted to look at both what was positive in that experience and barriers they had to surmount;
- the women's experiences studying beyond *Fresh Start* and their evaluation of how subsequent courses met their needs as adult and women learners.

The intention of the study was to draw on the evidence of these women's experience to indicate changes and improvements in policy and practice that could be made by educational providers - in adult, further and higher education - in improving access to adult women returners. And we wanted to communicate that experience in a way that quantitative surveys cannot achieve, by drawing extensively on their own words in the final report.

THE STUDY

Between June 1985 and October 1986 I undertook a series of individual tape-recorded interviews with eight women who had been attending *Fresh Start* and/or *Return to Study* courses at Islington AEI during the preceding year. The Women's Studies Co-ordinator supplied me with a list of fifteen women on *Fresh Start/Return to Study* courses that year who had expressed an interest in further educational or training opportunities. Eight of those that I contacted agreed to take part.

I carried out three batches of interviews: in June/July 1985; in January 1986 and in October 1986. Not all eight were interviewed on each occasion (see Appendix 1). Three women were reluctant to be interviewed in January 1986, either for personal reasons, or because they felt they had little more to add to their interview the previous summer. Seven were interviewed in October 1986 - again one person declining because of personal reasons. The resulting tapes and their transcripts supply the major data for the study; in addition the women completed a brief questionnaire asking for details of their previous

educational and paid/unpaid work experience and for those who were still on courses, a further questionnaire in July 1986 (see Appendix 2)¹.

At each meeting, the participant and I talked for one to one and a half hours. I used a list of open-ended questions (see Appendix 3) as a framework for the discussions. Generally, the questions aimed to explore:

- (i) the women's previous educational and work experience, and the point of their lives that they entered *Fresh Start*; their expectations of the course;
- (ii) their long-term hopes and aims; if and how these changed over the period of the study;
- (iii) their immediate evaluation of *Fresh Start*: did it meet their expectations on entry; quality of teaching/learning; how did the course meet their needs as women mature students; how had they benefited from the course;
- (iv) the experience of negotiating entry on to other courses: how they discovered what was available; the criteria through which they made their choices; their experience of entry procedures; barriers and difficulties they had to surmount in achieving a place on the course they wanted;
- (v) their experience studying as mature students in other institutions once they had gained entry; the quality of that experience; their particular needs and difficulties and how well the institution met them;
- (vi) the usefulness of *Fresh Start*, and other courses, for those who had chosen not to continue in formal education at the end of the research period.

The resulting tapes and their transcripts (approximately 30 hours of tape and 700 pages of transcript) provide a vivid, and frequently moving, account of the hopes, struggles and achievements of eight women. It is impossible to capture this fully here – the need to order and categorise leaves much unsaid. Nevertheless, the report attempts to convey, largely in their own words, the women's perceptions, experiences and feelings about returning to study as mature students. As a researcher with experience of teaching *Fresh Start* students myself, much of what these women said to me was familiar; and in a sense what I learned from them confirmed and consolidated the evidence of many others at other times. What felt important to me was the opportunity this study offered to record that experience, and to do so not just at one

¹ It should be noted that the study did not aim to draw on the experience of tutors in the educational institutions that the women entered or contacted – this was too big a task given the limitations of funding. I was, however, in informal contact with tutors at Islington AEL – and a *Fresh Start* tutor read and commented on the final written report. Some of her contributions are included.

moment, but through time, and from course to course. The tapes, as I shall suggest, raise many issues that need to be registered and acted on by educational providers.

FRESH START AND RETURN TO STUDY COURSES

Fresh Start courses are a recent development within the ILEA – a useful history of this development and a review of the strengths and directions forward for this type of provision can be found in a recent ILEA report by Sue Shrapnel Gardner¹. Essentially the courses are non-vocational and non-assessed; they are designed for adults, particularly those with few or no formal qualifications, and little experience of studying since leaving school. For some the courses become a stepping stone on to further and higher education, for others they mark a change in perspective as students think to their futures – either at home or in employment.

Islington *Fresh Start* courses are women-only², some daytime (one day a week from 10.30 to 3.30), and some evening (two hours a week). They run from September to July each year; the daytime ones being accompanied by a creche (though space in this is limited). The groups are informal, discussion-based and participative. Course content varies, each tutor developing a curriculum in negotiation with each group, but centres mainly on themes from within the humanities and social sciences. Some courses follow a fairly traditional structure – weeks on history, literature, psychology, sociology and biology for example; others a looser one, less based on specific subject areas, and working around themes or a particular text. On all the courses, however, women's lives, history and social roles, are central topics. They also offer women a chance to share their lives and experiences and to learn from each other. All the courses offer practice in study skills – writing, reading different sorts of texts, and discussion; some offer assertiveness training; and all include guidance and support on further educational, training and employment opportunities. In addition, in the year this particular group were on *Fresh Start* (1984-5), the Institute ran a two hours a week more intensive *Return to Study* course – one that concentrated on developing academic study skills, interviewing techniques, self presentation etc.

Fresh Start courses are a 'first step' for those wishing to try out formal learning in an informal way; their purpose is to offer women a chance to explore their potential, to develop confidence in their abilities, and to consider new directions. So they must provide for multiple exit points. They are not intended as a 'first step' in the sense of a 'first rung' to surmount in an

¹Susan Shrapnel Gardner: *Adult Fresh Start and Return to Learning: The Development of Written Language within Adult Fresh Start and Return to Learning Programmes*, ILEA Language and Literacy Unit, Occasional Paper No 2, November 1985.

²For an examination of how adult, further and higher education generally denies equality of opportunity to women, and the case for women-only courses, see Jane Thompson (1983) *Learning Liberation: Women's response to Men's Education*. Croom Helm.

educational ladder; their success cannot be assessed on statistical evidence of numbers who go on to achieve educational/vocational qualifications. Nevertheless many women do leave *Fresh Start* courses intending to enter vocational or qualifying courses in FE and HE.¹ My task was to tap women's experience not of a particular course, but of 'returning to learning' from a wider, more long-term, perspective.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The majority of women entered *Fresh Start* courses in Autumn 1984² and were all completing either *Fresh Start* or *Return to Study* courses when I first interviewed them in June/July 1985. I do not use the women's real names in this report, but refer to them respectively³ as Monique, Anne, Laura, Debbie, Gillian, Marie, Clare and Holly. Appendix 4 shows in table form their ages, work experience, educational experience etc. Appendix 5 offers brief biographies of each participant, based on their own accounts of their personal educational and work histories. I would suggest that, if possible, the reader turns to this section before going further. However, I will discuss the women's backgrounds generally here.

The women's ages ranged between 30 and 45 but most were in the middle 30s. They had grown up and gone to school in Northern Ireland (two), Wales (two), Luxembourg (one), the Caribbean (one) and London (two). Six were white and two were black. The majority had few or no formal qualifications - those that had, gained these many years ago and felt that they were of little use to them now³, or (e.g. typing) were for jobs in which they were no longer interested.

Seven of the women were mothers, three with children below school age. Five were the sole carers for their children. Three were in paid full-time employment when they entered *Fresh Start* - respectively as a care assistant, secretary and a childminder; one worked 16 hours a week as a women's centre worker on the MSC Community Programme; and four were unemployed, depending on supplementary benefit for an income. A large percentage of the women were engaged in some sort of unpaid work in the community, helping in playgroups, in youth clubs, the local Labour party, their housing co-op committee etc.

As already mentioned, most of the women had left school with no or very few qualifications - generally at 15. Yet although the women on the whole felt they had benefited little from schooling, they often reported doing well at

¹Course tutors estimated that a third to a half of each group yearly, on average, went on to further study or training, though this varied from year to year and group to group.

²One had entered the previous autumn (1983), had completed the *Fresh Start* course, and had gone on to a *Return to Study* course at the same AEL.

³As one of the *Fresh Start* tutors pointed out, a further difficulty for women who have been educated in the Caribbean, and other countries, is that frequently their qualifications are not recognised by British employers/institutions.

school in their early years. Their reports of how they lost interest in studying, or were forced to leave school early make interesting reading: lack of interest in girls' education, difficulties at home, class bias, the need to earn an income, and racism, are among the contributing factors they list.

Since leaving school, nearly all had spent a large part of their working lives working in a variety of low paid, and traditionally female jobs in catering, cleaning, shops, factories and offices both before, and for several, after the birth of their children – taking work which would offer them an income but still meet the demands of childcare. Most had had minimal chances of taking up substantial study or training after leaving school, or if they did (two for example had trained as nurses, and one as a dressmaker), the arrival of children or lack of opportunities meant they could not take full advantage of what they had done. Nevertheless, everyone had done odd short, part-time courses at some point – mainly in adult education, and a couple as brief periods of in-service training. Apart from the latter, the women's chances to learn as adults had to be fitted into limited spare time, and was undertaken at their own expense. And 15 to 25 years after leaving school, most held their intellectual capabilities in low esteem.

These women's lives illustrate much of the oppression of women in our society – lack of equality of educational opportunity, the concentration of women in low paid servicing or factory work, the difficulties of finding a job that offers a real income, while fitting in with childcare needs, the shortage or absence of childcare facilities for women who want to study or work, and the lack of career structures for women, or in-service training opportunities. And for black women the oppression of institutional racism is added to all the above. *Fresh Start* courses for women are a small step towards redressing some of that inequality, and it is to women's experience of *Fresh Start* that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Experience of Fresh Start

"It just woke me up you know. I didn't only start thinking about the actual course, it gave me a direction. I thought, 'Well, yes I can do something else. I can start thinking about a career, some kind of future for me to build rather than just being a mother (though I enjoy being a mother)'. It helped me a lot." (Marie, June 1985)

"I went with trepidation. I was expecting it to be more formal and I was pleased to see that it wasn't ... What I learned in my first few lessons was that what I had to say was as important as what other people had to say. And I was *interested* in what other people had to say. People live through such different lives, and people go through such things." (Clare, June 1985)

"Here [on my degree course] we gain in knowledge, but then knowledge is not the most important ... on *Fresh Start* you actually felt different in yourself." (Clare, Oct. 1986)

This chapter is based on the first series of interviews conducted in June/July 1985, as the participants were completing either their *Fresh Start* year, or *Fresh Start*, followed by *Return to Study*. Seven of the women had begun the course/s the previous autumn (1984); one had started in the autumn of 1983. During this set of interviews I asked women to talk about their experience of *Fresh Start*, in particular:

- their hopes and expectations when they started;
- their evaluation of its content;
- how they felt it had benefited them.

(For the checksheet I used, see Appendix 3.)

Their responses are considered in this chapter.

SETTING OUT

Why did women choose *Fresh Start*? What were their long term aims and goals?

In the extracts below, Marie and Gillian describe why they first went along to *Fresh Start*:

' [When my friend told me about it] ... I hadn't worked for two years because I was looking after [my son]. I felt that every day was just the same and that was how it was going to go on - I could see nothing at all. I decided I didn't want to go back into an office ... I knew that was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. But I didn't know what I wanted to do or anything, so [my friend] went there one week and she said it's a nice course and she thought it would be good and I went the following week. I've been going ever since.' (Marie)

"For a long time I thought that I would go back to college or go to a poly and do something, but I've never known what to do. So I had the idea that once [my son] was 18 I'd better do something ... I thought if I didn't do so soon I probably wouldn't do it at all. I thought of doing some evening classes to try and get into the way of studying. I didn't know about *Fresh Start* courses, so when I read their

newspaper, I was pleased to see them and they seemed to cover various subjects and be geared to the possibility of further study.” (Gillian)

These extracts are typical in that they reflect women's interest in 'doing something' – but also how uncertain they tended to be about what they would like to do or how to go about it. Most women wanted their lives to take a different direction – to move out of a cycle of low paid, dissatisfying work, to find possibilities for themselves outside the home, or simply wanting to improve their education. Most were looking ultimately to gain better employment opportunities, generally in some sort of 'work with people' – but this was usually a long term aim rather than a concrete immediate goal. In the near future, two thought they might like to go on to college after the course had finished, but the majority had little idea where the course might lead. As a whole, therefore, women went more through interest in the course, an indeterminate desire for change and improvement in their lives, and a hope that *Fresh Start* might offer them a direction, than because they had particular, well-formed ambitions. But they hoped *Fresh Start* might be a positive step towards a future, however ill-defined, and would offer them study experience and some guidance on how to get there. As Anne put it:

“[I went] because I just wanted to start somewhere and I didn't know how to do it.”

Two women joined *Fresh Start* as a result of initiatives they had already taken. One was Clare, who went on the course as part of her training on the MSC Community Programme (though she had to do some fighting to get released for a whole day a week). She had spent some years at home with the children where, looking back, she felt she had stagnated. Recently, however, she had become active in the local Labour party, joined the management group of a women's refuge and then taken a job at a local women's centre on the Community Programme. All this had brought her into contact with new people, new ideas and a new perception of herself. She wanted to study for interest – to learn more about issues that were becoming the subjects of debate in her new life – women's issues, social studies, psychology. Coming to *Fresh Start* for her was both a result, and a catalyst, of change.

The other was Laura, who worked as a shop assistant after leaving school, until the time she had her first baby. She then began helping in a local playgroup, then a youth club. As a result she had attended two playgroup leaders' training courses, and a brief youth work course where “you had to use your brain a bit and write things down. It got me going and I wanted to go on to do something else” – the *Fresh Start* course didn't seem too big a step into formal education:

“I just felt I wanted to do something more academic. It said it was an introduction to psychology and all sorts of things like that, so I thought it would be a good idea if I went along ... I'd got myself into going further but without, you know, stepping into some huge thing.”

For the majority of the others, though, *Fresh Start* was the first step in a new direction. Why did they choose it? Five of the women found the course in the Institute's newspaper, delivered through their door, and one in a local guide to courses for women in Islington. They had generally never heard of *Fresh Start* courses, but these appealed to them for a variety of reasons. “*Fresh Start* sounded good” commented Anne – its very title tuned in with her needs. It

was also broad in scope: it acknowledged women's uncertainty about what direction they would like to go, and didn't ask them to make decisions about subjects or topics. This last was very important for Debbie. She found it in the AEI newspaper, but she was not looking for this kind of course:

"To tell you the truth I was looking for a keep fit class or a yoga class and I saw it and thought, 'Oh I'll do that instead'."

It was the general nature of the course that appealed to her:

"I had always wanted to do something but I never knew what – I didn't know what subject I would have chosen to have carried on – but this course was everything all in one."

Three of the women said they had gone specifically because it was a women's course. Laura had had experience of mixed groups on her youth work course:

"The men tended to dominate the discussions ... and you just felt quite useless sometimes because they seem to have all the answers and they get listened to more than mere women"

Likewise, Clare had experienced the benefits of an all-women's group in the women's section of the Labour party, and felt strongly that this was the kind of group she wanted to be in; Gillian was also attracted by the fact it was a woman tutor.

Several women (like Laura and Gillian above) emphasised that the course seemed not too involving, and welcoming whatever your educational experience – "it seemed basic" commented Clare. As most women had an (unfounded) belief that they were not 'very clever', this openness was encouraging.

Perhaps as important for many women, particularly those with pre-school children, was the fact that the courses were local, were designed for women with childcare commitments, were part-time and cheap. This closeness meant it was not too much struggle to get there with a pre-school child or too far to travel at night. Debbie, who worked during the day, wouldn't have gone to her evening course if it were not held just across the road from where she lived, so she didn't have far to walk home. Closeness also meant low fares. This, plus low course fees (£1.00 per year), made it financially possible for many to join. Very important too was the fact that the daytime courses were held during school hours and there was a creche – vital for two women. While one or two did travel further, did find other means of caring for their children, and some might possibly have paid a little more, the courses' timing, locality, creches and low fees made joining less daunting, and several would, and could not have gone otherwise.

Despite the above factors, it still often took considerable organisation to get to the course: Clare and Holly had quite a long journey and it was a rush to get there after taking the children to school, and another dash home again afterwards; Monique had to come home from work and cook a meal for the rest of the family before going out to her evening group. Laura, on an evening *Fresh Start* group and then an evening *Return to Study* option had to pay a childminder – extra money not easy to find on social security. Making a space themselves for a day, or two hours, was not easy for these women.

In summary then, it seems that the appeal of *Fresh Start* for this group of learners was that it seemed introductory, broad in scope, welcoming and not too committing. It offered an opportunity for formal education, but didn't ask students to make decisions before they started – and acknowledged their uncertainty about outcomes. It offered a chance to think about directions. At the same time, it fitted in with women's home and family commitments and for most did not demand long periods of travel, or a lot of expense. And, for some, the fact it was a women's course was a decisive factor.

However, in spite of being attracted to the course, several women still found it difficult to go along for the first time. The majority expected it to be 'like school' – "that you would have to write things down and have them corrected and so on" commented Monique, and Anne said:

"I expected it to be like going to a classroom I think and having a teacher who would tell you about certain subjects ... you'd have a subject a week .. and they'd give you some kind of reading to do or something like that."

Clare and Debbie both expected the other women to be high powered, well-educated people, and that they might feel far behind and even stupid. Debbie remembered:

"[My partner] pushed me in the end. I was really hesitant and, I thought, wanted to go with a friend. But then I thought if I don't go on my own I won't go, so I just went..."

Q: Sounds like that was quite brave

A: "It was at the time, yes ... it was going somewhere with strangers and not knowing what will happen to you ... I thought that everyone was going to be [well-educated] ..."

In the event, however, Debbie and all the women found the courses welcoming, relaxed and friendly, and the other students women they felt comfortable with. "What I learnt in my first few lessons" commented Clare, "was that what I had to say was as important as what other people had to say" (see the beginning of this chapter). But the nervousness of some women illustrates how big a step it may be for those out of education for some time, to 'start' again.

EVALUATING *FRESH START* AND *RETURN TO STUDY*

In order to enable women to evaluate their one year or two years studying on *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* courses, I asked them to respond to a series of questions about learning on the course, and what they perceived as its benefits:

- What did you get out of the course: what did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about/from other people? What did you learn about subjects/ skills?
- Do you feel different learning as an adult?
- Do you think it's because you've changed, or because what you are learning is different, or because the way you are learning is different?
- What did you feel confident about when you were in school? What do you feel confident about now?
- What do you feel you got out of it?

In this section I leave aside the contribution of the course in offering information and advice about further education and training opportunities, and the support it gave to women in pursuing these: these will be the topic of the next chapter. I will look at what the women found useful on the course, how they experienced it, and what they felt they had gained from the experience.

Learning on *Fresh Start*

Probably the most appropriate place to start is in the contrast between their experience of *Fresh Start/Return to Study* and their experiences at school, or previous learning as an adult. In many cases these were very marked. Marie described the contrast as follows:

“Learning as an adult was completely different because you weren’t made to go. You chose to go, so while you were there you took in whatever was being said. We were never encouraged at school, you were never asked what you were going to do when you leave school. They just got to me in the end.

“The learning on *Fresh Start* was more real, more enjoyable. You know [on *Fresh Start*] that your tutor is concerned for you and she wants you to learn. At school, if I didn’t remember something, I can’t remember asking a tutor to explain it to me, whereas here, if it takes her all day [my tutor] will try to get it over in a simple way so that I know what she wants from me.”

Almost everyone, like Marie, spoke of the contrast between wanting to learn, as they did on *Fresh Start*, and having to learn, as they did at school. They were also virtually at one about the caring, confidence-inspiring nature of the tutors and of the relaxed atmosphere. They liked always being able to ask freely, or make mistakes, and know they wouldn’t be dismissed or laughed at by anyone in the group; of a kind of learning that was not like learning “I wouldn’t say you were taught, but you *were* taught” as Monique put it. The tutor was not a remote, inaccessible figure who inspired a degree of awe as were the teachers of people’s memories – “I was like one of us” said Holly, and “R took all the tear out of studying” she commented later.

The difference seemed to lie, not only in the quality of their teaching, but also in the way learning was approached in these groups – discussion based and participatory, giving women a very new experience of learning. Laura expressed this as follows:

“It’s different because you participate, you haven’t got somebody standing there saying this is your six times table, learn it ... they draw you into it. Because I think if it actually had been like going back to school and they’d said ‘Read this chapter by next week, come back and tell me about it’, I don’t think I would have stuck it.”

Many of the women stressed how much they had gained, not only from the tutor, but from the other women in their groups. Laura and Monique enjoyed the range of ages, nationalities and experiences of women in theirs. Laura said:

“... there were all sorts. The age range was something like 18 to 50 – it was quite incredible. And they were an amazing cross section of people ...”

Marie and Holly spoke of how much they had benefited from sharing

personal experiences with other women:

"It's just nice listening to other people's experiences and realising that you're not the only one that went through certain experiences. You don't feel so useless, that there's nothing you can do about them ... I realised as well that it isn't only black people [who suffer] – there were some Irish girls there and they went through very much the same experiences, some even harder than I went through." (Marie)

"[I wrote] about myself – things that I would never even have wanted to remember, that I wouldn't even think inside myself, never mind writing them down and letting anybody else know: it's the confidence people give you, even the other people in the class because they were all the same but you don't realise. You don't realise that other women are just the same as you." (Holly)

The support women gained from each other seemed to be very important to many of those interviewed.

A Women's Course

The courses provided a forum where women's own lives and experiences were explored, shared and given credibility. The focus was on women in all the courses' curricula – a shared theme that all could relate to and a common experience for everyone. Many subjects could be raised in an all-woman environment and talked about uninhibitedly and with confidence, in a safe, non-competitive atmosphere, with no louder male voices to dim them. "I never knew women lived such lives", Clare commented. The fact that women could discuss in this way was a revelation for Holly.

"A lot of women there were just ordinary working class women and they don't really talk about themselves: they never have a bloody chance do they?"

"We didn't realise how enjoyable women's talk would be. It's far better than any other talk – we enjoyed it so much..."

There was generally much interest in the topics they were covering. Monique, for example felt that on her course history became alive and involved real people's lives and was not dry and distant as it had been at school. Laura said learning was "more real, more enjoyable" and "more relevant". All were excited and stimulated by the 'women's studies' elements of the courses, and three of the women emphasised how much they had learnt about racism and living in a multicultural society.

Particularly worth stressing is the benefits of assertiveness training – in some *Fresh Start* groups the women read through and discussed a book on this topic and did role play: all were very positive about its usefulness.

Writing and Study Skills

Everyone also reported increased confidence in writing and study skills, and here again the approach of the tutors seemed very important, enabling women to gain new confidence techniques. Marie describes vividly how much she had benefited from this approach:

"In study skills, we've written about our experiences and how we felt at school, where we lived when we were young. This is very different from school where the teacher used to say, 'I want you to write about a holiday' (we didn't have holidays)

or 'Write about the river'. [At school] you weren't taught *how* to write ... they didn't say do it in parts, you plan it first. You just had to sit there with a blank sheet of paper and write. Up until I went on the course, writing a letter was next to an impossibility for me because it was just a blank piece of paper and panic set in. What am I going to write? What do I do that anyone wants to hear about? But once you plan it, it flows. I've written letters now and I've enjoyed it and I've enjoyed reading them through and thinking, 'I wrote that letter and it was no big thing'".

And Holly and Clare also talked how much their tutors had both made them feel they could write, and develop their writing:

"R was great, she made it so easy, she didn't mind you asking ... and she explained everything so well. She seemed the sort of person who wanted you to know. And by the time she was finished I thought 'I can do it ... it seems easy enough for me to even try it ...' Clare and I were talking about it afterwards and she said, 'Why didn't we think of it before? It's so simple. If we'd known that when we were younger we could have done so much ...'" (Holly)

"... it was J that gave me the confidence because she used to find my writing so interesting. And I used to be so surprised at first ... it always sounded so childish to me ... But she said that I write well ... My writing has changed ... I think more about what I'm writing, and I can put things down better and in a more interesting way. Also I'm writing more for people to understand, not just for myself." (Clare)

Marie made a sharp contrast between the response to her writing in a previous O-level course (where it came covered with red marks, and little constructive comment) and the positive response and useful comments she received from her *Fresh Start* tutor. Clare also said how important the constructive criticism of her tutors had been in helping her write. What seemed crucial was that women knew that no matter how little they managed it would be valued, their effort appreciated by the tutor and the rest of the group. And they could discuss their writing at each stage, and be offered sensitive and constructive suggestions they could build on.

Confidence and Direction

All the women reported increased confidence¹ in themselves and their abilities, and in most cases, a direction and a desire to go further. Marie described this as follows:

"I learnt that I was capable of doing whatever I decided I wanted to do, not like a brain surgeon, I do know my limitations, but I realised that my limitations were far fewer than I at first thought. As far as other people are concerned ... I feel confident of going into full-time study now. I'd be able to cope with it whereas just applying for full-time study I might not have been able to do it before ... they just brought my interest back into wanting to learn."

¹I use the term 'confidence' throughout this report because it was much used by women themselves and it describes an important feeling. I should like to add to this, however, and say that if women lack confidence in their ability to study and in their ideas, it is because of the consistent undervaluing of women's knowledge, and their exclusion from educational opportunity in a male dominated society. It is very easy to see 'lack of confidence' as an individual problem or 'illness', like having the flu; a problem which originates solely in our personal psychology. I should also want to stress how deeply these women impressed me with their strength, capabilities and courage, and with their confidence in themselves in other aspects of their lives.

Several women spoke of a greater confidence with people in general, and particularly speaking in groups. They were more positive about themselves, their right to express ideas, and more confident to assert themselves. For Holly this was the most powerful benefit of the course; it revolutionised her life – and the confidence and support she received from other women enabled her to apply for and take up a place as a Community Programme trainer. Anne and Gillian felt able to think more critically. Debbie described how she was more “rebellious” (in her partner’s estimation) because she had things to say and views to put that were founded on evidence provided in what she had learnt.

The course was not completely ideal for everyone. Clare, after a term on the *Fresh Start* course, made up her mind that she wanted to apply for full-time study; she felt then that the course was not geared enough towards preparing her for the specific skills she would need in HE and that many of the discussion topics as the course went on were now familiar to her. Ideally she would have liked to have changed to the *Return to Study* course in her second term. However, she had had to fight hard to join *Fresh Start* (for one day a week) as part of her MSC training, and feared that if she attempted to change courses she would have to go through the struggle all over again, so she continued on *Fresh Start* until the end of the year. But, despite her reservations, she was emphatic that *Fresh Start* itself should not be different – that she had needed it when she started and it met the needs of the other women in her group. It was simply that now she was ready to move on to something more intensive, more stretching. Gillian similarly recognised a point where she needed to move on – but she was able to do so. She had needed to begin with *Fresh Start* because she needed confirmation that she was capable of further study:

“[My tutor] repeatedly told me that I had the ability and the right ... I needed somebody like B to say ‘Yes, I can see it in you, don’t just think it might be there.’”

After a couple of terms, she decided that she would like to go on into full-time study and so she joined the *Return to Study* group. But she again stressed that her time on *Fresh Start* had been necessary to give her the impetus, and confidence, to go forward.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary then, women entered *Fresh Start* feeling the need for a new direction and an interest in studying, but were generally unclear about what its outcomes might be and uncertain as to whether they had the ability to go on to further study or training. The course seemed very appropriate for most of these women. It offered participative and informal learning in a supportive environment; it validated women’s lives and experience, and enabled women to develop a more realistic view of their own potential. It also helped them to develop purpose and direction. Not all the women went on to further study, but of those who did, all agreed it would have been unlikely that they would have had the confidence to take this step but for the *Fresh Start* (and *Return to Study*) courses. Those who did not ultimately take this step still reported benefiting significantly from the course – as will be seen in Chapter 4. Seven of

the women did want to go on to further study the following year, and in the next Chapter, I examine how women fared in finding out what were the options, and in gaining access to their chosen courses.

Chapter 3: Moving on from *Fresh Start*

"At the beginning of the course there is absolutely no way I could have dreamt of applying to the poly, let alone actually going to do an interview and writing an essay there ... I would have disintegrated ..." (Laura, June 1985)

An important aim of *Fresh Start* was to make available information and advice on further study and training opportunities, and to provide support and offer practice in skills that would enable women to gain access to these. Seven out of the eight women took up further study after completing either *Fresh Start* or *Fresh Start and Return to Study*, and this chapter explores women's experience of the following:

- the effectiveness of the course in offering information and advice on education and training possibilities;
- how they made choices about how to continue;
- the quality of support offered by the *Fresh Start* course through the process of applying;
- their experiences of entry procedures.

INFORMATION, ADVICE AND SUPPORT

Although colleges are beginning to be more accessible to adult mature students, and there has been some growth in special courses to meet the needs of adult returners without formal entry qualifications, it is still difficult to find out what is available and advice services are limited. This problem has been partially addressed in many London boroughs by the creation of borough education and advice 'shops' for adults, and the publication of local directories - usually written and circulated by small voluntary groups. Islington has an education and advice service for adults (EASIA), a local guide *Opportunities for Islington Women*, supported by Islington Voluntary Action Council (IVAC) and a comprehensive directory produced by ALFA for advisers in educational institutions¹. Nevertheless, most women interviewed had little or no idea of the range of possibilities opening up for mature students or how to find out about these. Providing information on what was available was one of the most important functions of *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* courses. Gillian, for example, was both unsure she was capable of further study and unaware of the range of options available to mature students when she began:

"I thought evening classes might be the springboard to more study, but I didn't know what was available or what I wanted to do ... [My first idea] was to go on to A levels, but I wasn't sure I would get a grant. *Fresh Start* gave me confidence, direction and advice ... R looked up everything in her big black book² and I realised that there were Access courses etc."

¹ALFA directory of AE, FE and HE courses.

²*Idem*.

And Debbie:

“My biggest obstacle was knowing exactly which route to take ... I didn't realise that somebody like R [adviser] existed, that you could go there and discuss and she'd help you ... I only went by chance”.

Women mainly found information and advice within the Adult Education Institute itself – though one visited EASIA and consulted the local guide *Opportunities for Islington Women* and two had limited help from the MSC Community Programme. At the AEI, detailed advice and counselling was offered by the Women's Studies Co-ordinator, who visited each group and encouraged course members interested in further study/training to meet her individually. Five of the women took up this opportunity – four to explore possibilities, and one to be prepared for an Access course interview. The remaining three found out about courses through the tutor, through other women on the course, or through outside contacts. Once people had found a possible course, tutors encouraged them to make relevant contacts and telephone calls themselves; although support was available from course tutors as they went through application processes – and often this support was crucial.

Providing information was only one aspect, and perhaps was not the most important, of the *Fresh Start* courses' contribution to women taking up further learning. Those who went on were unanimous that they could not have made this step without being on *Fresh Start/Return to Study* first. What other forms of support did the courses offer?

1. Crucially, the courses enabled women to develop *the confidence to apply for courses* – they helped them feel both ‘I can do it’ – and that they had the *right* to do a course, as Gillian put it – that full-time degree or social work courses with grants, for example, were not just for others who were younger and who had qualifications. Their tutors enabled them to see that they had as much to offer the course, and their applications were as valid as anyone's. Anne described the continuing encouragement she received as follows:

“I got a lot of help from the tutor ... she would always ask me how I was getting on and if I wanted some help and if I had tried this and that ... she always made everybody feel that ... she would be very willing to help and she would like to help if there was anything she could do. (That helped to keep me going) – I remember at the very beginning of the year she would say I think you ought to try and get yourself into something for next year ... she kept on saying it to me, and she would say have you tried? Have you done anything? ... she didn't exactly put pressure on me but she made sure that I wouldn't forget about it.” (Anne)

2. There was, in addition, both *practical help and support by tutors* through all the application process – filling in intimidating standard application forms that asked women to list their qualifications, and with little guidance on how to make the most of themselves, advice and practice in interviewing techniques, assertiveness training, and essay writing skills – needed for entrance tests.

3. Equally importantly, *being in a group with other women also applying* for courses encouraged individuals to try too, and meant ideas on possible courses were shared. They also found support and encouragement from the whole group in going through application processes.

4. Practice in *study skills* – both within *Fresh Start* and particularly in the separate *Return to Study* option – made people feel more prepared, and less nervous, about the demands of academic study in FE and HE.

All these factors seemed very important to women moving beyond *Fresh Start* into further study and training.

FINDING OUT ABOUT COURSES

Although women learnt about possible courses through *Fresh Start*, tutors didn't provide all the concrete information women needed – this generally had to be obtained from colleges and course tutors themselves. And one of the commonest problems women had was contacting courses in order to gain this information. Anne describes her experience as follows:

"I had a prospectus and I looked up all the courses and this one had a creche – and I needed a creche so I went for that one. And it's nearby.

"I rang them ... it was always difficult to get someone on the phone. I would see the courses advertised and I would ring the number and it would be really quite difficult to get in touch with the people. But this one had an advice evening ... so I went along there ... I thought at first it was the wrong place because there were all these young people there, you know, much younger than me ... but it wasn't ..."

(Anne then described how she met and talked to one of the tutors on the course, who asked her to fill out a form and said they would like to call her for an interview.)

"[Then] they didn't send me anything for ages and I got ... oh I got really nervous and I rang them. It was so difficult. I just couldn't get to talk with the woman. She gave me her phone number, her extension and everything, so it was perfectly all right to ring her. I left messages and I was ringing every day for a while. [Eventually] they sent me a letter [telling me to come for the interview] but ... the interviews were ... only eight days away ... It was just me panicking I think – I wanted to know, you want to know ... It was important to me because ... if I wouldn't have a chance then I would try something else."

At the time of my interview with Anne, in July, she was nervous once more because although she had been offered a place verbally, she still hadn't been offered one formally in writing. She commented:

"... they have all about me on files, but when I want something on paper it's different, because then it's too much work. I do believe them, but still ... you get so used to having things on paper, and that's the proof that it's actually going to happen and *has* happened."

It was not only Anne who found the inaccessibility of the college and course organisers trying. When I asked Gillian what had been hardest about getting her place on a preparation course for mature students, she responded:

"I think finding out what was available ... I don't know how many phone calls I made to colleges that didn't quite do what I wanted. When you telephone colleges, their line is usually engaged and when you get through to the switchboard the person you want to speak to, or that department is engaged. That's the general thing. And it seems in colleges like H, who do several courses, you go from one course organiser to another and you can't get all the information from one person."

Gillian was trying to discover quite general information – she had a rough

idea of the kind of course she would like, and she wanted to know what her local colleges had on offer, whether she was eligible to apply etc. As she herself suggested, an information officer for mature students at each college would have saved her a lot of time and expense. Making long and repeated phone calls during the day costs money – not easily found by those on low incomes. It is even more expensive, difficult and frustrating if you are ringing from a call box.

Several women emphasised how useful it was to meet the actual course tutors before applying/joining a course. Holly was much encouraged when she met the tutor for her O-level sociology course, as was Anne when she spoke to the course tutors at the advice evening. Anne commented:

“I think it’s nice ... when you have a prospectus and you can actually go and talk to somebody in the place and find out ... rather than just doing it over the phone and fill out application forms ... just being able to talk ... the woman I talked to, she was a tutor on one of the courses, and being able to talk to her made it different – it was just better; more real.”

Two women, although they had been very much encouraged to feel they could try course options, felt sometimes there was a lack of hard information, from both advisers and course organisers, about what exactly they would have to deal with. In October 1986, Debbie had been on both *Fresh Start* and then a *Return to Study* course at a different college. She felt strongly that although she now knew more about the range of courses on offer, it was much harder to find out exactly what a particular course would involve – the hours she would be in college, how much work she would have to do at home etc. She wanted realistic, concrete information so she would know whether she could manage a course with a young baby. Clare (who eventually went on to a degree course at a polytechnic) also commented, in a later interview, that her friends, *Fresh Start* and the polytechnic had not adequately warned her how much time she would have to organise for herself, or the pressure she would be under while she was studying.

A major problem then, for applicants to courses, is simply contacting colleges for more information and getting in touch with course organisers. An immediate solution to part of this problem might be to have an information officer sited within a college who knows about the courses on offer and who could liaise between the potential applicant and potential courses. But it is also to be noted how valuable women found informal personal contact with course tutors – either on the telephone or via an advice evening. Tutors on many courses do try and arrange this, and it is worth affirming its importance. Debbie and Clare’s experience also emphasises the need for course organisers and advisers to be able to supply concrete details about what exactly the course will involve, their likely timetable and how much time students will have to spend on coursework out of college. Tutors and advisers perhaps need to strike a balance between encouraging applicants to consider possibilities they might never otherwise have thought of, while at the same time being realistic in the picture they present.

CHOOSING A COURSE

Choice is perhaps a misleading term when considering women’s decisions

about how to pursue their education. Their choice was limited by what was available and personal circumstances – and far more so than those applying earlier in their lives and without family commitments. Clare's case is a good illustration of the limitations women had to work within.

During *Fresh Start*, Clare decided she wanted to do a degree course in social sciences. She would have preferred to have done a further year's preparation before entering her degree, but her year on the community programme was coming to an end and she needed an income during the following year. She had a husband in work, so would not be eligible for benefit. She could have attempted to find a job for a year to enable her to study part-time – but jobs were not easy to come by. She could not apply for an full-time Access course as she had moved outside the ILFA area and would not have obtained a grant: although the ILFA offers discretionary awards to students taking such courses, the outer London boroughs have a dismal record in this direction and grants are almost impossible to obtain. Clare therefore decided she must apply immediately for her degree because this meant she would be eligible for a statutory grant.

Her choice was further limited by the distance she could travel. She was tempted to apply to a different polytechnic to the one virtually round her corner. She felt it had a more exciting 'political' atmosphere. But the prospect of an hour's travel in each direction, and co-ordinating this with collecting children and her husband's shifts, meant that this preference was simply unrealistic. Thus, although London is well-supplied with higher education institutions, Clare's choice was effectively narrowed down to one, and she had to find a course there that would suit her.

How did other women make their choices? On page 43 there is a table showing courses women applied to and their eventual destinations. Most found themselves as limited as Clare. Major factors were:

1. *distance* – having to find a course within reasonable travelling distance of home.
2. *availability of on-site childcare* – two women could only choose courses that had a nursery available.
3. *finance* – the limitations this put on Clare have already been discussed. Gillian had a similar problem: she wanted "just to study", and would have liked to do two or three A levels. But again, she had to have an income. She went on to a full-time preparation course for degree level study in FE., and then directly on to a degree course faster than she would have liked, because these were effectively her only options (see Chapter 7). Finance was also a major stumbling block for those in full-time employment – they were unwilling to sacrifice their jobs – particularly at a time of high unemployment – in order to study full-time. They had to look for part-time courses, or day release. There seemed to be fewer qualifying courses available to them, and of a kind they were interested in. (This is discussed further in Chapter 4.)
4. *curriculum* – most women were interested in social sciences, or training in social and community work. This perhaps reflected their previous interests

before joining *Fresh Start*, and the course's content. It may also reflect the larger number of opportunities for mature students to study or train in this area.

However, even when choice was narrowed down to a particular area of study, and there were suitable courses offered locally which were welcoming to mature students, some still found it difficult to make choices about courses – as they had little experience of what a particular academic subject involved. Clare describes her dilemma as follows:

“[I chose sociology] because it seemed to fit in with all the other things I’m doing ... even though I hardly knew what it meant. I knew it was something to do with people and the ideas that I had ... but all the rest of them seem so interesting, I couldn’t choose. Even geography ... I thought geography was looking at Argentina and saying, ‘That’s where we get our beef from, South Africa and that’s where we get our gold from’: that’s what it was when I was in school ... But a friend of mine who teaches geography ... started explaining to me what geography was – its all to do with social things as well. So even geography became interesting to me ... The more I was talking to people ... the harder it was getting ... So I’m in a dilemma. So I’ve written sociology and I can discuss the rest when I go there.”

Choice of subject was thus often a stab in the dark; and in the event, many women changed subjects once they were on their chosen course. And one woman deliberately looked for a preparatory course that offered a range of subjects, so she didn’t have to make this kind of choice.

5. *special provision for mature students* – women preferred to go on to courses that were either specifically for mature students, or had special provision for mature students – either so they didn’t feel out of place, or because they still felt a little uncertain of their ability to study – especially for degree courses. For example, Laura finally chose a degree in sociology because there was a study skills workshop for mature students attached to this course, and Gillian, despite being advised to apply directly to HE, chose to do a mature student preparation course for degree level study first.

6. *approach of the college* – the reception women received on their initial contact, and their impression of those they met through the process of applying was important. It is worth recording Gillian’s experiences of the varying nature of this at some length. She applied to three preparatory courses for academic study for mature students – two in FE and one in AE:

“F. are very kind. They take the stress out of it; they really are very good. Their letters are worded in a way that doesn’t challenge or intimidate. They’re available on the phone – they’re difficult to get through to, but very friendly once you do ... and you do get through to people who can give you the information you want. They don’t ask you to do a written test at the interview ... obviously that makes it easier for the applicant ... though I can see there might be good reasons for asking applicants to write an essay at the interview. I found F. easier to apply to because I was interviewed by women ... And I also liked the book they’d asked me to read ...

“C. ... I didn’t like at all. They seemed to me quite bullying – quite frightening people. I think because they are a university preparation course and if you’re successful you’re guaranteed a place at (a particular university). So they’ve got (university) breathing down their necks and they come down heavily on their applicants. They say things like “Well if you think you’re coming here to waste your time and waste ours, you will find something different because you will be

thrown out of the course." Everybody I met there was white, male upper class, PhD under 30. I felt they wouldn't know anything about me and I wouldn't know anything about them. It wasn't an environment in which I would thrive at all. I could feel myself wilting ...

"P. were just middle of the road. And they had some women teachers – not enough as far as I can see. All their literature says they operate an equal opportunities scheme, regardless of gender, race, religion, etc. which is good. There are only two black people there, which is a shame."

Gillian was not offered a full-time place but a part-time place on her first choice (R. above) and so opted for P. Although part of her reason for choosing the latter was its breadth of curriculum (it included computers and science and she wanted to try these subjects), it can be seen how much her choice was influenced by reception by the college, a positive equal opportunities policy, and a sense that those there were sensitive to her position and had some feel for her life and experience.

In summary of this section then, finance, closeness of the college, and on-site childcare were very significant in determining women's choice of courses. Those with school-age, or pre-school children could not travel far as they had to be able to collect children from school or nursery – or both, and two women had to find courses with creche/nursery provision. The need for an income also placed limitations on the kind of course women could do, pushing some women into applying for full-time courses with grant support sooner than they would ideally have liked, and others into searching for much more limited part-time provision that could allow them to continue in employment. Generally, women started by identifying colleges/courses that fitted these essential criteria. Where choice of course still remained, deciding on subjects was another hurdle – it was often hard to know what a particular subject involved from its title and some deliberately opted for courses covering a range of subject areas. They also favoured courses that welcomed and seemed sensitive to the needs and experience of mature students, and applied with far more confidence if they met people who seemed welcoming.

ENTRY PROCEDURES: ENROLMENT EVENINGS, FORMS, INTERVIEWS AND TESTS

Holly was the only woman who experienced an enrolment evening at her local further education college. She found this an intimidating process. There were huge numbers there on the day she went – "I've never seen anything like it" she commented, and no signs to help people with procedure. As a result she waited for a long time in a queue and then found she had to fill in a form first. So she had to leave the queue, fill a form in and start all over again. However, she left feeling more confident about going to her courses, again because she had had a personal talk with her sociology tutor:

"She looked nice. I asked her what the people would be like and she said it's really good – a lot of single parents ... and I thought 'That's O.K., they'll be women just like me'."

Laura, Marie, Gillian, Anne and Clare all had to negotiate entry via application forms, or a letter outlining their reasons for applying, an

interview and some form of written test. These were inevitably stressful processes.

Gillian and Laura had found the support of their *Return to Study* tutor in filling in forms very useful. The problem was both in managing not to be intimidated by long sections asking for previous education and qualifications, and in how to convey what they did have to offer on a form ill-designed for the purpose. One of the *Fresh Start* tutors commented that one of her main roles here was in helping women to present themselves in the 'right' language (white and middle class). She also noted that polytechnic application forms were particularly complex.

Having negotiated this hurdle, they all had interviews, and some entrance tests. Supporting women through these, and offering them help with interview techniques was one of the major contributions of *Fresh Start/Return to Study*. Laura describes her experience of her interview at a polytechnic:

Q What was your biggest obstacle (to getting on the course) do you think?

"Other people were applying and they were receiving their interviews before I got mine, so going through their interviews [afterwards together] was quite helpful. But nobody's turned out quite as bad as mine ...

"[As we waited] there was a woman outside saying there's eight places and 40 people, so you really felt put down. They did the usual interview which I've read about ... putting you on the lower chair ... I was very brave, I asked for a different chair. I thought, No, this isn't going to happen to me. I just couldn't because I'd [collapsed at interviews before] ... the interview practice I'd had was very important."

Both the interview and the tests themselves were quite gruelling. They did a comprehension test, and a short essay – Laura felt this was particularly hard for women applying straight to the college as mature students without having been on a course like hers. She was also angry about how misleading the college had been about the time the whole process would take:

"When I got the letter saying could you come for an interview, they said something like there will be a short written test – they gave the impression that it would be about 15 minutes but it turned out that it was an hour and half – not what I call short. They'd read my application, they knew I had children and took no account of that whatsoever. If I hadn't have arranged to have the kids picked up I couldn't have taken the test [It started at 3.30pm]. There was a lack of information on their part."

Interviews seemed to vary between the 'testing', if not 'bullying' and those of the kind that Gillian experienced at F. (see above), that were informal, and designed to help women reveal as much of themselves as possible. Obviously women much preferred the latter to the former. But, as importantly, for those with few or no formal qualifications, interviews are an important means by which applicants can reveal how much they have to offer, and to learn more about the course they are applying for. Interviews which put women on test may offer little chance for those inexperienced in interview techniques to do either of these.

Both F. (an AE institution) and Clare's polytechnic also made the whole

application procedure less intimidating by asking people to write an essay at home. The course at F. is a very long standing one for mature students, a large percentage of whom go on into higher education. If F. and applicants for a degree course can do without entrance tests, then there seems little reason why other institutions cannot do the same. Timed tests are extremely intimidating, especially for mature students who may not have sat any sort of examination since they were at school. Colleges should certainly consider whether there is anything to be gained by subjecting mature students to this experience.

It is also worth noting how much support these women gained from their tutors and groups at Islington AEI. Laura was able to ring her tutor just before she went:

"She said "Don't worry Laura, you can do it", and it just stayed in my head."

This gave her the boost of confidence she needed to get through the day. She also had a group to go over the experience afterwards and gain reassurance that she had not done badly. Marie, Gillian, and Clare were clear about how valuable and strengthening this kind of support had been.

THE EXPERIENCE OF REJECTION

A final and major barrier to access for mature students is the shortage of places on particular courses - those leading directly to social and community work qualifications. As a result, three women were turned down by the courses they applied for - Marie, Gillian and Anne. Marie, perhaps the most excited by the prospect of *Fresh Start* and about a new-found future, found the knock to her confidence devastating and difficult to get over. She had applied for Access to social work and was turned down because she didn't have sufficient practical experience. What was meant by 'sufficient' was left unclear, both before she applied and in the rejection - she had a fair amount of unpaid social and community work experience, but it turned out this was not 'enough'. The optimism she had felt at her interview, when she said

"... if I don't get it I do intend to just cram the year with other courses until I can apply for my CQSW. There's no way I intend to stop now ..."

was hard to sustain in the face of this blow. The practical difficulties to pursuing other courses (such as A levels) also prevented her finding other options immediately. She was desperately waiting for a nursery place for her son to give her the space to pursue her studies. In the event she spent an autumn feeling very low, but did become involved in a group starting a community nursery. She felt so sensitive and uncertain about her future, that she did not want to be interviewed again during the following batch of interviews in January.

Anne was turned down by a full-time community and youth work course - she hadn't even had an interview. But by the time we met, she was reasonably philosophical about this. She too needed 'more experience'. But she had other possibilities for the following year and was very hopeful of being accepted for entry in September 1986.

Gillian applied for a full-time place on her chosen course at F., but was at first

offered a part-time place (for which she would not be eligible for a grant). She describes her reaction to this as follows:

"They were only going to offer me a part-time place because they felt I could cope – they did use the word 'cope' – with a part-time place, and that other students wouldn't cope without the framework of the full-time course. I was very hurt – it seemed that circumstances through my life had forced me to cope, and now because I seemed to cope, I was being made to 'cope' even more ... And I wrote and told them ... that I wanted them to think again and offer me the full-time place, but if they wouldn't than I'd accept the part-time ..."

In fact F. did finally offer her a full-time place – but she was so discouraged she opted for a course elsewhere.

Courses that do not ask for formal entry qualifications do have a problem of criteria on which they are to decide whether to accept or reject candidates. What may happen is that colleges develop internal (unpublished) criteria in order to choose when they are more suitable applicants than places. For social work Access, for example, they may ask for 'experience', but may only in practice accept those with a specific amount and quality of experience. Some 'return to study' courses for mature students may operate a system in reverse to the normal – rejecting candidates because they are *too* capable. But rejection for two of these women was a serious blow to their confidence, if not devastating – whatever the given reason. If, in reality, courses open to mature students without qualifications have narrower criteria for choosing candidates than their publicity suggests, it would seem preferable that they give potential candidates more indication of this – though they could continue to emphasise their flexibility. (This would also make their entrance guidelines open to public scrutiny.) Applicants would then have a more realistic idea of their chances. Where courses have many suitable applicants, it might also be fairer to offer places on a first come first served basis, rather than trying to decide who is more 'worthy' – though undoubtedly courses who practise this are acting from the best of motives. This was the policy F. was considering, and as Gillian said:

"Then they can say to applicants 'we're full' ... and that's much better than the rather back-to-front way of offering places that F. have got, and it's much better also then being told you've failed and you're not wanted. 'We're full' doesn't say anything about you as the applicant ..."

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has raised many issues, and it is perhaps best to summarise them again here. Again, I make practical recommendations in Chapter 8:

1. It is difficult generally to discover what study/training opportunities are available to mature students, and many women had little idea of the options available when they entered *Fresh Start*. Islington AEI played a very useful role in helping women discover possible courses, and in supporting and encouraging them to apply.
2. Women had difficulty in getting through by telephone to colleges. There was often no-one they could speak to who could let them have details of

courses across the college that were available to mature students. It was also very hard to get in touch with course tutors, both initially, and later, when checking dates of interviews etc. Making repeated phone calls during the day time was not only frustrating, but expensive.

3. One woman became anxious when colleges failed to get in touch with her until the last minute about interview dates, or to confirm her offer of a place in writing.

4. Women much preferred to talk to tutors involved in the course so they could develop a 'feel' for it, rather than simply sending off an application form. Advice evenings, or the presence of a tutor at an enrolment evening were appreciated. A friendly, welcoming approach by colleges was also highly valued.

5. Women needed concrete and realistic information from advisers about the amount of time they would need to spend on the course, in and out of college, and their likely timetable, so they could plan ahead.

6. Women's choice of courses was effectively narrowed by: the need to study within travelling distance of home, and reluctance to travel at night; the need for on-site childcare; the need for an income and the shortage of part-time or day-release courses.

7. Applicants may be uncertain what is meant by course titles from brief descriptions in a prospectus. They may prefer broader based courses that do not ask them to specialise too early.

8. Women preferred to go either into courses either designed specifically for mature students, or into those which made special provision for such students.

9. Application forms were often intimidating and did not encourage women to present all they had to offer fully.

10. Women often viewed prospective interviews with foreboding. In the event they varied from the intimidating to the relaxed and supportive. If colleges/courses are not doing so already, they should recognise the importance of developing a relaxed and informal atmosphere in interviews for mature students, so the interview becomes a means of enabling applicants to reveal as much of what they have to offer as possible, and to check out their own questions about the course, rather than an endurance test.

11. Women with children needed concrete information about how long they would spend in interviews and written tests, so they could make arrangements for childcare.

12. Women preferred to write an essay at home, rather than go through the tense experience of sitting an entrance test. Such tests are particularly intimidating for those who had not been in the education system for some years. Not all colleges use them; their value must be questioned.

13. There was a shortage of places on several courses – particularly Access to social work and community and youth work training courses for mature students. Some women only got a place on their second application, a year later.

14. Three women were consequently rejected by their preferred courses. Two women found this painful and a serious blow to their confidence. Those who had alternative options in the following year survived this. One woman couldn't take up other options because of childcare problems. She was extremely discouraged, and might easily have given up altogether.

15. Courses could make the experience of rejection or selection easier, by publicly acknowledging internal guidelines they may be operating and by suggesting positive alternatives to applicants, who are not offered places. They should also consider adopting a first come, first served policy.

Chapter 4: The Second Year (1) – Study and Paid Employment

In this chapter, I look at the experience of three women for whom paid employment remained or became a priority during the following year – Debbie, Monique and Holly.

Monique did not continue to study after her *Fresh Start* year. She had considered working towards social work qualification, but had not seen how it would be financially possible for her to study full-time, even though she wanted to train for social or community work. She had thought of looking for a course she could join for one day a week and working the other four. Towards the end of *Fresh Start*, however, she had applied for and obtained promotion within the social services. This new job put fresh demands on her, and she had to develop skills of administration and management. She felt she had little time to continue her studies, and didn't think now, in her mid-forties, that she would undertake training for a qualification. Nevertheless she had greatly enjoyed the *Fresh Start* course, she felt it had given her a degree of confidence as she entered her new post, and had also a space to herself away from home, family and work responsibilities. She also felt that the multiracial membership of the course and the inclusion of sessions on racism, would help her in her new job. If she had time in the future, she would study again, but she would need classes in the evening.

Debbie continued to be interested in taking up study/training opportunities that would offer her a qualification, but her choice of possibilities was limited by her need to remain in employment, and her uncertainty as to which direction to take. She had also applied and got a new job during the course – she moved from a solicitor's to a social services office. Again she felt the course had given her the confidence to make this move. During her *Fresh Start* year, she considered an Access course in social and community work, but was reluctant to enter full-time study the following year, partly because of the financial risk of leaving her job, and partly because she did not yet feel sufficiently confident in her study skills. She also investigated taking a part-time social and community work training course, but did not take up the option in the end because she would have to travel home by herself at night. She did however join a psychology course at the AEI and she still planned to enter study or training that would improve her qualifications and offer her a new career. In the summer of 1986 she took up an eight-week day-release course – in 'return to study' – at a local FE college, sponsored by Islington council (her employer). She again found this very stimulating and made her feel very positive about continuing. As a result, she applied and got a place on a BTEC course in administration (again on day release). However, she found she was expecting a baby, and so had to shelve any immediate plans.

In October 1986, Debbie was determined to continue to study during and after her maternity leave, but her circumstances closed a number of options. Like many women, she did not feel safe travelling at night – and this ruled out

several courses. She was also worried about maintaining an income:

"It's a bit frightening because once you (give up your job), you're living on a grant, and then at the end that's your lot ... but I want something where I could work towards a qualification and not be a nonentity at the end of it."

She was also still unsure what she would like to do – her interest in social work training had waned, and the BTEC course she had applied for was a practical option, but not her favoured choice. She was really interested in training for advice work and her ideal option would be one or two years day release, perhaps followed by a year or two on a grant. But she still had to discover a course that would allow her to do this, in a kind of training that appealed.

Holly decided to take two daytime O-level courses as part of her MSC training programme during 1985-6. *Fresh Start* had encouraged her to apply for a job on the Community Programme (in a Mobile Therapy Unit) – and she was emphatic that she would not have done this but for the support, encouragement and confidence she received from other students and tutors. She was not due to finish her year on this until mid-1986. *Fresh Start* had also enabled her to find an assertiveness in herself she had never experienced before:

"I just don't let things go past now that I would have a few years ago ... At work my boss is a real 'man' ... The coffee would come in and if we didn't jump up and get him his coffee, he'd say "I haven't any coffee – is nobody going to get me some?" And the young ones would jump up and give it to him. Well, we'd practised that situation in one of the classes ... as a role play, so next time, I said to one of the girls, "I'm damned if I'm going to get up and give him coffee, let him get his own". And she agreed ... Before I would have just jumped up and got it for him. When I told them at college the next time I went, they said "Well done, Holly" ... I knew I had their backing, even though they weren't there. I was proud of myself ... It's only little things like that, but it's built up my confidence."

Little things they may have been, but Holly also fought for her right to go on to two part-time O-level courses the following year, despite much opposition from her manager (he argued that they weren't training), and also dealt in many other ways with his authoritarianism and sexism. She also found she could talk to others with far more confidence, and deal with those who previously would have overwhelmed her.

When her MSC training finished in the spring of 1986, Holly's main priority was finding another job. Although she had benefited from *Fresh Start*, and her O-level group, she knew she wasn't interested in studying full-time. She had done enough to satisfy her. When she found a job, she had to leave her (daytime) course. In October 1986 she was working very happily managing the office in a nursing agency, a job she had been offered by a friend. She said:

"These two years have flown ... it just seems a different life to my old one – staying indoors. But I always knew I could do something if I could get in there ... *Fresh Start* played a big part at that time of my life ... it gave me confidence ... if [my friend] had offered me the job and I hadn't been on the *Fresh Start* course I wouldn't have gone. I wouldn't have been the same person. But I'll be moving on to bigger things now. I know I will."

The experience of Debbie, Holly and Monique raise several issues concerning *Fresh Start* and mature student access:

1. *Fresh Start* can benefit women in many ways – both in their everyday lives, in personal relationships, and in gaining and changing employment. It is therefore important that such courses remain geared to multiple exits, and do not become solely ‘feeder’ courses for further and higher education. It is also important that their ‘success’ is not measured in terms of the number of students that choose this option.

2. A serious barrier to access for women in full-time work is that opportunities such as *Access* courses are mainly held full-time or as 21-hour day courses. Even where students are eligible for a grant, the risk of giving up employment may be too great, particularly at a time of high unemployment. For Debbie and Monique the need to have a stable income was very important. Monique preferred early evening courses, but even where evening provision is available, childcare responsibilities and the dangers of travelling at night deter many women.

3. A day-release course was the best option for Debbie, and we can assume for many other women in Debbie’s circumstances. However, far fewer women compared to men¹, particularly women in lower paid and part-time work², are ever offered this opportunity by their employers. Both Debbie and Monique were eligible for such release under by Islington council, but this is perhaps exceptional.

Even where women are eligible for release, employers may only consider training directly related to their jobs. Clare and Holly had to fight the MSC to be allowed to join *Fresh Start*, and O-level sociology and English literature courses – even though release for study was part of their training on the Community Programme. Management argued that their chosen courses could not be considered ‘training’, as they were not directly related to their placements. Also worth noting is that, by coincidence, Clare’s husband was trying to negotiate a period of unpaid study leave from his job as a driver with British Rail. He wanted to take a degree course. This had been refused, but he was still fighting the case through his union.³

Women may also be deterred by the hostility of their immediate management to their taking ‘time off’. Clare had to deal with this while she was on *Fresh Start* (one day a week) – it was the main reason why she felt she couldn’t apply to change to *Return to Study*, as she felt she would have had to start fighting all over again. Another woman interviewed said she had had the option of day release when she was working but still preferred to study in her own time because:

¹Of those receiving training on part-time day release in 1985 there were 142,000 women to 328,000 men; DES Statistical Bulletin 15/86, (December 1986).

²In 1984, 90% of part-time jobs were undertaken by women; *Employment Gazette*, (October 1985) cited by ‘The fact about women is ...’ Statistics Unit, Equal Opportunities Commission, (Manchester, 1986).

³The argument for increased Paid Educational Leave for low paid women and men workers, and for part-time workers is made in Jane Mace and Martin Yarnit (editors): *Time off to Learn: paid educational leave for low paid workers*, Methuen, 1987.

“By law they will allow you to go, but they’re not at all pleased all the time you’re having a day off to go into further education.”

Yet such provision is the only way many women can realistically hope to retrain. The struggle for the right to train while at work, and in the kinds of courses women are interested in, must be part of the campaign to improve women’s access to education and I make more detailed recommendations in Chapter 7.

STUDY BEYOND *FRESH START*:

Destinations in June/July 1985

Name	Courses applied for	Offered place?	Accepted?	Long term goals
Anne	HE: Community and Youth Work	no	no	youth work
	FE: 21 hr O-levels	yes	yes	
Clare	HE: BA Social Studies	?	?	social work?
Debbie	AE: Psychology (p/t eve)	n/a	n/a	social/community work/advice work
Gillian	AE: Return to study (f/t)	p/t only then f/t	no	study: Dip HE
	FE: Preparation for mature students wanting to do degree (f/t)	yes	yes	
	FE: University Access (f/t)	-	withdrew	
Holly	FE: O-level English Literature and Sociology (p/t)	n/a	n/a	'Meaningful' job with people
Laura	HE: BSc Sociology (f/t)	yes	yes	interesting job, e.g. research for GLC
Marie	FE: Access to CQSW (f/t)	no	-	social work
Monique	--			--

January/October 1986: courses taken by each woman in academic years 1985-6 and 1986-7

Name	1985-6	1986-7
Anne	FE: 21-hour O levels: Community Politics, Sociology, English Literature, History. 2 hour Introduction to Social and Community work	HE: Community and Youth Work course, (f/t)
Clare	HE: BA Social Studies (f/t)	(contd)
Debbie	AE: Psychology (p/t) FE: 8 week return to study course (day release)	AE: Return to study, (p/t day)
Gillian	FE: Preparatory course for mature students wanting to enter degrees (f/t)	HE: BA Combined Studies in Economics, Politics, Environment and Society (f/t)
Holly	FE: O-level English Literature (closed after 2 weeks) and O-level Sociology (p/t) (till Easter) (MSC Community Programme training)	-
Laura	HE: BSc Sociology	(contd)
Marie	-	FE: 1 year f/t Access in social and community work - leading to 2 year CQSW (polytechnic)
Monique	-	-

Chapter 5: The Second Year (2) – Surviving the Course

“Perhaps I should have gone to more tutorials. I didn’t though because I wasn’t really sure what I didn’t understand.” (Clare, Feb, 1986)

INTRODUCTION

Improving access for mature students is not only about increasing the amount and range of provision, it is also ensuring that they have every chance of completing a course once they have started. In this chapter, I move on to the experience of women who entered courses in FE or HE in the year following *Fresh Start*. A table showing the courses women entered during the academic year 1985-6, and 1986-7 is on the previous page. It can be seen from this, that after *Fresh Start*, two went directly into degree courses. The others went into FE: one onto an FE course preparing mature students for degree level study; two into part-time courses in FE (one two-hour, the other 21 hours) working towards O levels, and one onto an FE Access course leading to social work training. All the courses (HL and FE) were either specifically for mature students with few or no formal qualifications, or actively encouraged mature students’ entry. The majority of women were interviewed twice in this year, in January and October 1986 (see Appendix 3 for checksheets).

The chapter is structured as follows: I begin with a comparison between *Fresh Start* and traditional patterns of education in FE and HE, in order to consider some contrasts women could be expected to find as they moved on. I then consider women’s perceptions and feelings about their experiences as mature students during their first term. I first pick out some key problems most women referred to, coping with coursework, developing study skills and tutor-student relationships. I then go on to consider the quality of support they received both from within the institution, and from other mature students.

FRESH START ON FE AND HE: A CHANGE IN EMPHASIS

As described in the previous chapters, *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* were key first steps in enabling women to develop confidence in their ability to study, in the development of skills and in gaining information, advice and direction. These courses had an approach that is *traditionally* not found in FE and HE: they had negotiated curricula; they were informal, supportive and participative; women were actively encouraged to explore their personal experiences and to learn from and develop these. The atmosphere of the groups encouraged women to feel free to raise any questions they might have, and they could discuss their writing with their tutor at any stage. Coursework was not compulsory, it was not graded, and there were no tests or exams. When women entered courses in FE and HE – courses with pre-designed curricula, where coursework was compulsory and graded, and where they were often examined, they were bound to find some change in pace and

emphasis. For some, however, this was considerably more than for others.

The change was perhaps sharpest for those going into full-time HE, and one FE course that prepared for study in HE. The traditions of teaching and learning in HE are often markedly different from those of school, or adult or further education. Study here is a relatively isolated and self-directing process: students are encouraged in 'independent' learning and thought. At the same time, I would suggest, HE has unvoiced traditions, expectations and values that all new students must learn – a culture of academic institutions. This combination may put enormous demands on women who have not been in full-time education for 15 to 20 years, where they are relatively inexperienced at study skills, where they are unsure of the quantity, style and standards of work they are expected to produce, and where they are surrounded by those who have come straight from full-time education and have other qualifications. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that women felt unsure of themselves, and that they often found their first term, if not year, stressful. "It was like going into a different life" as Clare put it – a world of different values and expectations that they had to learn to judge. I should stress at this point that the issue was not women's *intellectual capabilities* – all successfully completed their academic work – it was finding the energy and confidence to 'survive' during their first year, particularly for Gillian and Clare, and to some extent, Laura, that needs to be noted. Equally, two women who went into FE courses designed for adults with few or no formal qualifications found the transition easier. Unfortunately, one of the women (Marie) did not enter her Access course until after I had completed the interviews, but Anne's experience of her course in FE (preparation for O levels) does contrast at many points with that of other women.

THE FIRST TERM

Coping with coursework

One major problem all the women found in their first term was coping with the volume of work. They, especially those on full-time or 21-hour courses, found the pressures and demands of essay writing and reading tough to deal with and demanding considerable organisation of their time. Some, like Anne on her O-level preparatory course, found this simply a matter of establishing a pattern of work; once having done this, the volume could be managed. Others reported never feeling on top of their work.

Most full-time courses or reasonably full-time courses are demanding, but for some women the load did seem to cause unreasonable tension and anxiety. Often the women felt this was due to their lack of experience, and that other students didn't seem to need to spend as long as they did on writing essays, for example; but much of this may well have been their *perception* rather than actuality. There were other more concrete reasons why they should feel pressures. Firstly, most had to both cope with a heavy timetable of study and fit in family and childcare commitments – this problem is looked at more closely in the next chapter. Secondly, these were conscientious students, some still a little uncertain of their right to be where they were; they were anxious to work hard. This meant that they saw themselves as 'failing' if they did not complete all the suggested reading for a seminar/lecture, or could not finish a

piece of writing on time. On some courses, however, there seemed to be a contradiction between the stated requirements for course work, and what students could realistically achieve. Laura, on a polytechnic degree course, commented on this, and how it undermined her confidence.

“In a week you just can’t read [all the reading you have been set]. You would be given seven or eight books to read for one subject and sometimes there would also be reading to do for maybe three or four other subjects in the course, and it just can’t be done. It is dreadfully unrealistic.”

Q: How does it make you feel having that amount of reading to do?

“The first term I felt dreadful as I felt I was lagging behind because I wasn’t doing all the reading. You see you want so much to do well and succeed, and you tend to do what is expected of you.” (Oct 1986)

Laura attributed her apparent inability to ‘keep up’ to her own inadequacy. But the reasons why she experienced this probably lie with the course itself. There seemed a lack of attention to how much work each individual was being assigned across their *whole study programme*; about whether the volume was appropriate for first term students – and the effect on students’ confidence, particularly mature students, if they couldn’t manage it all. Secondly, it is important for new students that tutors distinguish between *essential* and *supplementary* reading, and make sure the ‘essential’ reading can be managed in the time available. It can also be useful to suggest chapters, rather than whole books – only part of which are relevant to the topic area. Colleges may expect students to make this kind of judgement themselves – but this requires some prior knowledge of academic practice that many mature students (in fact any first term student) cannot be expected to have.

Gillian’s experience also illustrates the difficulties for mature students when there is a mismatch between an ‘ideal’ workload and one that can be carried out in practice. Gillian was in college from 9-5 each day on her preparatory course, so had to do most of her coursework during evenings and weekends. She too seemed to have daunting quantity of coursework to manage each week. She felt particularly under pressure during the first term, because students were given a reference for their polytechnic or university at the end of this term. This reference was based on the tutor’s assessment of their first term’s work.

It is worth reproducing in full Gillian’s account of her and her fellow students’ experience of the course’s approach:

“The introductory talks at P. more or less implied ‘you needn’t think that you can come here and get away with mediocre work, and you’re going to be on test all the time’ (and you *were* too) and ‘a lot of people don’t make it’ and this sort of line. And we didn’t even know what it was going to be about, you know, we hadn’t written an essay or been in a class. This was going to be such a challenge they said, – we already knew but we didn’t know what to expect. All things like giving you an essay schedule in the first week of being there, and when you looked at it you realised you’d got an essay a week to do ... for the first and second term ... plus the reading for four or five subjects, plus study skills and homework ... People who had home commitments didn’t get the work done and they put ... such an emphasis on getting the work done – ‘if you can’t prove you can do the work we can’t give you a reference and you can’t get into a poly’ ... and I took that very seriously and so did everybody. And about half a dozen of us and we were people without children [Gillian’s son was 18 by now] did all that work and nearly worked ourselves to

death because we didn't really even know the standard we were aiming for. People with children just couldn't keep up and had to become a bit blasé about it and some people even who hadn't got children couldn't keep up anyway, the tension and anxiety were too much."

The course's emphasis on 'hard work' and 'standards' hung over Gillian for the first half of the course and drove her to work extremely hard and for long hours, always unsure whether she was reaching the required 'level'. Then to her dismay, Gillian found towards the end of the second term that her tutors considered her 'fussy and over-anxious' and as 'working too hard'. The general attitude to students' work changed too:

"And then at the end of the second term, and the beginning of the third they started ... saying well it isn't so important anyway ... I dropped one essay in the whole year; [but] some people only did half the work, and they all got into polys and they all got references anyway so I was utterly confused by that."

In practice, then, on Gillian's course, it emerged there was a mismatch between what the tutors implied was essential and what was in fact necessary for her to do – a hidden, and unvoiced 'rule of the game' that it took a long time for her to realise. The course seemed to be adopting a 'survival of the toughest' approach, threatening failure if students didn't produce the required amount of work at the required (but undefined) level, in the hope that this would push more students into working harder. This approach would seem markedly inappropriate for responsible adult learners, unsure of themselves and their abilities, anxious to do well, and with home and family commitments to manage too. And its effect, according to Gillian, was to put herself, and other students on her course, under enormous pressure and anxiety and led to many of them abandoning their studies.

Two issues, then seemed to have emerged in this section. The first is the need for courses (particularly in HE) to make sure mature students are being assigned a volume of coursework that it is actually possible for them to complete – and this means considering what they are being assigned across their *whole study programme*. Students straight from school may be more willing to 'risk' not doing all their reading for example, or skipping through it quickly, but mature students, new to the culture of education, may not have the confidence to play this 'game'. All first year students, furthermore, may have difficulty distinguishing essential from secondary reading, and 'crucial' work from work 'if you have got time', and need guidance on this.

The second issue is the difficulty for mature students in their first year of judging what the 'standard' is for their written work. This is perhaps particularly true for those going into HE (Although Gillian's course was in fact based in FE, it seemed to follow the traditions and style of HE). Courses need to recognise this and give students guidelines and realistic feedback, along with positive and concrete help in developing their writing. They should not, as in Gillian's case, just assume that students 'know' what is required. This is discussed more in the next section.

The first term: developing study skills

...second major area of concern for all the women who went on to further

courses, particularly in HE, was developing their study skills – particularly essay writing skills. Laura, on her poly degree course, commented:

“It’s been very strenuous because there is all the learning I have to do – not the academic learning but how to go about it.”

Although the women were bound to find they had to develop study skills as they went along, several felt there was a lack of concrete feedback on their work and how they might improve it. Their tutors’ comments were often not specific enough to help. Laura felt what she needed was a tutor to go through each essay with her and explain exactly what she should have done, offered her alternative plans etc. Holly also said she would have liked this on her O-level course. Gillian summed up how she felt at the beginning of her preparatory course as follows:

“I never knew how much reading I was supposed to do or what level I was supposed to try and write my essay ... I didn’t have the faintest idea how to write one ... I didn’t realise they were supposed to have a structure ... and I was always terrified of getting the point wrong.”

Gillian also commented that she often didn’t even *understand* the comments on her essays – written as they were in inaccessible language.

Again there were ‘rules’ of academic practice – and again unspoken – that sometimes took some time to discover. At the beginning of her degree course, Clare, for example, thought she had to remember everything she read, and did not realise that she was expected to refer to books constantly while writing (a contrast to school). Laura said that it took her a long time to realise that no matter what the essay title said (explain, discuss, describe etc.), what was really wanted was ‘criticise’. Gillian remained uncertain that she was structuring her essays properly for most of her year’s course and this caused her some anxiety although she later discovered that she had been structuring them well all along.

Most of the women had special study skills workshops on their courses and I shall consider below, how on some courses these could have been more useful, and how tutors could have offered more effective support in this area.

The first term: Tutor-student relationship

Compared to *Fresh Start*, one of the strongest contrasts most women found on their new courses – again particularly in HE – was in their tutors’ attitudes to themselves as learners. The quality of teaching varied from tutor to tutor, and course to course. Anne found her tutors (on her 21 hours a week O-level preparation course) very good: “I feel I can talk to them if I need to and even though they are the tutors, it’s all on an equal basis. Just because they are the tutors, I don’t think they feel they know everything, and the students know little”. Marie, on a full-time Access course, also found her tutors very supportive. But the others had varied experience, finding some tutors exciting encouraging and open; others more formal and distant, and a general shift in teaching approach that often proved difficult to cope with. Clare, on a degree course, commented on this:

“Sometimes I wonder if the tutor does in fact want you to learn. Mostly they do

seem to but sometimes it is as if they are saying that it is none of their business whether you get it into your head or not." (Clare)

Struggling with a large range of new subjects, Clare felt she needed more straightforward explanation of concepts and theories, instead of seminar discussions that assumed that this had already been grasped. And there seemed no-one she could ask these kind of questions. She said:

"I would like tutors to talk to you, and tell you things rather than always ask you things. Always asking you questions and so, in a sense they are assuming you know things ... in lectures they use ... terms, not just words, but whole sentences ... that perhaps somebody who has been there a long time would use, but not somebody who has not gone into it. I am not saying I don't understand it all, but there must be, for example, many people who are not aware at all of politics, and what terms such as 'capitalism' mean ..."

Gillian, on her FE preparatory course, felt her tutors were used to dealing with younger people and were not sure how to relate to mature students. She found them often judgemental, authoritarian and prone to judging students on their personalities rather than their work. It was a very difficult environment, where there seemed little interest in her educational development or adult discussion on her progress. She commented rather bitterly:

"I expected that they had given me a place on the course 'because they thought I was bright enough to benefit from it ... I thought they would say quite openly that I needed to do a lot of work (and I *would* do a lot of work). But I also expected that they would be on my side and they would tell me straight where I was not doing well - that they would work with me on me. Not only that - I hoped the relationship would have something for them as well. It felt so hurtful when in the end they didn't seem to be on my side at all."

Holly found herself with 24 other students in her two hours a week O-level class in sociology. The atmosphere here was different to *Fresh Start*. She missed the relaxed chat at the beginning of the group, and felt unable to ask questions as often as she would like in case she was holding up the rest of the class. She found the course work she did at home demanding, and would have liked to have more personal feedback from her tutor on her work (though she liked her tutor very much). There was very little opportunity of this however as the tutor always had to rush away as soon as the class was finished. And although she had some friends in the group, and they consulted each other in the week about their assignments, there were still many people in the group she didn't know. When I asked her what she felt was the main difference between this group and *Fresh Start*, she said

"Here if you don't do it, it is just your hard luck and you will miss it ... I find that the difference. I feel as if I have to keep myself going with nobody to help me here. At *Fresh Start*, if you missed things, there was always next week to go over it ... what is hard is that you have to work and no-one will help you. Nobody will lend a hand if you are stuck ... and you can't relax. I have only the two hours, and if my mind wanders, what did I miss?"

Many women therefore found a contrast between the supportive tutorial support of *Fresh Start* and that of their subsequent courses. In the latter they felt far more isolated, under pressure to keep up, and often uncertain whether

individual progress was of concern to their tutors. They often found this new environment most intimidating.

Surviving the course

Gillian, Anne, Laura and Clare, all had moments of crisis through their first term – though Clare emphasised that she did enjoy being at college. Laura reported, in January 1986:

“About three weeks into the course, I suddenly threw the books everywhere, saying I couldn’t do it, it was too hard ... I have a few other people who I talk to in other seminar groups and they were all going through the same crisis. Two women mature students actually did give up.”

Clare said, at the same time:

“I just feel why am I putting myself through all this. I really don’t know whether I will be able to stick it ... while I am there, things are fine, it is when I come home. Some nights I am exhausted and I have to be up before seven the next day because of the children ... all I see ahead of me is hard work. I need a bit of encouragement really...”

The excitement Clare (and most of the others) had felt about learning – an excitement that had developed in *Fresh Start* was dimmed in the struggle to keep up with the demands being put on them. In many senses their courses felt like endurance tests, but none of them did give up. Despite “living in a state of panic for three months” Gillian described the reason why she and other students on her course had continued to ‘stick it out’ as follows:

“A lot dropped out in their first term. Imagine what would become of a person if they dropped out? Often students go there because there’s nothing else left to do. Most of us are unemployable by the time we go – and we’ve tried every sort of job and realised that they’re all totally boring anyway ... One woman who dropped out still doesn’t seem right to me. Terribly depressed ... it’s just she felt totally useless.”

Gillian continued with her course because to stop would leave her with no hope for the future. But like Clare, she felt badly in need of encouragement. Feeling under pressure and vulnerable, not sure that she was ‘coming up to scratch’ her confidence, so carefully developed by *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study*, was now shaken. What support did she, and the other women, get from their courses?

SUPPORT FOR MATURE STUDENTS

In this section I look at the quality of support for mature students within the different institutions the women attended. I have divided their accounts of this into four areas: personal tutorials, study skills workshops, seminar groups, and support systems amongst students themselves.

Personal tutorials

During their first term, all the women had personal tutorials – either at their own request or at the invitation of their tutors. The quality of the help they received varied – and much depended on the tutor concerned. Gillian, on her

preparatory course for HE, had a particularly painful experience with her personal tutor when she approached him for feedback on her overall progress. She was looking for reassurance and encouragement. She came away feeling she was disliked and making a fuss:

"... the problem I had was that I thought there would be some feedback on how I was getting on and the syllabus does say that there is continual assessment and tutorials so the student can understand what progress they are making and any areas they need to work on. Well I didn't get any feedback and I noted that about half way through the term that some students had ... When I realised after my second tutorial that I had not like some people had any feedback I went to my tutor and asked him for some. He looked over the top of my head and during my conversation I had to address my words to the underside of his chin. He said: "Oh no don't worry about it, it will be all right." He spent the whole interview trying literally, physically, to get away from me ... I asked him again and he said "well at the end of term we would get all the work out and go through it." I said that would be after the references (for college applications), and he just kept talking about not worrying and these things get sorted out - just really not saying anything. And the conversation only took about two or three minutes ... I felt my tutor didn't like me personally or in any other way ... but I'd said several times "Oh I'm sorry to trouble you" and I thought to myself "why do you keep saying I'm sorry to trouble you?"

I left the building in tears and fortunately found three or four students in a nearby cafe ... if I'd gone home with that in mind ... I was feeling like cracking. I spent another three weeks feeling neglected, resentful, not sure of my ability or what people in the college thought of me ..."

The tutor's response made her feel she was being a nuisance, and his repeated claims that she was 'doing all right' failed to reassure her because they seemed dismissive, treating her uncertainties as fussing - said to palm her off. Eventually, one of her other tutors told her she'd written an essay that in itself would get her on a degree course, and another told her that if nobody had said anything it meant she was doing well. Nobody, however, had seen that Gillian herself might need to know this. As she said:

"I think my tutor labels me as 'fussy and over-anxious'. I think he thought I was going to be a person who'd use up a lot of his time and so he made sure that I couldn't. I don't think I would - I'm not that much of a leaner, I just do occasionally; I'm sure most people are the same - just occasionally need two minutes."

That Gillian was not being 'over-sensitive' or 'emotional' - male words used to describe women's overt expressions of feeling that men generally suppress - is illustrated by Clare's comparable experience with her first tutor:

"Some of the tutors here said that if we needed help they would be available, but you knew that they didn't really mean what they said. One tutor I went to said as soon as he saw me that he had another meeting to go to. [Clare had made an appointment to meet him at that time] He did however state that as I was here he would see me. He asked what I had to ask him [about an essay] and I said that it was the whole thing that I did not understand. He just said that he could tell me in one sentence. You do this, this and this, and put it in here. Well I said I understand that and that I can see but I just can't remember what goes where ..."

Clare felt very much at sea and was looking for time, encouragement, and some quite basic advice or technique - it wasn't necessarily that she didn't understand the subject, she was simply unsure about how to put it together,

and how she could remember all she was reading in order to write. She was expressing a general rather than a specific anxiety about the essay topic, but none of this was recognised or responded to by her tutor. It seemed to Clare that he found the whole meeting a chore, and she was taking up his time. She said later in her January interview that she had not gone to any more tutorials, partly because of her experience with this particular tutor, and partly because she 'wasn't sure what it was she didn't know'.

In both of these sessions, Clare and Gillian's tutors didn't recognise the particular pressures on them as mature students, or appreciate their need to be 'heard' with understanding and encouragement. Their tutors did not seem prepared to look for anything but a surface level problem, which one assumes they felt they had answered. They gave the impression that the women were exaggerating their difficulties, and 'fussing' unnecessarily. This could only make women feel 'unseen' and their worries unjustified, when in reality they needed them taken seriously and discussed realistically.

Some tutors were very helpful, however. They acknowledged both the needs and the strengths of mature students and offered positive and constructive support. I have already mentioned that Anne and Marie got much support from their tutors. Although Laura generally found relationships with her degree-course tutors more formal than on *Fresh Start*, she also found her personal tutor clear and helpful, and willing to take the mystique out of academic learning. Along with many others, Laura found sociological terms difficult. She knew she had to learn the new terms, but, as she said, when they "are thrown at you all the time, you are never going to get there. You never put them in your own words first, so you have something to remember and I find this very difficult". This was one area where she found her tutor very useful:

"My personal tutor very much puts words into everyday language which is very nice. She says we have to learn the terms ... but we don't have to use them all the time, as long as you know what they are ... she said that I had improved no end - because she takes me for two subjects - and she says my writing has improved greatly ... she tells me how to do things and I get home and do them straight away."

It is clearly this sensitive feedback and 'caring whether you learn' that was needed by Gillian and Clare early in their courses - they both found it eventually.

In Gillian's case this was the following year when she entered a degree course at her local polytechnic. Here she was positively encouraged to take in her essay plan and discuss it with her tutor. "I've never had that in my life", she said, "He didn't think I was being silly just to go and check." She was given a clear reading list for each topic on her course, and her essay titles related to each topic. She knew exactly what she needed to read. She now felt she might be able to write an essay 'without destroying her soul'.

Clare changed her personal tutor in the middle of her first year, and found someone who was endlessly helpful and approachable - to whom she could take any personal or academic problem. Thus, although writing essays was still causing Clare concern at the time of her second interview, she had found a tutor on whom she could take her anxieties to and knew she would find

support. She found this an enormous strength. Her case and that of Laura and, later, Gillian illustrate that sensitive, and vital, support is by no means impossible within HE.

Study skills workshops

Although the majority of women had a study skills element in their courses, these varied in usefulness. Laura, for example, felt she got little benefit from hers:

“When I read the prospectus it said [there were] workshops for study skills ... they were virtually non-existent. I had no idea – I still have no idea about exam technique ...”

What seemed to emerge was that good study skills courses offered a forum where students could discuss their problems with *actual* coursework – essays they were writing, for example; the less useful ones simply offered study skills exercises that were unrelated to the rest of their programme. Thus Laura went into her first set of exams for more than fifteen years “cold” – as she recalled – having practised a few timed essays – only one of which had been in one of her examination subjects.

Clare, on the other hand, found her study skills class very useful. It took her some time to get a place on this (owing to a misunderstanding) but she could not speak highly enough of her tutor and the group. Clare’s study skills tutor explained what her essay questions meant, helped Clare develop plans, took her through exam techniques etc. Clare commented:

“Now I am having help with my English and essay writing and general work. People are relaxed in her class and are not afraid to say what they think, and that was what I thought college was going to be like – where you could disagree with somebody and would probably end up changing your mind, but at least you can say what you think ... This teacher is giving us all the techniques on how to deal with the questions in our exams ... If I hadn’t been coming to this class, I wouldn’t know what the hell they were talking about.”

It is worth noting that this tutor was threatened with withdrawal at the end of Clare’s first year, owing to cuts, and Clare was active in a campaign to have her reinstated.

Seminar groups

Seminars, a standard feature of HE courses, again varied in usefulness. Often, especially early in the course, women felt unable to ask the questions they wanted, or to participate. Clare said, “some tutors twist your words up so you don’t feel like speaking.” Other tutors created an atmosphere where women did feel able to talk without running the risk of being made to feel stupid. Part of Clare’s difficulty early in the course was because she was in seminars with younger people who were inexperienced and unwilling to talk; and the mature students she knew were not in her groups so they could not talk about their coursework together. In her second year however, she found herself in seminars where she was with other mature students, and where the atmosphere encouraged her to feel free to express herself. She also found she

had much to contribute from her own experiences, and she felt this made all the difference. This suggests that it is important to place mature students in seminars together. It also indicates that the quality of group work skills amongst HE tutors may vary.

Support from other students

A final, and most important source of support for the women was with their fellow mature students. Most of those on mixed-age courses enjoyed being with younger people, but tended to rely on groups nearer their own age to share ideas and problems with coursework; some also offered each other practical help such as caring for each other's children at times of stress. For several this group support was invaluable. However, one obviously useful activity for mature students new to essay writing – the discussing and reading of each other's essays – did not seem to have been practised as much as it might have been; pressure of work, and an atmosphere where individual achievement was stressed, and plagiarism a major offence, often made this difficult in practice.

CONCLUSIONS:

The experience of these women suggests that the first year of study for women mature students going into courses in FE and HE is generally not easy. In many of the courses these women entered, particularly in HE, some concessions were made to the needs of mature students (waiving entry requirements, offering study skills support and perhaps a nursery) but they remained traditional in approach and structure – and often failed fully to recognise or meet the needs of mature students.

What these women seemed to be saying here is that they needed support during their first term – someone within the institution to validate their anxiety in a world of unknown values, even if there were no concrete conditions on which to hang that anxiety. They needed feedback – both constructively on their written work, in accessible language, that could be positively applied to their next piece of work; and generally, in a sympathetic and supportive framework, which would recognise their uncertainties and offer them a realistic but supportive assessment of how they were doing.

At least part of the problem seemed to be that the women faced the unspoken assumptions, values and expectations of an academic (and dominant) culture, where a shared background knowledge was taken for granted and in no need of explanation. This is fundamentally a class assumption. Those not part of that culture were expected to 'know'. As a result, it was often difficult to find anyone to recognise or validate women's doubts and lack of confidence, or give voice to 'the obvious'. Clare expressed some of this when she said she needed someone she could go to and know she could ask the kinds of questions none of her tutors ever seemed to broach, someone who would say simply "well this is what we are talking about":

"... [because I often feel] everybody seems to know about [something] and I don't; and sometimes people will explain things to me and still they haven't explained what it is and ... it is hard then to go and ask somebody else. If somebody was there specifically *for* that, you wouldn't mind going and asking for help."

On Gillian's course the tutors took an authoritarian and judgemental approach which stood in stark contrast to that of *Fresh Start* where knowledge was not the sole preserve of the tutor, learners considered adult and active participants in their own learning, and the curriculum negotiated. On her course too, your "face needed to fit" to get through. Both women's sense of alienation finally, was undoubtedly exacerbated by the maleness of the culture they were entering.¹ Anne's course (in FE), on the other hand, although following a highly structured syllabus – preparing for O levels – had all the characteristics of *Fresh Start*. Classes were participative; women were encouraged to draw on their own experience as mature students and women, and to feel able to ask questions, to make mistakes. They received positive and constructive feedback on their work. The traditional asymmetry of power between the tutor and students was reduced. Anne, as will be seen in Chapter 7, found the course hard work, but stimulating, highly enjoyable and confidence enhancing. Yet it was in one of the most traditionally 'curriculum-driven' areas of education. I have also mentioned already in this chapter examples of individual tutorials and workshops where a similar approach was followed.

These last examples indicate the direction in which all colleges can move. The principles and approach found in *Fresh Start* are not inapplicable in further and higher education, if the traditional male, middle class – and white – cultural values of academic institutions are challenged². We should also be wary of those who argue that mature students should be better prepared to enter 'mainstream' courses, thereby focusing the problem on women themselves rather than on courses and institutions. To some extent women had been prepared by *Fresh Start* and, particularly, *Return to Study* – though Laura on reflection would have liked more practice before starting, and Clare had felt that this worry (that she should have done a study skills course first) confirmed by experience. However, it is doubtful whether any part-time courses could, or would want to reproduce the pressurised, isolated learning, 'sink or swim' approach that tends to characterise HE. In the end study skills are learnt in practice. The problems women faced cannot be explained away as 'lack of preparation'; they indicate a responsibility on the part of all institutions to take fundamental steps in recognising, validating and meeting the needs of women mature students.

It would also be very easy to concentrate solely on the merits or inadequacy of individual tutors or courses. However, the fault surely lies not here but in

¹I would suggest it was this that led to their requests for support being seen as 'fussing' and left the difficulties of managing home plus study (discussed in the next chapter) unrecognised.

²Also worth noting here is the DES Policy Document *Changing the Focus: women and further education* (1985). This advocated changes in practice to widen the scope of opportunities for girls and women in FE. The document comments that "those female students who find themselves in FE colleges are likely to be part of an establishment organised by men for men, often with a monocultural ethos", and advocates a "negotiated learner-centred curriculum designed round clearly-stated aims and objectives". Cited by Enid and Edward Hutchinson in *Women Returning to Learning* (E.C., 1986)

institutional structures. I suspect that in many HE and FE courses with a commitment to mature students, teachers/lecturers are allocated very little time or resources for staff development or how to accommodate to the experience and needs of a new student body. Working in a highly pressurised system, it is hardly surprising many tutors do not move away from traditional techniques and expect mature students to fit into existing course design. Again, it is institutional practice and resources that should be in focus here, and not attempts to ascribe individual praise or blame. As it is, some individual tutors, and some courses, have moved away from traditional practice, but too much seems to depend on the commitment and sensitivity of individuals, and not enough on the part of the institutions themselves. Chapter 7 makes some recommendations for future policy and practice.

Chapter 6: The Second Year (3) – But life goes on ...

“... the only thing I've been thinking about is how am I going to get there by 9.30. Will I have to take the pushchair? Is the tube going to be crowded? That's what I think of ... It's quite a walk from here (the tube) – well its a short walk but ... he walks really slowly ... He'll be two and a half, so I'm wondering can he just walk there and how long will it take me in the morning to get him up? How early will I have to get up? How long will it take me? Will I have to give him breakfast? Will I have to take lunch for him? The sort of practical things, getting there. I know when I'm there and he's in the creche ... I'll do whatever I have to do and then when he's in bed I'll do what I have to do – but that's all I've been thinking of ...” (Anne, June 1985)

“My college has more in mind the needs of the 18 - 21 year old group, than the 30 - 35 year old group.” (Laura, January 1986)

“I have learned that women do find it harder – it's not just a fallacy that women find it harder to go to college and have children – even if you are given all the time you need (through support from rest of family) it isn't easy to ask for other people's time.” (Clare, October 1986)

One of the major differences between studying full-time as a mature student and as an 18 year old is that for all the women, family and childcare commitments had to be sustained as they studied. At the time of the first interview, three women, Laura, Anne and Marie, had pre-school children, Clare and Holly both had children of school age.

Fresh Start groups were accompanied by a creche, and were generally close to home. These made it easier for women with small children to study, but, as mentioned in Chapter 2, this didn't mean that organising the space and time to attend was simple. And when women started on full-time, or 21-hour courses, and had coursework to complete at home, the struggles to manage home commitments, childcare and work became far more pronounced; they needed to reorganise their time very carefully. In this chapter, I consider how women managed both to study and to carry on with child and home responsibilities, and how good colleges were in helping them meet these demands.

The chapter looks in particular at two areas: children at college, and at school, and finding time and space to study at home.

STUDYING WITH CHILDREN

Two of the women had chosen courses with nurseries. Anne found travelling with her two year old son to the course and settling him in the creche not as bad as she feared. The creche was an extremely good one, and he looked forward to going each day. But it was still not easy and she stressed how important it was to have a good creche, where she knew her child would be happy:

“... getting there is the most difficult because I get into the rush hour [on the tube] – if I take a bus I have to wait in the cold and he doesn't like it ... he liked the creche –

it's a lovely creche. I sometimes felt that the people who worked there didn't get appreciated enough ... they had no status and they're doing a really important job there ... and they're doing a very important job because [for] five or six hours a day, a lot of [students] depend on their treatment of their children ..."

When she moved on to a community and youth work course the following year, she could no longer take him with her – even though there was a (very expensive) creche at the college that social services would pay for. The journey there and back now took her one and a half hours – and with a small child it would take her nearer three.

Although Anne found studying with a small child difficult then, she found the facilities for small children good and her main problem was travel. When I asked Laura and Clare, however, what improvements they would like to see their polytechnics make for mature students, they were emphatic: they could do more for women with children. Laura commented:

"All of the books say that things are geared to mature students, no such luck."

Laura had two children, one pre-school and in the college nursery. She was very unhappy with the quality of care her four year old daughter received there:

"I hate the place ... she has come home with such racist remarks – it is a very sexist nursery, it's dreadful. She comes home with little bunches in her hair. ... Apart from that I just don't like the place ... it employs an awful lot of staff and seems to do an awful lot of nothing. They force them to have a nap in the afternoon, when she doesn't usually have one. They don't take the children off you when you go in there and lots of people are complaining about that. My earliest lecture is 10 o'clock ... I have to take her up there, get down to the bus stop and get into college – so you need your children taken off you virtually as soon as you get in there. Tea time is wonderful ... they put a plastic cloth down on the table and put the kids food down on the table ... not on a plate. Unless you finish your sandwich, you don't get the crisps or the biscuit.

Monday and Friday I have to be dead in [the nursery] at 9 o'clock to [be sure of getting to college by 10], but other days I tend to get there a bit later and try to collect her early. She goes on Wednesday [Laura's study day] but I go and pick her up early which is annoying because I am using up my time for working ..."

All this put added strain on her, and ate into the free time she had for study.

Clare and Laura also noted problems of timetabling: there didn't seem to be much effort at either polytechnic to consider parents when arranging reading weeks, and lecture and seminar times. Laura had one lecture lasting from 4 to 5pm; the nursery shut at 5 and was half an hour to an hour's journey away from the site where she was studying. She simply had to miss this lecture. Clare had a similar difficulty with school half term holidays. Reading week at neither college coincided with these – so parents had to make some sort of provision for their school-age children or miss a week at college. Few could afford childminding fees while on a grant. Temporary playgroups had been arranged at half term in both institutions, on some sites, but these had to be negotiated each term. And they were often expensive.

A final problem for parents was not knowing in advance of starting what their

timetable would be. This posed problems for Anne who needed to arrange a childminder when she began her youth and community work course - but didn't know exactly when she would be in college till the first week of term. This made pre-planning very difficult.

Laura and Clare both became active in campaigns for better nursery provision. At Laura's college they were asking for creches on all three sites - so students didn't have to make a long journey between the nursery and lectures. At Clare's college there were only 15 creche places and they were demanding more. At both they were asking for better provision for school age children at half term.

FINDING SPACE AND TIME TO WORK

All women with school age children found they had difficulties organising study time so they could still fit in childcare, shopping and housework - though the last was often cut considerably. Laura started work in the evenings from about 8, after she had done the dinner and helped her son with his homework. Clare, and her husband, after a lot of negotiation, had reached a point where he was accepting responsibility for a lot of the housework and childcare. But this had been a painful negotiation, and had begun while she was on *Fresh Start*. It would have been difficult to begin this process at the point she entered college - as other women might have to. Even so she had many responsibilities, and frequently felt exhausted. She couldn't work too late in the evenings as she had to be up at seven each morning to see the children off to school. But sections of her free days were often eaten up with shopping and housework, and being with her family:

"Fridays I have off, I have to do things on Friday that I cannot do the rest of the week, like housework, because you can only let things go so far ... [And] there is no way I could spend the whole weekend in my room and expect my family just to carry on as if I wasn't here. I wouldn't want to for a start."

As Clare points out, it was not only practical responsibilities that took up time and space. Time needed to be spent with children, partners and friends if relationships were to be sustained. And it was often hard for others to understand that the women needed to spend long periods of time working. They were not free to drop everything and chat to a friend over coffee, or talk immediately about any household problem that arose. There was also more likelihood, for those with responsibilities, of crises arising that simply could not be ignored. Laura's child was not doing very well at school, so she felt she had to spend some time at night helping him with his homework. Marie, on a social work training Access course the following year, found the community nursery time finding alternative premises. During the first year of her degree course, Laura was also going through a divorce and had to visit solicitors and attend court on her free days. She also had to spend time on the phone and with college counsellors, trying to get a full grant from the ILEA - they had deducted her [fictional] maintenance allowance from her husband¹.

¹The ILEA finally gave her full grant - but not till the end of the summer term in her first year. When I interviewed her the following October, she had had no grant at all that year.

Finally, simply finding a space to work away from interruptions was often a major difficulty. Clare commented:

"The ... problem is I've got too many people living in my house. I wish I had a room of my own where nobody else was allowed to come in ... I wouldn't have to keep lifting up my books and putting them away for dinner ..."

This kind of space – to work alone and uninterrupted – was a privilege Clare didn't have, but younger people without family commitments would take for granted.

The women coped with all of these pressures – but they were pressures and they added a strain that younger students, leading independent lives and with their own space, would not experience.

What could colleges do for mature students who were parents?

Obviously there is a need for adequate creche provision in colleges – and on each site. It is a considerable hardship to take a child to a nursery at one site and then travel two or three miles to another. There is also sensitivity in timetabling needed – to let students know well in advance what their lecture and seminar timetable will be so they can make necessary arrangements, to make sure that mature students start and finish within times that allow them to take and collect their children from school and nursery. It would also seem quite straightforward for colleges to arrange to have their 'reading weeks' at that same time as school half terms – and if this is not possible, then some sort of provision needs to be made for school age children.

In addition, Clare felt the need for someone at college that would understand the particular circumstances of mature students:

"I think there should be one particular person for mature students to go with their problems ... and it doesn't have to be academic. I don't say that a person has to have children before they will understand somebody who has children, because they have to be told first what the problem is, but I do think that it should be a woman, because a woman is more understanding and willing to listen. Sometimes I feel as if some of these other tutors wouldn't have time or that they wouldn't understand ... there are so many women with children, who have problems, like a child off school – I know we have nursery but many have children of school age and maybe are sick ... Surely there must be some help given in this kind of situation."

Clare is right to ask for someone whom mature students can talk to about their particular problems.¹ But we should also note that counselling is of limited benefit if institutions themselves do not recognise or make changes in policy and practice which meet the needs of women students who are parents. There is a clear need for sensitive timetabling, mature student support, and

¹Current research undertaken for the Open University by Pauline Kirk, suggests that many OU students may drop out because of domestic issues. She advocates special training for tutor-counsellors on the problems of coping with study and family life. She also advocates the provision of more informal and tangible warnings to applicants of the time needed to study (see Chapter 3). Reported in 'Changed minds, broken hearts', *Times Educational Supplement* 13.2.87.

for reasonably priced childcare facilities, of good quality, provided on the premises where women are studying. Women also need alternatives to full-time courses – ones that are daytime, but which operate within school hours, that leave them more free time for their other responsibilities, and which still have grants, so women can afford to take them. But such courses are few and far between in London, or elsewhere. The Hutchinsons¹ note the continued trend to offer full-time provision for mature students, and believe the lack of flexibility in this direction stems more from the needs of (predominantly male) college administrators than those of learners:

“The dominant pattern of full-time courses is of greater benefit to college organisation and staffing than to a potential female student body from whom a part-time re-entry to study is most appealing ... There is ... little to suggest that many of the institutions seeking new ‘mature’ students and devising courses for them have shifted in their built-in male stance.”*

Yet this shift is crucial if women are to genuinely have the choice of returning to study in FE and HE.

Chapter 7: Looking Back and to the Future

The participants and myself met for the last time to talk on tape in October 1986. By this time, Laura, Gillian, Clare and Anne had successfully completed their first year at college, and were either starting their second year, or had moved to a new course. I asked all the women to sum up the two years since they started *Fresh Start*, and to think what they would like to be doing in a few years time. I have already looked at Monique, Debbie and Holly's responses in Chapter Three. In this Chapter, as an endnote, I look briefly at what the others said.

Laura in October 1986, had a further two years to go on her BSc course. She had survived her first year, and her exams, and was doing well. Looking back, she felt she had changed a great deal since she began *Fresh Start*:

"I've got much more confidence, there's absolutely no doubt about that ... I think I'm a different person ... and although I knew what I was talking about before, now I've got more coherent arguments."

As for the future, she had been interested in a job in research when she started her degree. At the end of her course, finding an interesting job such as this was still a priority. But she felt her course was not just a means to an end – it was an interest in itself. When I asked her if she could advise someone on *Fresh Start* now with two young children to do what she had done, she replied:

"Yes I would. Providing it's what they want to do. I think it's about the best thing I've ever done."

Gillian, in October 1986, had finished her FE preparatory course, and had entered a BA combined honours degree course in economics, politics and environment and society at a polytechnic. "Because I would just like to study, for its own sake, I find the education system is too structured for me", she wrote in July 1986. "I'm going on to a degree because I can get a mandatory grant, and because the object of my [preparatory course] is to get as many people into degree courses as possible. Ideally I would like a broad-based course with a flexible syllabus. I did consider doing some O and A levels, but was discouraged by my tutors, and it's hard to get a grant. I can understand the practical and economic reasons for this, but I feel that I'm being rushed and channelled. Generally though, I realise that I'm one of the lucky few ... Perhaps I'm being ... perverse when I keep on insisting, 'I don't need a degree I need an education'."

In October, however, she was enjoying the polytechnic. She found it far less pressurised, and less claustrophobic, than her preparatory course, and was enjoying it very much. Would she advise someone to take the route she had?

"I did once say to you I would never recommend P. [her year's preparatory course] to anybody. I'm not sure that I really would now. I probably would, then add, "well if you really think you're tough, and if you haven't got any children". P made me feel ill at times. I really felt awful ... I could have given up, couldn't I? And if I'd

given up how would I have coped with the failure? And what would I be doing with my life now?"

She did however find the course had given her a lot of basic concepts that proved useful to her at the polytechnic. Did she think the had changed?

"I seem to have a sense of purpose in life, and it's not just to go and get the degree. It's grown up within me and it wasn't really there when I first met [tutor] on *Fresh Start* ... I think I like myself a lot better in some ways. It's given me problems in other ways, I suppose, [with my friends] - people say, "Oh do shut up. I really don't give a damn what the Scarman Report said." But I'm into a life where people round in the canteen are discussing incredibly interesting things and I feel somehow I've got a bit more intellectual muscle which is great ... I can actually read the financial pages of the *Guardian* now! ... and I realise, it's a sad thing, but the world talks a load of nonsense most of the time, and so do I - we all do - but we couch it in very intellectual terms ..."

Q. Are you still pleased you did it?

"Oh yes. And it's something I've been thinking about for years, but I think it took maybe a decade for it to gradually build up. I really used to think I was incredibly stupid when I was a kid ... and most of my teens and twenties. One thing I have gained is that I realise I'm really quite intelligent, and I don't really need this degree gained to prove that. But I actually want to go [poly] every day and read things and write things and discuss things. I don't really have any plans after that, but I hope at the end of it that I'll be much better equipped to carry on thinking and writing.

"The nice thing about being in [this] college ... is that I don't get spoken to like a 'woman'. I always get spoken to as though I'm an adult, whereas when you work in offices and shops and lots of other places, because you're a woman you get spoken to a little bit as though you're a child. Or perhaps a nice dog ... And it doesn't happen at the poly .. Now when I come up against being spoken to in that way I'm quite shocked and taken aback. It makes me realise how women's lives where they're being spoken to like that and it's not that men are being unkind or attacking you, but they're just demoting you by their perception of you and their way of talking to you ..."

Much of what Laura and Gillian said, was also echoed by Clare. At the beginning of her second year on her BA, Clare was feeling considerably more confident, and was finding her courses that term very exciting. At home however, the competing demands of coursework and family were still tiring, and her family, though supportive, still found her new life difficult to deal with. However, she felt she was considerably better off in this respect than other women on her course, who got no support at all with childcare from their husbands, and were belittled for studying. Of the future she said:

"I'd hate to leave and not finish the course, but I've told myself it's not life and death any more ... It's going to college that's important rather than getting a degree ... although, of course I'd love to get a degree, but I don't think it would be the end of the world ... I think this part of my life [my family] is still the most important, and it takes you going to college, and getting into other things that makes you realise that ..."

Q. What's been the best thing about the course?

"I do look at things in a different way - or I can see that there's a lot of different ways of looking at things ... There's so many answers to the one thing, nobody's right."

Q. What's been the worst thing?

"... that you can't leave it at 5 o'clock. You're never divorced from it. You can't give

yourself the day off ..." (Clare went on to say all the subjects she studied were totally new to her when she started) "Why did I think it was going to be like school, and they would actually make sure that you knew what you were talking about before you went on to the next thing? I couldn't tell which lecture was psychology, which sociology, which was planning ... [I'd say to someone on *Fresh Start* now] "you'd need to know a bit more about the subjects before you came, even if it is only reading an introduction to sociology or psychology or whatever ..."

Q. Would it have been worth doing even if you didn't get a degree?

"Oh yes ... it's the satisfaction of knowing things, and even if you don't know, knowing how to find out. Once you get an education you don't feel stupid letting people know you don't know something ... you don't feel people will look down on you any more ..."

*Q. Are you different now to when you started the *Fresh Start* course?*

"Oh yes, though I must admit when I started the *Fresh Start* course ... it meant more to me ... I suppose it was a bigger step ... and also I was very much on a 'high' ... I wanted to be in an all-women's course, and wanted to learn about women ... everything was new and everything was great to me at that time ... now I'm more realistic. I enjoyed the *Fresh Start* course ... because it was my first learning with women, and it was my first learning since leaving school and if people hadn't been so sympathetic, then no doubt I would never have dreamed of staying and going to further things. It was the basis and first step for me and had it been different I may have taken a step backwards or stayed where I was, instead of taking a step forward which I think I have done. *Fresh Start* seemed more constructive at the time because people go more out of it. Here we gain in knowledge but then knowledge is not the most important ... on *Fresh Start* you actually felt different in yourself."

In October 1986, Clare had three more years to study – she would spend one year out at work. She had considered the CQSW option at her college; and now she was thinking about doing a social work qualification once she'd finished. However, she didn't really want to be a social worker – she was more interested in community work. The CQSW, though, would give her a qualification that would ensure her a job. At this stage she was still undecided about her future.

After her year on her 21-hour O-level course, Anne entered a two-year community and youth work course. She was uncertain about this in her first term – the course pushed people to question assumptions and values; this made it tense and draining. It was a long journey into college – one and a half hours each way – but eventually she had found a nursery place near where she lived for her son, now three, and some of her time would be on placement and she would find somewhere to do this nearer to home.

On her FE O-level course, Anne had discovered a great deal about her intellectual capabilities. If finally she had not been offered a place on her present course, she would have gone on to do an Access course in social science, and then to a degree:

"I did much better than I expected ... I know if I want to do something academic, it might take me longer but I can do it. Before I thought it wasn't for me, that you need a special mind to do those things. I never thought of myself as intelligent ...

"... I don't regret that I didn't get any education, because I enjoy it (now) very much."

Marie and I only talked once on tape, but we had several conversations during

the following year. Having been turned down for the Access to social and community work course on her first application, she was terribly discouraged. She worked on a community project during the following year (unpaid) helping to set up a neighbourhood nursery - and this increased her practical experience. She found it difficult to continue to study in that year because her son was still very small, and she needed to wait until he was old enough to go into nursery - she also needed to find him a place. She re-applied for the Access course the following year, and this time she was accepted. Her son now went to the nursery she had helped set up.

Like other women, she found the first year of her Access course stressful - and when I spoke to her in October her confidence was low. She found the course physically and emotionally draining, and seriously questioned whether she had done the right thing. In January 1987, however, having survived the first term, and despite difficulties keeping the nursery running, she was feeling she would get through.

Although in October 1986, the women who had chosen, or were able, to go on to full-time study were well established on their courses, their journey up to that point, as we have seen was not always an easy one. In the next chapter I consider what we can learn from their experience, and from the experience of Debbie, Holly and Monique.

Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this project was to consider the experience of 'access' for eight women with few or no formal qualifications who had entered *Fresh Start* courses at Islington AEI and wanted to move on to further education/training in FE/HE. In October 1986, two years after entering *Fresh Start*, all except one had either entered their target course in FE/HE or had ceased to be interested for the time being in study/training, as new employment possibilities opened up. The exception was Debbie, who, at the time of the last batch of interviews, still hadn't found a course that would lead to a qualification; she was hampered primarily by the difficulties of finding part-time, day-release opportunities in an area she was interested in. Nevertheless, overall, this report seems to record a success story.

Despite this, there are several issues to be noted about these women's experience:

Firstly, the women were almost all interested in social studies or social or community work - this had been one of the first areas to open up opportunities for mature students without qualifications to return to study. Even so there is increasing pressure on places on many courses - particularly Access courses - and it is becoming harder and harder to obtain places. Furthermore, other areas of study/training may not be as relatively well served - particularly skill/craft training, especially in subjects not traditionally available to women and in science and technology. Finally, those who were in, and who needed to remain in, employment while they studied, seemed to have even fewer opportunities of pursuing their education/training.

Secondly, entering *Fresh Start* was the first 'step' into education for the majority of women; the courses reached a range of local women, generally with few or no formal qualifications, because of their closeness, the recognition and meeting of childcare needs, their cheapness, their informal, friendly, encouraging approach and their recognition of women's uncertainties about direction.

The majority of women were convinced they would have never have gone on into FE and HE but for the support, advice and direction they received on these courses. They may have underestimated themselves in this; but it does lead us to infer that many women, particularly working class and black women, out of full-time education for some time and with few or no formal qualifications, have, but never pursue, aspirations to continue their education. Furthermore, *Fresh Start* helped women overcome a number of barriers that otherwise might have deterred them and we imagine, does deter others:

- (i) the difficulties of finding and arranging childcare, an income and finding a course within reasonable travelling distance lack of knowledge

of the range of possibilities that are available for mature students with few or no formal qualifications;

- (ii) a belief that they are not 'clever' enough to enter anything but a very 'basic' course;
- (iii) a belief that they do not have the 'right' to become students;
- (iv) the difficulties of not knowing what direction to go in;
- (v) the difficulties of gaining information from colleges and contacting tutors about courses that are available;
- (vi) surviving application procedures that may be alienating and intimidating;
- (vii) surviving rejection.

Thirdly, improving access is not only about increasing places for mature students, it is also about giving those who gain places on courses every chance of successfully completing them. This means providing courses that recognise and accommodate the particular circumstances and needs of mature students, particularly parents. The vast majority of women found their first year in FE/HE, in the year following *Fresh Start*, at times exciting but also something of an exercise in survival. Partly this was due to the burdens of full-time or relatively full-time study, combined with home and family responsibilities. And on several courses, particularly in HE, it was the pressures of entering courses with expectations and values (male, middle class and white) that were unfamiliar and often inexplicit, to women with little experience of formal education since they had left school 15-20 years previously; and where recognition of the circumstances of, and the quality of support for, mature learners varied. This particular group did not give up, but all seriously considered doing so and they reported others who had abandoned their studies. At the same time, it should be noted that many individual tutors were exceptional in their support for mature learners; this should be recognised and measures taken to ensure that this sort of support becomes a matter of institutional policy, rather than individual practice.

In the rest of this chapter, I offer a summary of recommendations resulting from the experience of this group of women. These should be of use to those in AI, FE and HE wishing to improve the quality of service offered to mature learners – particularly those wishing to ensure access to those who have previously been excluded from educational opportunities.

CHAPTER 2: THE EXPERIENCE OF *FRESH START*

1. Women-only *Fresh Start* and *Return to Study* courses, along the lines of those offered by Islington AEI, are an important step into education for women with few or no formal qualifications. Important features of such courses are:

- (i) their accommodation to the needs of women on low incomes and with childcare commitments;

- (ii) their active encouragement of women who have been out of the education system for some time and who had benefited little from school;
- (iii) their informal, participative and supportive approach;
- (iv) their learner-centred, negotiated curriculum;
- (v) their role offering advice, information on further study opportunities and their preparation of students for - and support through - application procedures;
- (vi) their role in helping learners develop study skills;
- (vii) their accommodation to multiple exit points.

There is clearly a need for increased provision of these courses across London and for courses in FE and HE to learn from their experience.

2. The part-time *Return to Study* option offered women wanting to go into academic study more intensive support with academic study skills and preparation for application procedures - but still within a supportive and informal environment. This kind of provision also needs to be increased and women may well be advised to take up this opportunity, if practically possible, before going on to either Access or its equivalent or courses in HE.

CHAPTER 3: MOVING ON FROM *FRESH START*

1. Colleges should design special forms for courses open to or designed for students with few or no qualifications. These should make it clear no qualifications are required and should give adequate space to sections asking for experience (paid or unpaid) and encourage applicants to expand on these. Particular attention should be paid to the working of the questions so they offer guidelines to applicants on what they can include. (GLC Second Chance courses developed useful examples - including detailed notes to candidates on how to fill in forms).

2. Colleges need an information officer, to whom telephone enquiries from mature students can be directed. S/he needs to be well informed about the range of courses on offer in the college, to be able to offer advice and counselling to mature students and to be able to put them in touch directly with course tutors. This could perhaps be co-ordinated by ALFA.

3. Informal contact with course tutors prior to applying proved valuable and courses aimed at mature students should try and ensure that this contact is, or continues to be, available. Open evenings seemed a useful way of providing both more information and a 'feel' for the course on offer.

4. Advisers and counsellors need to be able to offer mature students, particularly parents, concrete and realistic information on how much time will be spent on the course in and out of the college and what the timescale will be.

5. Colleges should pay particular attention to their interview techniques, bearing in mind interviews will be a very new experience for many of their

applicants. They should consider ways the interview can be structured to give applicants the maximum help to reveal their potential, rather than creating a 'testing' situation.

6. Applicants need to be given adequate notice of interview dates and to know the precise length of time interviewing will take. They should also be given as much information as possible about any tests they may be required to sit (for example sending a 'sample' test).
7. Course organisers might seriously consider how much advantage there is in requiring candidates to sit tests in the college and whether it might be as useful or more useful and less intimidating, to ask candidates to produce work at home.
8. Course organisers should be clear to candidates about any informal criteria they use for selection purposes. Having established these, they should consider accepting candidates on a first come/first served basis.
9. Courses need to let applicants know rapidly and in writing that they have been accepted.
10. Colleges should recognise that being refused a place on a course can be a very discouraging experience and may deter mature students completely from attempting to enter study/training opportunities. The women who were rejected in this study all found alternatives and/or re-applied the following year – they were mostly supported in doing so by *Fresh Start*. This may not be true for other applicants and course organisers could enable applicants to survive rejection by making it clear in what ways the candidate could improve their chances in succeeding years and/or other avenues they could try.

CHAPTER 4: THE SECOND YEAR (1) – STUDY AND PAID EMPLOYMENT

1. Women may be reluctant to leave employment to study/train full-time, particularly at a time of high unemployment.
2. There needs to be an increase in the number of day release/part-time opportunities to allow women to study towards a qualification or re-train. Islington Council is perhaps exceptional in offering a valuable opportunity to office workers to take up a one-day a week *Return to Study* option and other opportunities. Other employers (including the MSC Community Programme) may be reluctant to allow women in lower grades paid educational leave to study for substantial periods or in subjects not directly related to their employment. Even where employers make day-release facilities available to their employees, this may be made uncomfortable for them by their immediate management.

These case studies suggest that Trade Unions need to campaign, particularly on the part of women in lower paid, unskilled or semi-skilled occupations – full-time or part-time – for the right to:

- (i) paid educational study leave during the day and not only in areas of immediate relevance to employee's current occupation;

- (ii) a broader range of courses that can be taken up on this basis;
- (iii) the right to periods of full-time study leave to gain qualifications;
- (iv) unions should also offer support to employees wanting to take up these options, as their immediate management proves hostile.

3. There also needs to be a greater range of opportunities available for part-time study/training during the day and evening leading to improved employment opportunities – *for women in full-time/part-time employment or women with childcare commitments.*

CHAPTER 5: THE SECOND YEAR (2) – SURVIVING THE COURSE

1. There needs to be formal staff development opportunities available for tutors/organisers working with mature students in order that they may best consider how courses may be designed to meet the experience and needs of adult learners.

2. Many tutors may also need the opportunity to take in-service training in tutorial and group-work skills to enable them to offer sensitive and constructive support to mature learners (or any learners) with little educational experience since leaving school. In particular, an atmosphere needs to be created in tutorials and seminar groups where learners feel able to raise apparently 'obvious' questions, and feel able to ask for support with essay writing and other coursework at the planning stages. Any training should include sexism and racism awareness components.

3. Tutors should recognise the need of mature students for sensitive, concrete feedback on their progress – particularly early in the course. They should pay particular attention to how they respond to written work, and ensure students understand and can make use of their comments.

4. Where most students are school-leavers, mature students may appreciate being kept together in seminar groups etc. Colleges could also help by encouraging students to read each other's essays, share ideas, present papers jointly etc. and to set up 'support networks'.

5. Study skills workshops should be provided, and should offer a forum where students can air immediate questions about their actual coursework, and be given concrete help with this.

6. Where students have several tutors/lecturers, course organisers should ensure that the total workload allocated to learners is not excessive. In their first year, learners may also need more precise guidance on their reading than in later years.

CHAPTER 6: THE SECOND YEAR (3) – BUT LIFE GOES ON ...

1. Courses should give notice of timetables, and time that will need to be spent studying outside class time, well in advance.

2. Colleges should prioritise the provision of reasonably priced/free creches of good quality on *each site* of their institution.
3. Courses should try and co-ordinate their 'reading weeks' with school half terms, and/or offer facilities for school-age children during these holidays.
4. Each college should have a mature student adviser, whom mature students can refer to about problems sustaining coursework, childcare needs etc. Preferably this should be a mature ex-student and a woman.
5. Educational providers need to offer more part-time or 'extended' options in FE/HE, with grants for those with family commitments, (as for example are offered by Croydon College (CQSW) and The Polytechnic of The South Bank (BEEd, primary).

Many courses are already implementing, or are conscious of the need to implement some or all of these recommendations. In a sense their 'lead' has demonstrated their validity. But, as colleges increasingly seem to maintain student numbers by looking towards the adult population for new learners, there needs to be a shift in practice by all educational providers, so that institutions, rather than inspired individuals, or particular courses, adapt themselves to the needs of this new student body. For this to happen, there needs to be a considerable reallocation of resources and time to allow staff to design whole 'packages' for mature students¹, rather than expecting them simply to fit into a system designed for those in their late teens and early twenties. These changes must, furthermore, be firmly based on an equal opportunities policy that challenges the traditional culture, values and institutional structures and practices of colleges; otherwise women, and all those traditionally excluded from the benefits of the education system, will be excluded from educational opportunity yet again.

¹I am grateful to Sue Pedder, co-ordinator of ALFA, for her comments which led to this point being included.

Appendix 1

Table of interviews

Name	June/July 1985	Jan. 1986	Oct. 1986
Anne	yes	yes	yes
Clare	yes	yes	yes
Debbie	yes	-	yes
Gillian	yes	yes	yes
Holly	yes	yes	yes
Laura	yes	yes	yes
Marie	yes	-	-
Monique	yes	-	yes

Appendix 2 (a)

Personal details sheet

ALFA RESEARCH PROJECT

Name

Address

Age

School experience (incl. dates and any exams taken)

Experience of learning since leaving school

What sort of reading and writing before *Fresh Start/Return to Study* course:

Courses applied for:

Name	where held	where found	selection	reasons for not going
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Future courses:

Name of course

Subjects:

Where held:

When applied:

Means selection:

Date starting:

How long is course:

Reasons accepting:

Paid work

Dates

Jobs

p/t or f/t

Unpaid Work

Dates

Description

Islington course:

Name of course:
Subjects covered:

Tutor:

Branch:

day and time:

when started:
when left:

Name of course:
Subjects covered:

Tutor:

Branch

day and time:

when started:
when left:

Appendix 2 (b)

Questionnaire sent to women on courses in July 1986

ALFA RESEARCH PROJECT

Please could you use this questionnaire to write down some thoughts and feelings about what you have been doing in the last six months or so. The questions are to give you some ideas – don't feel you have to answer every one! Answers in odd words/notes will be fine.

- Have you been on a course/courses in the last six months? Which one/ones?

Where?

- Will you be studying next year?
 - Will it be on the same course or a new one?
 - If different, what is it called? Can you say briefly why you chose it?
-

If you've been on a course this year, or for part of it:

Please jot down some notes on how you have felt about the course. The questions may help but don't feel you have to answer them all! –

- What subjects/topics did you cover?
- What did you like best and why?
- What did you like least, and why?

- What do you think about the way the course was taught? Could it have been taught in a more useful way? Were your tutors helpful?
 - What coursework (e.g. writing, reading, essays, exams etc) did you have to do?
 - Which did you find easier/enjoy more? Can you say why?
 - Which did you find harder/did you enjoy less? Can you say why?
 - Did you get more confident at writing as the course went on?
 - Did you get any help doing course work (e.g. advice from tutor, study skills help)? Could you have had more help, or was it about right?
 - Was it easy to find space and time to do your work?
 - Did you get support from tutors/other people on the course/friends/family? Was this important?
 - Do you feel more confident at any of the above since I spoke to you last?
-

The course as a whole

- What has been good about the course this year?
- What has been hardest?
- What would you say to someone who wanted to do the course next year?
- What improvements would you suggest if the course was to be re-organised?
- Anything else?

Appendix 3

Checksheets used for Interviews

ALFA PROJECT: prompt sheet June/July 1985

- Why did a *Fresh Start/Return to Study* course seem appealing?
- how did you hear about the course?
- were the times of the classes convenient?
did you have to make special childcare arrangements?
was the class easy to get to?
had you been to the place where the classes were held before?

how important were each of these to you being able to come?
- what did you hope to get out of the course when you first went along?
- what did you imagine it would be like?
what sorts of things did you think you would do?
who did you think would be there?
- when you got to the course, was it as you expected?
- what you got out of the course:
 - what did you learn about yourself?
 - what did you learn about/from other people?
 - what did you learn about subjects/skills?
- what sort of reading, or writing, did you do (if any) before you started the course?
- what was your schooling like?
what were you like at school?
did you do what was expected of you?
what did your parents think of what you did?
- do you feel different learning as an adult?
do you think it's because you've changed, or because what you are learning is different, or because the way you are learning is different?
- what did you feel confident about when you were at school?
what do you feel confident about now?
why the similarities and the differences?
- in the five years before you started the course, what were you doing? Was it what you wanted?
- do you think there's a connection between what you were doing (five) years ago and what you are doing now?

What next?

- did the course include help with where to go next?
 - did you talk to other people in the group/tutors/people outside?
 - who do you think helped you most?
- what do you see yourself doing in two years from now?
- do you think the course has played a part in helping you decide?
- can you say what it is about the course that has helped you reach that decision?
- what is the biggest obstacle to you reaching that goal?
have you met any already?
- what would make it easier, or help you get there?
has it been easier so far than you expected? in what way?
- can you think of one thing that would have made it easier to get in contact with the people offering the course?

(if going on to another course)

- do you think it will be the same or different to the course you have been on? In what way?
- could you have applied straight to this course, without applying to a *Fresh Start* course first?
- how do people you know feel about you doing the *Fresh Start* course and (the future) course? And their feelings important?
- can you think of anything else you would like to say about your experience of doing a *Fresh Start/Return to Study* course or about the plans you have for the future?

June 1985.

January and October 1986

It was not so easy to create a global checksheet for the interviews in January and October 1986 as everyone was doing different things. But generally, in January 1986, questions about the course itself followed the format of the questionnaire in Appendix 2 with the following additions.

- how have you found fitting in studying and childcare?
- (if relevant) what are childcare facilities at the college like?
- how have you found travelling to the course?

(if in paid employment)

- how has *Fresh Start* helped you as far as work is concerned?
- could it have been more useful?
- what do you hope for the future?
- what do you enjoy about your job now?
- do you want to continue with study/training?
- what work would you like to be doing?

In October 1986 I added the following:

(if studying)

- what more do you think your college could do for mature students?
- Looking back to when you began *Fresh Start*, do you think you have changed?
- What do you hope to be doing in two/three/four years time?
- Was it worth doing?

(if in paid employment)

- what are your hopes for the future?
- do you want to (continue to) study or train in the future?
- Looking back, was your (course) useful? In what way?

Appendix 4

Participants: some details

Average age: 36 (youngest 30, oldest 45)

Age leaving school:

15 years	5
16 years	2
19 years	1

Qualifications

On leaving School:

none	5
RSA English and typing	1
School Leaving Certificate (St Lucia)	1
School Leaving Certificate (Luxembourg)	1

Post school:

State Enrolled Nurse	2
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Paid Employment

On entry to Fresh Start:

Full-time	4
Part-time	0
No paid employment	4

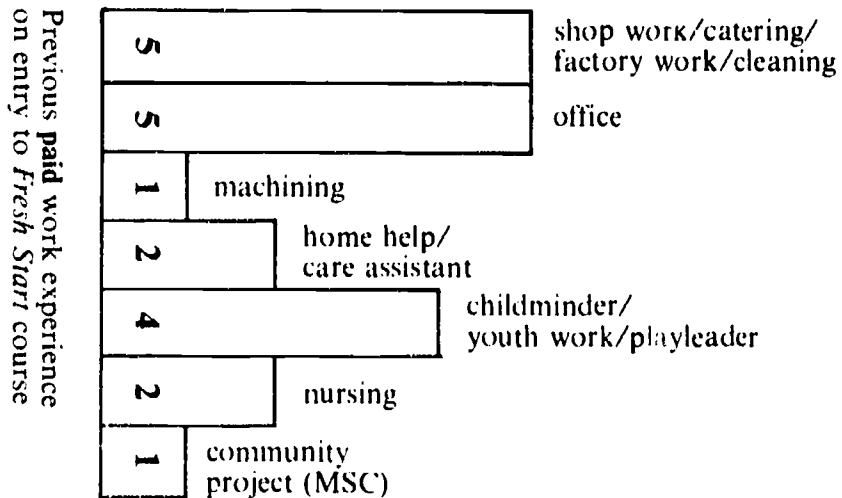
At time of first interview (June/July 1985):

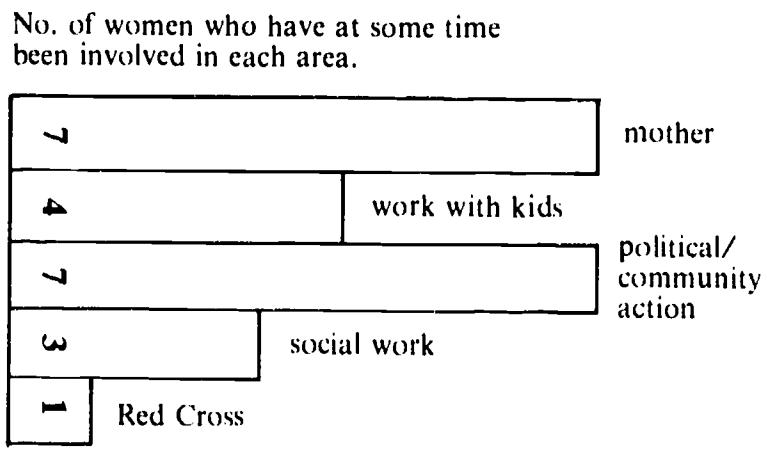
Full-time	5
Part-time	0
No paid employment	3

Unpaid work at time of first interview

<i>Mother</i>	7
- at least one child under 3	3
- at least one school-age child	2
- children over 16	2
<i>social/community</i>	6
<i>political/community action</i>	3

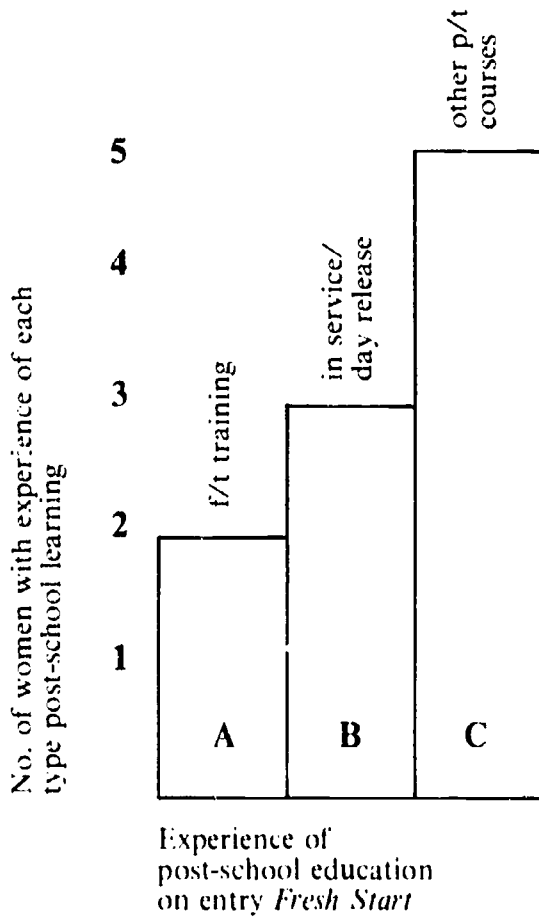
Number of women employed in each area
at some time since leaving school





Previous unpaid work
experience: July '85

32



A Nursing

B dressmaking apprenticeship (St Lucia)
home help training course
speed writing (day release)
O levels (day release)

C 1st Aid
Home Nursing
flower arranging
O-level English (2)
typing
German
EFL

craft
woodwork
photography
sewing
yoga
sports
piano

Appendix 5: Biographies of participants – experiences of education and work

The following brief biographies are based on the tapes from the first set of interviews in June 1985. They focus particularly on women's experiences of education and paid and unpaid employment.

Marie

Marie was in her early thirties, and at the time of her first interview, was a full-time mother to her two year old son. She was bringing him up alone.

Marie grew up in Cardiff. Until she was six, she lived in the poorer dock areas, in a multiracial community; then she moved to a more middle-class area where they were the only black family. Life for the children outside the home was difficult here. She remembers:

"It was a battle out there. We were always made to feel that we were different – we were the odd ones out ... I didn't like myself because I wanted to be like everyone round me ..."

At school, Marie was the only black child in the class. She did well. "My father was so proud of me," she said. "I just jumped and they had to keep putting me up until I got to the top class. And that's how I went through junior school – a bright child. I won prizes and everything." Then much to her shock and bewilderment, Marie failed her 11 plus:

"I was so confident. I just went through the exam and I knew all the questions. It was such a blow when they read out who'd passed ... and my name wasn't on the list."

Later Marie began to suspect that she had been deliberately failed because of her race – it was the only way she could account for the result. "To this day I've thought if maybe I could get hold of those exam papers ... and have a look again..." she said.

As a result of this experience, Marie went to secondary school with her confidence badly shaken. She just "didn't bother" there, and "at that school", she recalled, "if people didn't bother ... they didn't bother with you." Her mother was too busy with six children to have time to encourage her, and Marie did little work and left school without any qualifications. She worked in factories and shops, and then decided to come to London. She planned to get an office job here, so she took a typing course, and started an O level in English language. She moved when she was 26, found a job in a solicitor's office, and worked there till the birth of her son. She had been at home with him for two years in July 1985. During that time she also worked as a voluntary visitor for pensioners, and helped in a playgroup.

Marie found she enjoyed being a mother, "but ..." she said. "I got to the point where it simply was not enough, nowhere near that ... I just dreaded waking up in the morning. I thought it's the same thing every day. I'm not doing anything for myself, for me ..." She knew she didn't want to return to office work – even though this had been her ambition while she was in shops and factories:

"Once I did get into an office ... it was just as boring. You still sat there with something in front of you – mine happened to be a typewriter, before that it happened to be a machine that rolled cigars – and you still had to get out x amount of work to get your pay at the end of the week. After a while I realised that this was no different to a factory, except when I was in a factory I had more girls to chat to and be friendly with ... In an office, you just sat there with less people and you still hadn't achieved anything.

"Now I know when I start work I'll probably be working for the rest of my working life, and I want to know that I'm going to enjoy doing it, and I'm going to achieve something."

It was at this point that Marie joined *Fresh Start*.

Laura

Laura was 35, and in June 1985, her children were aged three and a half and eleven. She had grown up in South Wales, one of seven children – six girls and one boy. She enjoyed her primary school and did well in her secondary school at first. After a couple of years, however, she stopped working so hard. "I tended to be a bit of a rebel ..." she said. She didn't like the school, or the pressure put on her by teachers. She also was angered when her younger brother – the only son – was sent away to an expensive private college: an opportunity not offered to any of the girls. As a result, having started in the A-stream, she deliberately failed exams so she could be in the lower streams, where the pressure was not so great.

She ran away from home at 17 and came to London. She worked as a shop assistant until she had her first child. While she was at home caring for him, she was persuaded to help in her local play group, and as a result took two playleadership courses. Then she was asked to help in a youth club, and attend a youth leadership training course. She enjoyed learning and wanted to do something more; so she joined *Fresh Start*. Laura was also active in the Labour party – mainly in fund raising events.

Debbie

Debbie grew up in North London. When she began *Fresh Start* she was 30 and working in solicitor's office. During the course she changed to office and reception work in the local borough social services offices.

Debbie had also done well at school at first – and she found herself in the 'grammar stream' of her secondary school in Highgate. She and her sister – from a working class family – felt out of place there:

"We were in classes whose children's dads were doctors, architects, surveyors – things like that, and they knew exactly what they were going into when they left school, and they all had money, and nannies and came from St John's Wood. They'd done a lot more before they got there – they'd learnt French, and things like that, in their prep schools, and they spoke well ... They were very Tory minded."

In this environment, Debbie felt very much looked down on – "The teachers made it obvious we'd come from the working class", she remembers. After a while she rebelled and stopped working as hard. At the same time, her family moved, and she changed schools. She had been going to do eight O levels at her old school, but at her new school she was only allowed to do two. She found herself going over material she already knew. Her friends now became more important than schoolwork.

Debbie had always wanted to go to College to be a social worker, but never told anyone at her school – or was asked. In the end, when she left, her parents were away, and she just went and got a job with her friends. She worked in a solicitor's office up till she began *Fresh Start*. At this point, having experienced a long and difficult relationship that left her drained, she was beginning to feel more settled and was hoping to think again about her future.

Monique

Monique was in her 40s with three children in their late teens and early twenties. She grew up in the Caribbean and enjoyed school life there. She would have liked to continue her education, had circumstances permitted. Instead she left and trained as a dressmaker. She moved to London when she was 19 and worked as a machinist for 12 years. When her children arrived it was a struggle to carry on working. She said:

"It wasn't easy to get up and get three small children fed and clothed, and then carry them to a day minder ... there were no nurseries, and housing accommodation was not very nice in the early sixties when it was a question of 'no coloured' and 'no children'."

In the end, she was forced to send the children home to the Caribbean to be cared for by her parents: they returned 12 years later when they were in their teens. "That was very hard", she recalled.

Meanwhile Monique carried on working as a machinist, and then, because employment was so unstable, and with three teenage children at school, she went into the public sector where she knew she would be guaranteed an income. She first went into a children's hospital as a domestic assistant, and then into social services as a care assistant. There she took on duties very similar to those of a qualified worker – but unrecognised and unpaid.

She joined *Fresh Start*, partly because she felt now very out of touch with education, and partly because, as she was getting older, she was worried how long she would be able to continue with her present, very physically demanding, job. She was interested in training in some sort of social or community work – her work in the social services had given her a good basis for this. During *Fresh Start*, however, she was promoted to a managerial post. She felt that this would now satisfy her – she had a job now for the future.

Gillian

Gillian was in her mid-thirties and had a 17 year old son when she started *Fresh Start*. She grew up in London, with a tense, and sometimes violent, home life. She described herself as a "lonely, defensive child". Police were often called to their home, and the stigma attached to her family in the local neighbourhood "made me feel disgraceful too".

At school, though, she did well. She was put up to the A-stream in her last year of primary school due to the efforts of a particular teacher. Once there, however, she was unhappy. She said:

"Looking back, I think I was one of those unwashed, tatty kids, and I stuck out like a sore thumb in that class ... All the other children were 'looked after' ... I felt inadequate and dreadful, and, stopped going."

She went on to a comprehensive school, which seemed vast and frightening. She found she was in one of the higher classes, and was encouraged to do O levels. But her father died, her home life deteriorated, and her new stepfather insisted she earn money if she was to continue to live at home. She consequently left at 15, without taking any exams, partly because of her stepfather, and partly because she thought that to pass O levels, she would need to remember everything she had done since she was 11 – a feat she could not imagine achieving.

Six months after leaving school, Gillian left home too. She became an 'unmarried mother' in her early twenties, at the time when much stigma was attached to this – even more so in her case, because her child was black. She faced lack of money, poor housing conditions and racism. She had to move frequently, and she worked as she could in temporary, part-time work – in factories, kitchens and shops. She has also worked as a home help, a care assistant and a childminder, jobs which she has enjoyed.

Gillian's experiences had evolved into a political way of thinking – she was active in various organisations and was now very interested in studying:

"I want to know what's going on in the world ... that's why I want to do economics which I think is largely at the basis of everything ... I've been conscious for a long time about having ideas about things that I can't explain in a man's world ..."

She joined *Fresh Start* in order to pursue her ambition to 'go to college' – her son was now virtually an adult so she had more time for herself, and she felt she must start now before it was 'too late'.

Clare and Holly

Clare and Holly were sisters in their mid-thirties, and had grown up in Northern Ireland. Their parents had been travelling people; but after their mother died, their father had left his daughters in a convent and this is where they were brought up.

Their life there was not unhappy, but they had few possessions, and received kindness but not love from the nuns. They were consequently very reliant on each other. They also suffered from being known locally as both 'charity' children, and of gypsy parentage.

In her early teens, Clare, the elder, won a place at her local technical college to do a course in commerce, and then, against the will of the nuns, applied and got a place to train as a nurse (she wanted neither of the other options open to her – to work in an office, or in the local mill). However, she found her first year in training a terrible contrast to her protected life in the convent – the young women she was living and working with seemed, to her, dreadfully immodest – and she didn't do well in her studies. Eventually, after being moved to working in an old people's home where she was happier, she started her training again, and this time enjoyed it. She also moved to work in a hospital in London. She was forced to leave before she was qualified when she found she was having a child. She lived alone in a tower block for few years, until she met her present husband.

Clare had in recent years found life at home restricting, and felt limited at home. Her husband was active in the local Labour party, and she eventually joined too. In the couple of years before joining *Fresh Start*, her life had changed radically. She had joined the local Labour party's executive committee, and the women's section; she was on the management committee of her local Women's Aid Refuge, and she had started work in a women's centre, employed on the MSC Community Programme. All this had made her very conscious of women's issues, and she also found herself among people who were encouraging her to study. She was entitled to release to take up a course on her job, and she felt that *Fresh Start* covered topics she was now interested in.

Holly had followed her sister into the local technical college. But a shy and insecure child – as she described herself – she was unhappy there, feeling looked down upon, and lonely with her sister away training. She didn't do any work here, but was eventually moved to a college in a different town where she was happier. No-one there knew her background and she felt the same as everyone else.

She also followed Clare to England to train as a nurse – mainly because she wanted to be near her. But in London, she was some distance from her sister, and felt even more lonely. She married at 20 and suffered a painful and violent marriage. She finally left permanently with her two children – and her life began to change as she got a home of alone, and became free from fear.

At the time she began *Fresh Start*, Holly was conscious her children were growing older and her future didn't seem to hold much for her. She was painfully shy and unconfident, and found it hard to mix with people. The only job she thought she might be able to get was cleaning, and this didn't appeal at all. She recalled:

"I was going through a stage of thinking, 'God, is this it ... the kids are going to get big and get married, and I'm going to be here with nobody ... I'll be talking about their babies, and then I'll be dead ...'"

When Clare joined *Fresh Start*, however, she persuaded Holly to try it too. Reluctantly and nervously, Holly went, and found much of the confidence she badly needed. Part way through the course, she applied for a job on the MSC Community Programme in a Mobile Therapy Unit. She greatly enjoyed this, and was still working there when I first interviewed her in June 1985.

Anne

Anne was in her early thirties, with a two year old son. She grew up in Luxembourg, and moved to London to work as an au pair when she was 20.

Anne disliked school, and disliked her teachers, and came from a family where girls weren't expected to spend much time on their education. She left as soon as she could. After coming to London, she spent most of her 20s working in catering jobs, and travelling between Luxembourg and London. She always wanted to be on the move, trying new things before she had her child, she worked for a summer on a playscheme and became interested in Youth Work. The birth of her son prevented her from following this up immediately, but she did feel it gave her a sense of direction. She knew now she must begin to take up a more settled life. Although she was not unhappy being at home with her child, she did not want to be there forever. She joined *Fresh Start* - because that's what she felt she needed - start. She felt her written English was not good, and her writing 'totally stupid'. She did not think herself capable or interested in academic study - she felt she was more a practical person, particularly interested in sport. She hoped she might eventually train in community and youth work.

ANNE: "I did much better than I expected. I know if I want to do something academic, it might take me longer but I can do it ... I don't regret that I didn't get any education, because I enjoy it (now) very much."

CLARE: "I have learned that women do find it harder – it's not just a fallacy that women find it harder to go through college and have children."

DEBBIE: "My biggest obstacle was knowing exactly what route to take. I didn't realise that somebody like R [the adviser] existed, that you could go there and discuss and she'd help you."

GILLIAN: "I want to know what's going on in the world ... that's why I want to do economics, which I think is largely at the basis of everything. I've been conscious for a long time about having ideas about things I can't explain in a man's world."

HOLLY: "We didn't realise how enjoyable women's talk would be. It's far better than any other talk – we enjoyed it so much."

LAURA: "I've got much more confidence. There's absolutely no doubt about that. I think I'm a different person ... and although I knew what I was talking about before, now I've got more coherent arguments."

MARIE: "I learnt that I was capable of doing whatever I decided I wanted to do. I do know my limitations, but I realised that my limitations were far fewer than I at first thought."

MONIQUE: "On the *Fresh Start* course, I wouldn't say you were taught, but you *were* taught."