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AUTHOR Munn, Pamela; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the effectiveness of Scottish Wider Access Program (SWAP) courses in different subject areas in preparing adults for degree-level study. It compared the experience of 100 students enrolled in 4 science, engineering, mathematics, and technology courses and 4 courses in social sciences or humanities. Findings suggested that, although SWAP had been successful in building confidence, students who had become accustomed to the modular, continuous assessment, criterion-referenced approach used on access courses often felt unprepared for the workload and intensity of degree programs. Science students reported feeling worried about their level of knowledge, particularly in mathematics, and felt the content they needed for the higher-level course had not been covered sufficiently. Nonscience students were less critical of apparent gaps in content and more aware of the skills they could use in learning. Students were highly critical of a lack of examination practice on access courses. Those students who had had some examination practice appeared to perform more successfully in the end of the year exams on their higher education course. More than three-quarters of the sample successfully completed their first year in higher education. Policy implications were organized under three main headings: curriculum structure, assessment policy, and student welfare. (Contains 37 references. Appendixes include details of the sample students, and list of project advisory committee members.) (YLB)

The Effectiveness of Access Courses

Views of Access Students and their Teachers

Pamela Munn
Margaret Johnstone
Rosemary Robinson

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Responsibility for the content of the report lies with the authors. The report does not necessarily represent the views of either the Leverhulme Trust or SCRE.

Preface

The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) is designed to encourage adults to participate in higher education. It is a unique programme involving almost all Scotland's institutions of further and higher education. They, together with regional authorities who provide bursaries for students attending full-time Access courses, formed four consortia which in 1991 were rationalised into three. SWAP was launched in 1988 and student enrolments on Access courses have risen from 750 in 1989 to almost 2,000 in 1992.

Under the aegis of SWAP, Access courses have been developed which, if successfully completed, provide an entry route to higher education. The first Access courses, had a vocational thrust and were offered chiefly in the areas of science and technology. As the programme has developed a wider range of courses in arts, humanities and the social sciences has been offered.

Access courses typically are modular, use continuous assessment and are criterion - referenced. In these respects they differ from traditional entry routes to higher education where courses such as Highers and 'A' levels are not modular and use end of year, norm-referenced assessments. Student experiences and perceptions of Access courses and, in particular, their effectiveness as preparation for entry to higher education are, therefore, of interest. It is these experiences and perceptions which form the basis of this report.

The report concentrates on the perceptions of Access students on eight courses, four science and four non-science, and during their first year in higher education. It also reports the views of a small number of Access course tutors and tutors in HE who had experience of SWAP through curriculum committees or through teaching Access students.

The general picture which emerges from interviews is that SWAP has been successful in building students' confidence, encouraging progression to HE by under-represented groups and enabling many of the students tracked by the research to complete their first HE year successfully. As with any innovation there were some worries about Access courses and in particular whether they can prepare students for the workload and intensity of degree programmes. For ease of reference a summary is provided at the beginning of the report, highlighting the key findings.

Summary

This summary follows the structure of the report beginning with a general view of the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) before focusing on specific findings derived from SWAP's students and their teachers. Research details are contained in Chapter 1. It is important to note that the research approach was designed to elicit a range of views and that in-depth interviews with a comparatively small sample took place. This means that findings are not generalisable. It is noteworthy, however, that issues concerning a modular curriculum structure and criterion- referenced assessment emerged across courses and HE institutions. We are confident, therefore, that the issues we report are issues likely to be of concern to those involved with SWAP. We offer ideas on how these might be taken forward in Chapter 6.

The national picture

Theme	*Findings*	*Location in report (chapters)*
Growth in adult entrants to HE	There were over 11,500 entrants to full-time higher education aged 21 or over in 1991-92 compared to just over 6,000 in 1986-87.	*1*
Growth in non-traditional entry qualifications	About 10% of entrants to the eight 'old' universities in Scotland had non-traditional qualifications.	*1*
Growth in student numbers and of courses under SWAP	There were over 1,600 students on Access courses in 1992-93 compared to 750 in 1989-90. SWAP courses include business studies, health and access to teaching and nursing courses as well as science and technology.	*1*
Progression to HE from SWAP encouraging	About 70% of students progress from SWAP to successful completion of their first year in HE.	*1*

The distinctive nature of SWAP

Curriculum structure	SWAP courses are modular, comprising free-standing units of work taking 40 hours. About 20 modules comprise a one-year full-time course. The breadth of curriculum provision was welcome but there was some concern about fragmentation, lack of depth and the balance between subject content and process.	2

Theme	Findings	Location in report (chapters)
Assessment practice	SWAP uses criterion referenced assessment to record students' learning and progress. This represents a challenge to the ideology of norm-referenced assessment and is not universally welcomed. Continuous assessment is seen as encouraging good work habits and more thorough learning.	2, (3), (5)
Student confidence enhanced	There was almost universal recognition that curriculum structure and assessment practice on access had built students' confidence and enhanced their self-esteem.	2
Problems in HE	About a third of science students and just under half of social science students reported problems in HE. Concerns about heavy workload and knowledge gaps dominated.	2, (4)
Teaching methods	Students praised their Access and HE tutors. They generally preferred small group work or interactive methods to traditional lectures. Lectures were not seen as conducive to effective learning.	2

A different kind of picture

Adaptation of SWAP courses found	Two courses with strong links to a particular HE institution were studied. Curriculum provision was not fully modular, student attainments were graded and end of year examinations took place. One of the courses was part-time.	3
Student characteristics different from typical SWAP courses	Students on these courses tended to have more academic qualifications and tended to be more confident in their abilities.	3
Course structure	Students welcomed close links with a nominated HE institution and appreciated the range of courses on offer as tasters.	3
Progression to HE	A higher proportion of students progressed to HE and by the end of first year three out of 26 had failed one exam. Eight gained exemptions from degree exams, because of the outstanding quality of their work.	3
Problems in HE	Like students in conventional SWAP courses, problems of workload were experienced. Nevertheless, students felt academically well prepared for HE.	3, (4)
Teaching methods	Students praised the high quality of teaching and personal qualities of Access tutors. About half the group were disappointed that the same high standards were not encountered in HE.	3

Guidance

Pre-entry guidance to SWAP	Students praised the time and care taken to discuss their plans. A key criterion for selection was student motivation - related to staying power on Access and thence to HE.	4
Changing goals	Some students became less sure of their intention to progress to HE as their Access course continued. It is difficult to anticipate the students who will drop out. The Access year was seen as worthwhile in its own right, regardless of progression to HE.	4
Progression rates	Two-thirds of the science sample went on to HE and over four-fifths of the arts/social science students.	4
Problems in HE	Problems fell into three broad categories — academic, financial and personal. About two-thirds of students reported problems which fell into one or more of these categories.	4, (2, 3)
Variation in HE guidance provision	Some faculties had early warning systems to detect academic problems. There were few attempts to set out in advance, the financial implications of degree study, the income support entitlements and so on.	4
Self-help groups	Informal advice and help from friends was a major asset. Where Access students moved as a cohort to a single HE institution, such networks were easier to sustain.	4
Careers advice	Students were generally unaware of HE careers services.	4

HE responses

SWAP generally well regarded	HE staff praised the national character of SWAP, the broad introduction to a range of subjects provided and the possibilities of progression to a wide variety of tertiary courses.	5
Some concern about modules	Some HE staff were concerned about the level, coherence and lack of built-in progression in modular programmes.	5
Demand for graded assessments	Some staff were opposed to the mastery/non-mastery assessment of students' attainments. They would have welcomed grades as providing more precise information on students' abilities.	5

Theme	Findings	Location in report (chapters)
Study skills preparation praised	Access courses were seen as providing students with useful study skills such as note taking, time management and using a library. Access students were perceived as better prepared in this area than school students.	5
Little direct impact of Access students on HE	Access students make up a very small proportion of the student body. It is unsurprising that they have not encouraged HE institutions to examine their provision.	5
Self-help groups fostered	Some institutions with relatively large proportions of adult students encouraged such groups as a way of encouraging self-reliance, independent study and a sharing of problems.	5 (4)
Adult students seen as no different from younger students.	Some HE staff believed that adults did not require any special treatment. This is a cause for concern.	5

Policy implications

Policy implications are derived from the findings and are the opinions of the authors. They are organised under three main headings, curriculum structure, assessment policy and student welfare.

Theme	Implication	Location in report (chapters)
Curriculum structure	There are many advantages to a broad introductory curriculum. Providers should be cautious in sacrificing breadth for depth.	6
	SWAP curriculum committees should be proactive in reviewing curriculum content particularly in regard to the intellectual demands of modules.	6
	More use should be made of project work or other 'integrated' assignments as a way of reducing the risk of curriculum fragmentation.	6
Assessment policy	Learning outcomes could be more intellectually demanding.	6
	Grading student performance would be against the spirit of SWAP. Better feedback to students on their attainments would be more informative for students than grades.	6

Theme	*Implication*	*Location in report (chapters)*
Student welfare	Students are positive about guidance and support on Access. Could HE learn from Access provision?	*6*
Student welfare	Adult self-help groups could be encouraged in HE.	*6*
	Career service provision in HE needs to be better known.	*6*

1 Background

Get more out of your life — SWAP it!

Increased participation in higher education is an explicit objective of education policy. The government wishes to encourage a higher proportion of school leavers to enter higher education and also to encourage more adults to participate. The aim is to encourage **more** students to participate and to **widen** participation by targeting groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. Traditionally, first degree courses in British higher education institutions have been designed for able undergraduates, entering directly from school and studying three or four years on a full-time basis. Entry to these courses has been controlled by using past or predicted academic success with the number and grades of 'A' levels or Highers possessed by aspiring entrants playing a key role. One strategy to encourage increased participation in higher education is to encourage more young people to stay on at school beyond the statutory minimum leaving age and to gain 'A' levels or Highers. This strategy has been remarkably successful with the overall proportion of 16 year olds in full-time education in England having risen in the last five years from 48% to 71%. Half of the 16 year olds in full-time education in 1992-93 were on 'A' level courses (DFE, 1993). In Scotland staying on rates have also increased markedly. In 1992, 73.6% of pupils in education authority schools stayed on into S5 and 37.4% into S6. This compared with 50.3% and 17.6% in 1981. Furthermore, the percentage of pupils leaving with one or more Highers has increased from 31.7% in 1981-82 to 42% in 1991-92 (SOED, 1993a).

Another strategy has been to broaden the range of entry qualifications seen as acceptable for degree level study. A wide range of non-standard entry qualifications is now accepted by HE institutions in Britain. These include completion of access courses; Joint Matriculation Board Special Entry School; Open University credits; City and Guilds or other vocational qualifications; professional qualifications in, for example, nursing; and institutions' own tests and selection procedures. Stated government policy at the end of the 1980s was for a medium term goal of 30% of higher education students to enter through non-traditional routes (Fulton and Ellwood, 1989). At that time 9% of university students and 29% of polytechnic students had been accepted on the basis of qualifications other than the traditional 'A' levels or Highers minimum (Smithers and Robinson, 1989) . More recent figures for Scotland suggest that 10% of entrants to the eight 'old' universities in 1991 had non-traditional qualifications (SUCE, 1993).

Thus the picture of the typical undergraduate as entering straight from school with a clutch of 'A' levels or Highers is changing. Not only is the profile of entry requirements changing, the age profile of first time entrants is changing too. In Scotland, adult students, these aged 21 or over on entry are forming an increasing proportion of all first year entrants. In 1991-92 they formed 31.4% of all entrants to HE (SOED, 1993b). Some of these adults enter HE with traditional qualifications but many enter through one of the many non-traditional routes now on offer. As

we shall see in Chapter 5 the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) was the route used by over 300 non-traditional entrants to the eight 'old' Scottish universities in 1991. SWAP currently has over 1,600 students enrolled and it is likely to become an increasingly popular alternative route to HE entry. Before looking at SWAP in more detail it is worth asking why should HE institutions be concerned about widening access and increasing population. McGivney (1990) has suggested that arguments for widening access to education can be categorised under three main headings: national self-interest; pragmatism/expediency and equity and social justice. All three of these can be found in an examination of the wide range of initiatives now aimed at encouraging participation in higher education.

The national interest argument was evident in debates about the effects of the decline in the number of 16-18 year olds in the population over the next 15 years. The need for a skilled, adaptable and well-educated workforce was seen as vital if Britain was to compete effectively in world markets. Increased participation in higher education by young people and a change in perception of education *from* something that happened at school *to* something which was recurrent and lifelong was a means to that end.

The pragmatism/expediency argument could be inferred from the enthusiasm and interest displayed by higher education institutions to the 1987 White Paper, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*. This encouraged institutions to look at their provision with the aim of attracting more adults to undergraduate courses. The institutions, fearful perhaps of a decline in the numbers of their traditional school leaver entrants responded in a number of ways. For example, the number of part-time degree level courses began slowly to increase; a wider range of entry requirements was recognised for degree level study and credit accumulation and transfer schemes (CATS) have been developed. These allow students to build up evidence of their attainments over time and to transfer from one institution to another. This makes it possible to study for a degree in a more flexible way than the traditional three or four year course.

The response to these supply side developments has been an increasing demand for places in higher education by all students (SOED, 1992b). The response by adult students, those aged 21 or over has been particularly noteworthy. There were over 11,500 undergraduate entrants to full-time courses in higher education aged 21 or over in 1991/92 compared to just over 6,000 in 1986/87 the year of the White Paper. Entrants to part-time courses aged 21 or over in 1991/92 numbered over 17,000 compared to 15,555 in 1986/87 (SOED, 1993b).

The equity/social justice argument can also be seen in the response of higher education institutions. Many institutions have strong links with their local communities and have traditionally seen it as part of their responsibility to provide 'second chance' opportunities to adults, who, for whatever reason missed out on higher education. Gallacher (1993) argues that Scottish higher education institutions, especially those in the West of Scotland, draw the vast majority of their students from their local areas and see themselves as having strong links with and responsibilities towards their local communities. He points out many institutions had special entry schemes for adult students and pre-entry and access courses were in existence long before national policy developments in this area. Thus their response to the drive for increased participation was not

solely on the grounds of pragmatism. There was a real willingness to provide a second chance for adults who had 'missed out' for whatever reason on their initial education. Furthermore as Britain moved slowly towards a system of mass higher education, institutional policies to widen and to increase access were one ingredient in the impetus towards institutional development — evaluating aims and purposes and the implications of these for curriculum provision, teaching, learning and assessment. As we shall see, the wider access policy in terms of encouraging adult students and moreover adult students from areas of social and economic deprivation may be likened to a Trojan horse. Just as the debate around adults' learning and the implications for teaching adults, begun by Knowles (1980) and his theory of andragogy can be seen as influential in the push towards a more progressive pedagogy in schools, so increasing numbers of adult students in higher education may encourage institutions to think about their teaching of all students. This is a theme which pervades the remaining chapters of this report and is more fully discussed in the conclusion. For the moment let us return to the issue of adult access to higher education in general and to one particular access route, the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP).

As previously mentioned access courses existed in Scotland before SWAP. They were developed by universities, using their continuing education departments or indeed specific faculties, to enable adults without formal entry qualifications to undertake a course of study which, if successfully completed, would allow the student to enter a degree course at that university. Scottish higher education has a tradition of broad degree programmes. The four year honours course encourages students to sample a range of subjects in first year before specialising thereafter; and the three year ordinary degree is conceived of as providing a broad general education. Most of the university access courses were therefore also broadly based although they were typically aimed at widening access to non-science subjects, such as the humanities, social sciences and the arts. Moreover, Strathclyde Regional Council (SRC) had taken an initiative to develop access courses in three further education colleges as part of its social and economic regeneration strategy. SRC, indeed, played a key role in the development of SWAP (Gallacher, 1993). SWAP was innovative and radical in that it involved all higher education institutions, further education colleges and regional authorities in Scotland. It was thus a national approach to encouraging adult access to higher education (HE) in contrast to England where a wide variety of schemes continues to exist.

■ Origins and outline of SWAP

SWAP was set up by the Secretary of State for Scotland in April 1988 with resources coming from SOED, the Training Agency and regional authorities. It was intended as a national framework for the development of access provision and had an initial emphasis on access to vocationally relevant higher education. Indeed, the need for stronger education-industry partnerships was emphasised. Within this general framework SWAP had three main aims:

- to improve the rate of participation in higher education by older students and those lacking the traditional qualifications
- to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education (eg

those from semi- and unskilled occupations, ethnic minorities)

- to encourage collaboration between institutions of further and higher education so that effective progression from further to higher education would be easier.

The institutions and regional authorities involved in SWAP formed themselves originally into four consortia. There are now three consortia, North of Scotland, East Scotland and West of Scotland (South-East and Mid Scotland consortia were amalgamated in 1990 to form the East Scotland consortium). The members of the consortia are drawn from higher and further education institutions and from the regional authorities in the geographic area covered. The current levels of funding by the SOED for the Programme is £500,000, with a similar amount, largely in terms of resources, being provided by the three consortia. The most recent figures show that there are approximately 1,600 students involved in SWAP courses with all Scottish further and higher education institutions participating. Table 1.1 gives details of the numbers of students participating in courses in each consortium over the past three years.

Table 1.1: Numbers of students in each SWAP consortium

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
West	554	*74*	672	*61*	829	*52*
*East	129	*17*	331	*30*	593	*37*
North	37	*5*	100	*9*	166	*11*
*Mid	30	*4*	–	–	–	–
All	750		1103		1588	
Increase over last year			by 47%		by 44%	

*South-East and Mid Scotland were amalgamated in 1990 to form East Scotland

SWAP initially had a vocational thrust and offered chiefly science/technology courses. As the programme has developed, the range of subjects has diversified. Subjects now include: art and design; building; business studies; engineering; health care; hospitality management; mathematics; science; social sciences; technology and divinity offered either separately or as generic programmes. There are also SWAP courses specifically aimed at getting people into advanced courses for a particular profession. These include access to teaching in primary education, access to teaching in secondary education and access to nursing studies. In addition to the access courses, SWAP offers pre-access programmes and preparation for access courses. Table 1.2 gives details of student numbers by Access subject area.

Table 1.2: Numbers of students taking courses by subject areas
Note: Subject areas have been ordered according to percentages taking these subjects in 1991/92

	1989/90		1990/91		1991/92	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Science and Engineering	276	*37*	413	*38*	630	*40*
Combination of courses, eg arts and business studies	140	*19*	28	*3*	228	*14*
Access to Education	–	–	230	*21*	209	*13*
Nursing	1	*0.1*	129	*12*	190	*12*
Business or Administration	44	*6*	71	*7*	172	*11*
Arts	–	–	85	*8*	76	*5*
Social Subjects	95	*13*	109	*10*	51	*3*
Other	120	*16*	20	*2*	20	*1*
General	74	*10*	–	–	11	*1*

The usual duration of the courses is one year for full-time courses and one or two years part-time where it is available. SWAP courses tend to be modular, criterion referenced and use continuous assessment. If a student successfully completes a specified number of modules this is a pass and allows access into a higher education course. In fact, SWAP courses carry *a guarantee of an offer of a place in higher education.*

On the whole, the statistics suggest that SWAP is encouraging more adults to participate in higher education and has been successful in attracting adults from some under-represented groups. We know, for example, that in 1991-92, 41% of all SWAP students came from an area designated in fairly broad terms as one of socio-economic disadvantage and that 36% of students had been unemployed prior to joining their Access course. We also know that about 70% of all Access students successfully completed their Access courses and progressed to higher education (Munn, Johnstone and Lowden, 1993). We know little, as yet, about the progress of these students once in higher education and their eventual career destinations. Current statistical information from SOED is incomplete. Looking at the available progression statistics the picture is of the majority of SWAP enrolled students progressing to HE and successfully completing their first year.

Table 1.3: SWAP students' progression

Year of SWAP course	Enrolments* on SWAP courses	No. successfully completing first year of HE	No. successfully completing 2nd year of HE
1989/90	625	414	265
1990/91	974	639	?
1991/92	1379	(967) (not confirmed)	—

*Excludes Access to nursing courses

It can be difficult to track large cohorts of students. The apparent decline in the numbers of students successfully completing their second year may reflect the difficulty in collecting valid and reliable information rather than high numbers of SWAP students discontinuing courses. A longitudinal study tracking a cohort through to graduation and first destinations would provide information about these students' experiences in HE and subsequent employment patterns thereby throwing more light on SWAP preparation.

The research reported here is a quasi-longitudinal study, it investigated the experience and progress of a small sample of Access students from their participation in Access courses to the end of their first year in higher education. Further details are given below.

The research

The overall aim of the research was to assess the effectiveness of Access courses in different subject areas in preparing adults for degree level study. This aim was translated into the following objectives:

- to investigate the adequacy of the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment practice in Access courses in terms of preparation for higher education
- to explore the responsiveness of higher education institutions to the presence of former Access students on degree courses
- to compare the view and experiences of two broad groups of Access students and their teachers — those on science related courses and those on social science and humanities courses
- to provide examples of good practice, especially in terms of FE/HE institutional links.

The research approach was one of small-scale, in-depth enquiry. Since SWAP was a relatively new phenomenon, the approach was that of a limited case-study with condensed field work. We selected four science, engineering, mathematics and technology courses and four social science or humanities. The different subject areas were chosen to explore perceptions of the modular approach to preparation for HE. Access courses have to prepare students for an increasingly diverse higher education provision, some courses are organised on the basis of a modular curriculum and use continuous assessment to register students' attainments. Other courses eschew a modular approach and are organised on the basis of much larger and integrated course provision and use end-of-term examinations to assess attainment. We hypothesised that students following science or science related courses where there was a reasonably clear knowledge hierarchy might have different views of a modular curriculum from social science students where knowledge hierarchies are more obscure or problematic. The selection of courses was difficult. The criteria for selection were:

- at least 20 students on the course to permit 10 students per course to be interviewed
- geography — one science and non-science course from each of the SWAP consortia
- the existence of both science and non-science courses at the same institution to permit comparison at a later date.

In the event, only one college met this last criterion with students in sufficient numbers to achieve a reasonable sample size. Brief descriptions of the courses are provided in Chapters 2 and 3. They were all recognised as SWAP courses but, as we shall see, they varied in curriculum design, teaching approaches and assessment methods. Six of the courses — all four science courses and two of the non-science courses were broadly similar in that they were organised on the basis of a modular curriculum and used continuous assessment to gauge students' progress. Two of the non-science courses resembled traditional university Access courses in that the curriculum tended not to be based on modules and end-of-term examinations featured prominently. The distinctively different nature of these two courses means that their staff's views and students' views are reported separately.

The following research methods were used to gather information about student experience and perceptions of the courses as preparation for higher education:

- semi-structured interviews with a broadly representative sample of students on each course. Students were interviewed three times, during their Access course and near the beginning and end of their first year in higher education
- semi-structured interviews with a small number of staff teaching Access courses, including course co-ordinators
- analysis of Access course documents
- observation of Access courses in operation.

We believed it important to collect students' perceptions at different stages in their progress through Access and higher education. It was possible that views about the effectiveness of courses would change as students gained experience of the curriculum, teaching methods and assessment on their Access courses. It was also possible that views about Access would change with the reality of participation in higher education and with end-of-year results. Most students were interviewed by telephone after they had met the researchers face to face. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one and a half hours. They were tape-recorded and transcribed to enable a coding frame to be established. Interviews with Access and higher education staff were face to face, tape-recorded and transcribed. Most lasted about an hour.

As Table 1.4 shows, we have a rich data base of the students' perceptions of their Access courses. This is supplemented by information on students' attainments on their courses and, for those who progressed to higher education, their attainment at the end of the first year. Staff views provide a further context in which to consider students' perceptions. The sampling numbers and procedures mean that the students interviewed were not necessarily representative of SWAP students and their views are not generalisable. Nevertheless, a rationale for small-scale, in-depth studies is that they provide a fuller, more comprehensive picture of respondents' thoughts and feelings than large surveys. Their purpose is to raise questions and issues about aspects of provision based on the experience of those directly involved. Some of these will be irrelevant to some providers because the nature of their provision is not comparable to that experienced by the students. However, we anticipate that there will be issues which Access and HE staff will want to discuss and we have summarised these in Chapter 6.

The student sample and their progression to higher education

As will be seen from Table 1.4, 100 students were interviewed while on their Access courses. Some detail of the backgrounds of these students is given in Appendix 2. In chapter 2 we also discuss briefly possible contextual factors to the students' progression patterns, but this study is primarily focused on issues concerning the provision of Access. Issues relevant to the individual student or possible sub-groups of students, will, we hope, be pursued by us more fully elsewhere. The progression of the group as a whole, the 100 students contacted as Access, is shown in Table 1.4. From the initial group of 100 interviewed, 89 progressed to higher education and we were able to interview nine students who had successfully completed their Access courses but who did not progress to HE.

Table 1.4: The student sample

Course subject	Interview 1 Students on Access courses	Interview 2 Initial progression to HE	Interview 3 End of first year in HE
Science	48	41	33
Social sciences etc	52	48	45

There was inevitably some attrition in the original cohorts as students changed addresses or ceased having Access to a telephone. The overwhelming majority of our sample wanted to progress to higher education and succeeded in achieving this aim. What kind of institution was preferred? When the research was carried out higher education was in a state of flux. Science Access students were interviewed when the binary line between universities and central institutions or polytechnics still existed. It was in the process of being removed when the social science interviews took place. For ease of comparison of students' intended HE destinations we maintain the distinction between universities and central institutions in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5 Intended destinations of Access students

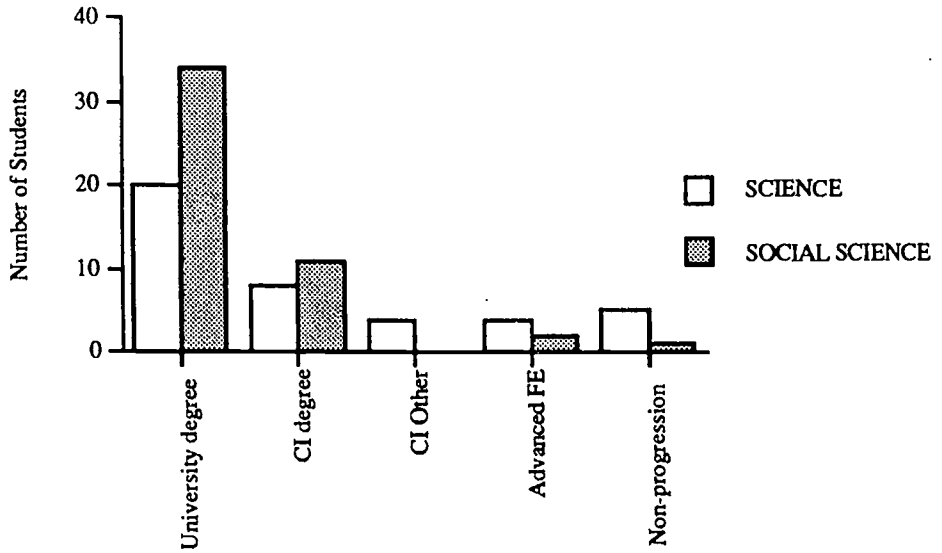
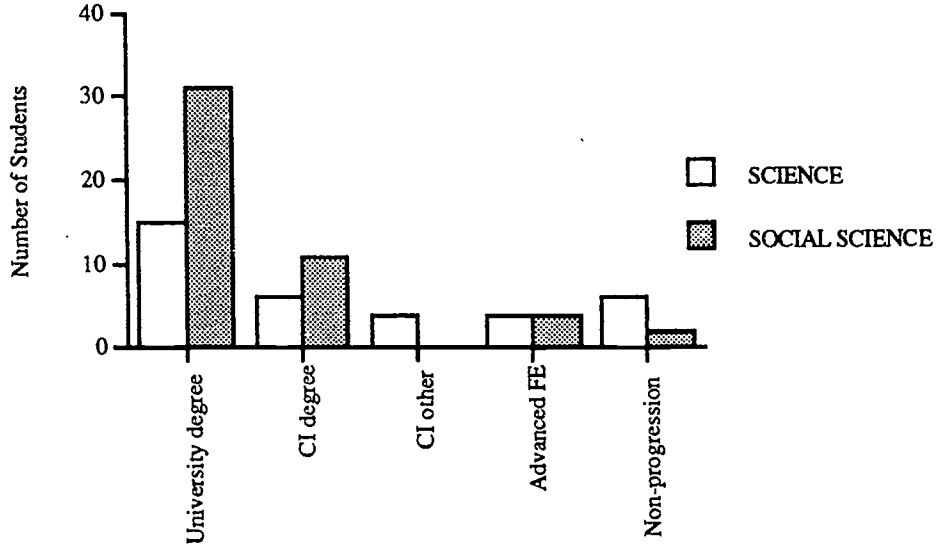


Table 1.5 shows that most of our sample wanted to progress to a university to study for a degree. Indeed, as we shall see, a major attraction of SWAP was the apparent guarantee of an offer of a place in higher education. For most students higher education meant university, rather than a central institution or an advanced course in further education. It is also worth pointing out that six students did not intend to progress immediately to higher education. In fact, four of the six *did* progress to HE. One had gone to an advanced course with FE and the remaining three to degree level work. The two students who said they were postponing progression to HE lived in remote parts of Scotland and were unlikely to move. For these students, perhaps, completion of an Access course was enough in itself. However, this runs counter to the whole idea of Access as a route to higher education. Whether Access admissions tutors should be admitting people on to courses who profess no intention of progressing to higher education is a difficult question. As we saw, some students change their mind and do progress. Others who intend to progress may dropout of their Access course, deciding that higher education is not for them after all. Admissions staff have to live with uncertainty and as Table 1.6 shows, most of our sample did indeed progress to HE. The same is true nationally (Table 1.3) and is a tribute to the hard work and dedication of Access students and their teachers.

Table 1.6 Eventual destinations of Access students



In the science cohort, the majority of the sample, 33 out of 41, progressed into some form of higher education and 28 arrived at their intended educational destination. The 33 were taking a variety of courses and had dispersed to 14 institutions. There was a similar pattern for the social science students. The vast majority, 45 of the 48 progressed to HE. Of these 43 arrived at the kind of institution they intended.

In terms of bald figures on Access course completion rates and progression to

HE, Access courses seem to be doing a good job. The same picture is presented by figures relating to the students' progress into their second year of HE. In science, 25 of the 33 who had entered HE were progressing into second year. Six students had failed their exams and resits, one had left the course at Christmas of the first year and one had transferred to another course. All these students intended to continue with some form of higher education. Two had lowered their sights a little, one from degree to HND and one from HND to HNC. Two had transferred to different degree courses, one gaining direct entry to second year. So four students were still actively in higher education. Of the other four, three intended to take a year out and study for resits, while the student who had left his course hoped to build up more modules and enter a different HE course under CATS.

In social science the picture was similar. Twenty-nine of the 45 had progressed unproblematically into the second year of their courses. Nine of these students reported that they had gained exemptions from first year degree examinations due to their performance over the year, as monitored by continuous assessment procedures in their courses. Seven students had resits in one subject but were confident of passing. Two students had failed everything. One admitted she had not studied for exams, partly because she had had to seek alternative accommodation. Her course work had been good and she intended to resit all her degree examinations. The other student felt that her age (early fifties) was slowing her down and she was uncertain whether she would pass the resits. Even so, she reported that she had enjoyed her Access course and her first year in HE and now felt readier to seek employment. The remaining student had withdrawn from an HNC course through ill-health and had a place on a degree course in autumn 1993.

There were several reasons given for students' change of direction; ill health, as above, financial, academic or personal reasons were all cited in various combinations. For example, two women on science degree courses had found the nine to five attendance required too difficult to balance against family responsibilities. This made it difficult to meet course demands.

Although most students said they felt well-informed about HE, there was a demand for more precise information on intended HE courses, for example timetabling of class work and the workload. We return to issues of student guidance on access and links with HE in Chapter 4. Within the general context of student satisfaction with access reported in Munn *et al* (1993) and confirmed by our present study, what did students have to say about particular aspects of Access preparation — the modular system, continuous assessment, criterion-referenced assessment and teaching methods? Chapters 2 and 3 provide details.

2 Access and transition

I think the important thing for Access students is to raise their confidence in their own ability to learn.

This chapter reports the views of Access students and their tutors on the effectiveness of Access courses as preparation for higher education. It concentrates on six Access courses, four science and two non-science, whose curriculum was designed on a modular basis. This means that the courses comprised approximately 22 modules, a unit of work lasting 40 hours, each module being complete in itself. Students normally completed each module as a free standing unit. The main exception to this was the study skills module which was sometimes integrated into other work. The courses used continuous assessment and criterion-referenced assessment to gauge students' progress. Two further Access courses featured in our research. These were Access to social science/arts courses. They used a different curriculum structure and methods of assessment. The views of students and their teachers on the effectiveness of these courses are reported separately in Chapter 3.

When we speak of the effectiveness of Access courses what do we mean? It may be helpful to think of this in terms of a number of rather different criteria. One of the major aims of SWAP is to improve the participation rate in higher education by older students and those lacking traditional qualifications. Access courses are the main vehicle to achieve this aim. A glance at SOED statistics on undergraduate entrants aged 21 or over to full-time higher education over the past ten years shows a steady increase in participation by adult students. They represented 31% of all entrants in 1991/92 (SOED, 1993b). Not all this increase can be attributed directly to SWAP but, as we show in Chapter 5, Access students made up a significant number of the students holding non-traditional qualifications admitted to Scotland's eight 'old' universities in 1991 (SUCE, 1993). Furthermore, as we indicated in Chapter 1, numbers of students enrolling in Access courses have steadily increased as have numbers of Access courses on offer in each of the SWAP consortia. It seems likely, therefore, that, other things being equal, numbers of students enrolling on Access courses and progressing to higher education will continue to grow and in that sense Access courses are being effective.

In their aim to target traditionally under-represented groups in higher education, Access courses can claim to be modestly effective too. The courses have attracted, for example, people living in areas of social and economic deprivation and the over 30s. They have been less successful in attracting ethnic minorities, or students with disabilities, other categories of students under-represented in higher education, although the national monitoring system has not been attuned to identifying these as well as it might (see Munn, Johnstone and Lowden, 1993 for a full description of Access students' characteristics). In relation to the small sample of 100 Access students participating in this study, the age

pattern is marginally in favour of students under 30 (see Table A1 in Appendix 1). If the students are sub-divided into science and non-science groupings, almost three in four of the science students were under 30 at the start of access and almost two in three of the non science students' were over 30. at the start of access. Indications of living in areas of socio-economic deprivation based on the students' post-codes, the method used by the SOED for SWAP students generally, were less successful when applied to this small number of individuals. In fact, the students in the sample ranged from a homeless young man literally sleeping on a friend's floor to a former college lecturer. Those who were unemployed ranged from a casual labourer to a housewife who had organised and worked on several voluntary bodies. The students' backgrounds did not necessarily replicate the general picture. Nevertheless, this does not contradict modest claims of success for SWAP. It is against this background of some success for SWAP that we can consider effectiveness at a more demanding level, namely widening access to higher education.

Traditionally, higher education in the UK is in the cultural possession of a social and intellectual élite and successive attempts to widen access have been socially controlled by institutional differentiation so that élite universities remain in the cultural possession of traditionally advantaged groups (Halsey, 1991). Thus, for example, Britain has its own 'Ivy League' institutions, venerated as centres of academic excellence where abstract, and theoretical knowledge is valued and students' attainments are assessed by end-of-year, norm-referenced examination. These institutions typically have a preponderance of undergraduates from economically and socially advantaged backgrounds. There is emerging in higher education, however, a rather different curriculum philosophy. This philosophy values applied practical knowledge, stresses modular learning, criterion-referenced assessment and continuous assessment. This philosophy is most frequently to be found in the newer universities and in advanced level courses, such as HND and HNC offered in further education colleges and elsewhere. While it is simplistic to portray all higher education as embracing one or other of these philosophies, it is important to recognise that different assumptions about the aims and purposes of higher education exist and are, to some extent, reflected in approaches to course design, teaching and the assessment of student progress. Higher education provision is changing and as new arrangements for funding institutions on the basis of the quality of their research and teaching become established, the differences in philosophy and emphasis amongst them are likely to become more transparent.

Access courses have to prepare students for an increasingly diverse higher education scene. What makes them so interesting is that their structure firmly embraces a particular view of knowledge and learning, a view that is not necessarily shared by all the higher education institutions to which Access students will want to progress. Perhaps their most distinctive difference is their view of knowledge as something that can be neatly apportioned into modules and that students' attainments can be expressed in terms of pre-specified learning outcomes for each module. Thus students are not assessed in comparison to each other, as in norm-referenced systems but in terms of specific criteria. Students either achieve the module learning outcomes or not. This is such a radical shift in the way we are used to thinking about entry requirements for higher education that it is worth spending a moment or two reflecting on the differences between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment systems.

Norm-referenced assessment systems take as their starting point the need to compare students' attainments in relation to each other. That is, their concern is not so much with what students know and can do, but with whether student X is 'better' or 'worse' than student Y. This is largely because the purpose of assessment was selection - selection for higher education where places were limited, or selection for the labour market. Since assessment could play such an important part in the life chances of individuals a great deal of organising went into trying to ensure that norm-referenced systems were reliable and fair. It was important, for instance, to remove marker bias. When reliability checks were carried out on subjective marking procedures, such as essay marking, quite alarming results were sometimes produced revealing a wide variation in opinion of the merit of the same essay among markers. All kinds of checks and balances are therefore built into national norm-referenced systems to try and ensure fairness. The underlying premise of these systems, however, is that people have a fixed amount of general ability. The task of the assessment is to distinguish the good, the middle and the poor. This has been fundamental to our education system for so long that it can be difficult to see the assumptions being made. It is still the assumption governing entry to HE.

We would want to argue that this notion of general ability is not very useful. In this we are joined by many but by no means all educationalists. Drever (1988) summarises the limitation of the usefulness of the notion of general ability:

> It (the notion of general ability) serves to explain away the variation in pupils' attainment by involving an ill-defined quasi-psychological quality intrinsic to the learner and of which each is supposed to have a different fixed amount. Once it has been measured, what are teachers supposed to do about it? Only accept it, it seems and limit the educational aspirations of pupils accordingly. (p. 92)

If one thinks about the purpose of assessment as being an aid to teaching and learning, rather than for selection, then a different approach seems more appropriate. Instead of the teacher being concerned to know whether X is better than Y, the concern is with both X and Y and a recognition of their individual attainment and progress in terms of specific criteria. Drever continues:

> A much more positive view of what teachers and pupils can hope to achieve develops from thinking of 'general ability' as simply *the collection of specific abilities (knowledge, skills, understanding) that a pupil has learned by a particular time.* These abilities are something teachers can work with, recognising, developing, consolidating and adding to them through classroom teaching and learning (p.92 - original emphasis).

One can immediately see how criterion-referenced approaches, specifying and describing specific abilities resonates with the intention of Access courses to build students' confidence. Many Access students were products of norm-referenced systems in schools, which, as we have seen were designed to label pupils as more or less able. Access courses with their commitment to criterion-referencing and a simple mastery-non-mastery grade, therefore pose a considerable challenge to HE norm-referenced systems.

Before leaving this description of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced systems, it is important to say a word about grade related criteria (GRC). It is sometimes suggested that specifying criteria for different levels of performance is criterion-referenced assessment. Thus it is argued that if HE specify criteria for a first or upper-second then criterion referencing is in operation. Similarly, in course work, if criteria for credit or merit passes are specified then this fits the bill of criterion referencing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Attempts to achieve **description and grading** mean that assumptions have to be made that all kinds of student performance, no matter the nature of the knowledge and skills involved can be adequately described by a fixed number of levels. Further such systems usually amalgamate different kinds of knowledge and skills and collapse then into an overall grade. Finally, the criteria used to distinguish levels typically make reference to the amount learned, the extent of help given and the difficulty of the task, thus slipping into norm-referenced comparisons (e.g. Drever, Munn, McIntyre and Mitchell, 1983 for a fuller discussion)

This is not to suggest that criterion-referenced systems are straight forward. Black *et al* (1989) have shown that teachers can interpret criteria in quite different ways and that their expectations and assumptions about students influence judgements about what counts as having achieved learning outcomes. Nevertheless the purposes of criterion-referenced and norm-referenced systems are quite different and there are profound ideological differences about the nature of ability underlying each system. These are summed up in Box 1. This is what makes staff and student views about criterion-referencing so interesting.

Box 1: Key distinguishing features of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced systems

Norm-referencing	Criterion-referencing
• Ranks students in relation to each other.	• Describes what students know and can do.
• Assumes students have a fixed amount of general ability.	• Assumes students have different kinds of abilities.
• Assessment is summative and for selection.	• Assessment is tentative, more than one attempt to achieve criteria is possible and as an aid to teaching and learning.

Have Access courses been effective in challenging traditional conceptions of knowledge and assessment in higher education? This is the question that is addressed in different ways in the remainder of this report. It is an important question because if higher education is to cater for a wider range of students than has traditionally been the case, then, in our view, traditional assumptions made about knowledge, learning and assessment need to be challenged. Equally, if Access courses are to grow and develop it is important to examine the assumptions made about what counts as effective preparation for higher education. These are our starting points for interpreting staff and student perceptions of the effectiveness of Access courses.

Building students' confidence

We opened this chapter with a comment from an Access tutor highlighting the need to build students' confidence in their abilities as the keystone of Access preparation. This is understandable. Students were returning to study after a gap in formal education and often with unhappy memories of school. Some had 'O' grades and/or Highers but these had often been obtained many years previously; others had few formal examination qualifications. Table 2.1 shows the academic qualifications held by the Access students interviewed on six courses. Access courses were deliberately designed to boost students' confidence by providing positive reinforcement of students' achievements, particularly during the early stages of preparation. Did they do so?

Table 2.1: Qualifications on entry to Access courses

Category	Science	Arts/Social Science
None	2[1]	12[2]
1-3 'O' grades	6[4]	12[4]
4-6 'O' grades	8[3]	6[1]
> 7 'O' grades	5[1]	-
1 Higher	15[4]	6
2-3 Highers	8[2]	9
> 4 Highers	4	2[2]
Professional Diploma*	–	5[1]

* *Five of the students had post - school qualifications in nursing (2), journalism, hotel management and art. Figures in square brackets show the number of students who withdrew.*

The table shows, for each student, his or her most advanced qualification. Many students had added to their school qualifications through courses at further education colleges and a small number had other qualifications such as National Certificate modules or City and Guild certificates. The key point to stress is that most students, regardless of their academic qualifications reported that Access courses had boosted their confidence in their abilities such that they believed they could cope with the demands of degree level courses. The following comments give a flavour of this. They are taken from interviews at the end of Access courses:

> *What I've done in the last year is pretty much as broad a base as you can get. There'll be nothing there that's a shock to me. And I'll have a wee bit of grounding in just about everything [HE] is going to throw at me.*

> *I believe everything we got we needed. We touch on quite a lot of things and it gave you an idea of whether you would really like something.*

The issue of how well founded this confidence was is explored later in the chapter when we report students' views on Access courses from the perspective of their first year in higher education. Indeed, a small minority of students expressed reservations about the adequacy of their preparation for HE while on access courses. In general terms however, students were highly positive about their Access preparation and said that the courses had boosted their confidence in their abilities.

In a qualitative study the numbers of people expressing particular points of view are less important than the range of opinion expressed. Our aim is, therefore, to convey the range of views so that they provide a starting point for discussion by those involved in SWAP. For the moment we concentrate on three features of Access courses which were seen as contributing to students' confidence in their academic abilities and in their ability to manage the demands of full-time degree level work. These are:

- course structure
- assessment practice
- teaching methods.

The six courses from which students were interviewed were structured along broadly similar lines. All were based on modules with students being expected to complete 22 modules satisfactorily. Turning first to the four science courses, three provided foundation modules which all students were required to take. These typically included mathematics and one or more of science, communication, computing and study skills. Having completed this foundation, students could then choose from a range of options, although one course stipulated that all students had to continue with mathematics for the whole length of the course. The fourth science course provided three programmes of study, science access, mechanical engineering and electrical engineering and students had to choose one of these programmes, each having a unique combination of modules. The two social science courses were designed as introductions to a broad range of subjects. Students studied 12 subjects in all, including psychology, statistics, economics, politics, sociology and communications. The courses were designed to provide continuity with social science and arts faculties in four local universities where students would be studying three to five subjects in their first year.

Student views on course content and structure focused on three main issues:

- breadth versus depth
- content versus process
- study skills.

These issues remained prominent amongst students as they progressed from Access to higher education. We suspect that they will continue to feature in debates about the nature of Access courses as preparation for HE and the responsiveness of HE institutions to increasing numbers of entrants with non-traditional qualifications.

Breadth versus depth

Most students welcomed a course design such as those described above that had enabled them to sample quite a wide range of subjects. Such a design provided variety and could open up new interests. For example, some social science students welcomed the opportunity to begin a foreign language; others had never done computing and wished to continue studying this. Social science students also appreciated the opportunity to experience new subjects and talked about the 'new world opened up' by their courses.

Courses had been deliberately structured so that degree choices were fairly open. Students were provided with an opportunity to find out which subjects they enjoyed and would like to continue studying in HE, in line with traditions

of Scottish higher education. They appreciated this, often comparing Access provision favourably with Highers in this respect:

> *I just wanted a general course, something that wasn't actually specific, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. ...Highers are more restricted. Access gives you a broad range of different subjects.*

Furthermore, students' confidence was boosted by achieving success in new subjects:

> *[I have been exposed to] subjects that I'd never looked at before — for example, politics. It's quite nice when you pass a module in something like that.*

> *It [electronics] didn't go too deep. I mean you sort of went below the surface — enough to understand — but it didn't go too deep so that you were lost.*

Breadth was possible because of the modular curriculum structure. Students were provided with a taste of a subject, and as we shall see below, able to chart their success in attaining learning outcomes and move on. Perhaps surprisingly, breadth was appreciated by those students who had come onto an Access course with a definite degree course and career in mind. After a few months on Access they could discover whether they really liked a subject and could change their degree plans if necessary. Thus the twin benefits of this approach were a sampling of a range of subjects and a gradual boost in confidence as students successfully completed one module after another.

Although breadth was welcomed by most students some were disparaging of the course structure: 'a whistle-stop tour through different subjects' and critical of 'too many introductions'. These concerns about lack of depth increased as students progressed from Access to HE. Numbers are small, and it must be remembered that students dispersed to a wide variety of institutions and courses. Nevertheless, it is a strand of student opinion that should be highlighted. The following comment illustrates the concerns which a small minority of students reported:

> The physics ...we're getting this year, I wasn't taught last year. It's not even just the levels — it's a different branch of physics, different learning formulas ... a totally different ball game.

Concerns about the academic level of the subjects on their Access courses were reported by 42% of the sample of Access students in HE surveyed by Munn *et al* in 1993. Whereas students on Access courses had at the time welcomed their breadth as an opportunity to try new subjects, with hindsight they seemed to grudge the time spent on subjects which were irrelevant to their HE courses. They wished they had been able to spend more time on the subjects they were studying for their degrees.

The breadth versus depth argument was also evident among Access course tutors and co-ordinators. Co-ordinators tended to see breadth as a distinctive and positive feature of Access provision which students needed to be made aware of and to value. Two co-ordinators from different institutions and courses give their views:

> *[Access students] have an inferiority complex, especially when they're about to go to HE because they feel they're going to be sitting beside people with three, four and five Highers. But I try to impress on them that while that's true, those with a group of Highers have a very much more limited academic background. Our students will have studied a bit of language, a bit of politics, a bit of economics, a bit of computer applications, various things which school leavers or mature students doing Highers won't have done. So Access students have a wider range of subjects although not to the same academic level.*

> *You often get students doing at least one module in a programme that's completely uninteresting to them — the chemist having to do the computing and so on. The course structure is that we try to be all things to all men and women. I think in these cases, with one module, we'd just tell the students to bite the bullet.*

There are a number of points which need to be considered in making judgements about the breadth of the curriculum on Access courses. The first is the point made by students themselves and substantiated by a number of studies of adult participation in education, that adults are often uncertain about their participation goals and that goals change over time (eg Blair *et al*, 1993; Cross, 1986; McGivney, 1990) Furthermore, they are often ill-informed about the educational opportunities available to them (eg Blair *et al* 1993). Secondly, a distinctive feature of Access, and of the Scottish education tradition, is a broad-based general education as a pre-requisite for entry to higher education. Access is striving to appeal to a wide range of students and to expand their educational horizons by introducing them to subjects they have previously never encountered. Thirdly, higher education itself is changing and some institutions and some tutors take steps at an early stage to identify the knowledge base of their entrants and provide 'topping up' classes for students lacking the specific knowledge and skills required for first year courses. This may well become more widespread in HE if the nature of first year undergraduates changes and if the curriculum in upper secondary changes in response to the concern about its focus and purpose. It would be ironic if Access courses were to narrow their curriculum at the very time when moves are afoot to broaden the school curriculum.

These points would lead us to suggest that Access course providers should be very cautious in changing the balance between breadth and depth. Nevertheless, there are opportunities presented by a modular curriculum structure which are perhaps not being as fully exploited as they might to integrate knowledge and skills across modules. Some students were concerned that dividing up knowledge into 40 hour units would not promote theory building or, more pragmatically, would not promote links between the component parts of their course. One student summed up this view:

To a certain extent you don't get a link-up between different modules. You know there is some there but the pressure's on you just to get through the specific item rather than see the general scheme of things.

Interestingly, the concern that modules encouraged fragmentation of learning and did not allow students to build up an overall view of the subject was less in evidence among social science students. Indeed many of them would agree with a statement from a fellow student that:

Modules are all interrelated. The modules are good; they build up to a broad picture.

Students in the social sciences completed a practical investigations module which was deliberately designed to pull together knowledge gleaned from earlier modules. It may be that such a strategy would pay dividends in science courses. It is worth highlighting that concerns about theory building, remembering content and making connections were reported by a large sample (N = 153) of access students; 44% agreed that 'using modules you forget a lot of what you are taught'; 43% agreed that 'modules do not allow you to obtain an overall view of a subject'; and almost one in four said that it was not easy to see the connection between one module and another (Munn *et al*, 1993). As we point out in Chapter 5, such concerns are not an inevitable feature of the modular curriculum and thoughtful course design and assessment tasks can promote integration and cohesion.

Content versus process

Related to the debate about breadth and depth is a more subtle question about the kind of knowledge Access students are acquiring through their courses. At a fairly elementary, but nevertheless important, level, there were concerns about whether key topics in specific subjects had been covered. As they moved through their first year of higher education, the science students and the social science students criticised gaps in their Access courses. Some science students had not studied trigonometry, for example, and some social science students had not studied 'supply and demand' in economics. Where these gaps were shared by fellow students straight from school, the failings of Access were criticised less strongly. Nevertheless, discovery of such gaps may have dented the confidence students felt in their grasp of subject knowledge. This is an example of where joint HE/FE curriculum committees set up under SWAP could be used to monitor course content and explore assumptions about the course content Access students will have experienced. The committees could also be a vehicle for exploring the kind of knowledge — or the views of knowledge which Access students were being exposed to.

Access co-ordinators stressed that new students were 'greedy for facts'. Unsurprisingly, the students wanted to acquire the knowledge which would enable them progress to higher education. Often this was conceptualised as specific content which had to be ingested as 'key points' about particular subjects. Yet in higher education knowledge is regarded as tentative and contested. Even in the so-called 'hard' sciences of physics and chemistry, those at the forefront of research increasingly see explanation in terms of current knowledge limitations

rather than as universal truths. Subject disciplines have evolved ways of knowing and have rules on what counts as evidence and one might argue that Access courses ought to be aiming to introduce students to the nature of different subject disciplines rather than focus on detailed specialist knowledge. As we shall see in Chapter 5, some higher education staff were sceptical about the view of knowledge with which Access students were being presented. They feared that a modular structure encouraged too much of a 'cut and dried' approach instead of opening up debate and encouraging wider reading amongst students. Thus students could 'do' the concept of social class in a module, attain the learning outcomes and leave it. This was unsatisfactory. They needed to question the concept, be familiar with different views of its usefulness as an analytical tool and get into the habit of applying it in different contexts.

A further line of argument centred on the place of processes and skills on Access courses. The two social science Access courses focused very strongly on these. Research skills, library skills, the collation and analysis of material and, in effect the bones of independent study were the basis of the modules. Initially, the students resisted this approach; they wanted to be told *what* to learn rather than *how* to learn. This attitude changed over the Access year and once in higher education these students tended to be critical of their lack of practice of process skills on longer texts and more difficult targets. For example, extracts of a few pages in length had been studied as sources on Access, whereas book length texts were the norm in HE, and essays in HE needed to be longer and more theoretical.

We suspected that there might be clear differences of view between science and social science students on the adequacy of the content of their Access courses, with science students highlighting gaps in factual knowledge and social scientists emphasising process skills. The picture was more complicated. Both sets of students identified gaps in subject knowledge and both sets commented on the study skills module — a module emphasising processes — sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Social science students had more to say about process skills as their courses emphasised these to a greater extent than the science courses.

The same complicated picture was evident from Access tutors. Science tutors raised concerns about the content being covered in some mathematics and physics modules, concerns which should be alleviated by the revised modules now being used. However, they also raised concerns about the 'cut and dried' nature of some modules, as the following tutor makes clear:

> *It's not teaching mathematics where the student goes away with a very good background in maths with the ability to apply it to various areas. It's much more limited.*

Similarly, some social science tutors, while welcoming a focus on process felt that students were not acquiring a strong enough knowledge base:

> *What worries me is that all you are teaching them is the processes. I feel that you want them to have some knowledge that they've retained as well. It's all very well being able to go out and use libraries and collate information and present it, but if you haven't got some kind of academic frame of reference into which you can place this knowledge that you've got, I don't feel you're doing [the students] any service.*

What is this telling us about the effectiveness of Access courses? As the students progressed to higher education did problems attributed to Access course content emerge? With the science students about a third reported difficulties with academic work during their first term and just under half of the social science students reported such difficulties. Workload and gaps in knowledge were identified as the main problems. As we shall see, the sheer volume of work in HE took many students by surprise and they had to make rapid adjustments to work patterns to keep up. Yet, as Chapter 4 reports, most students satisfactorily completed their first year in HE and progressed to their second year. Had the successful completion of the Access year given these students the confidence to cope with academic difficulties? Was the student motivation to succeed so strong that they refused to be worn down by academic problems? The short answer to these questions seems to be 'yes'. Although students had specific criticisms to make about gaps in subject knowledge, the level of work and the balance between subject specific knowledge and general processes, these were outweighed by the gains of confidence and motivation. As one student put it:

> *I suppose the end result is that you have the confidence ... to get a degree or HND or whatever ... because up until [Access] you're not sure if you're intelligent enough. ...once you do the Access course, you realise you've just as much chance as anyone else. Before that you tend to think a degree is something that is extremely difficult to achieve.*

As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5 this confidence enabled students to seek help with academic problems from HE staff and raise questions about degree course structure with their tutors. In this rather subtle and low-key way, perhaps SWAP is beginning to encourage some staff in some HE institutions to examine course provision and what is taken for granted about students' knowledge and skills. If it does, this should benefit all entrants to HE. More fundamentally, a modular curriculum structure encourages curriculum planners to specify what it is intended that students will have learned by the end of the module. This is essential if students are to be provided with a coherent and progressive learning programme rather than one thing after another. A concentration on the kinds of knowledge and skills that students entering HE need to have would open up debate about the nature and purpose of HE and about whether HE course provision, teaching and assessment methods were congruent with its nature and purpose.

Study skills

How to extract relevant information from lectures, how to structure written work and how to manage the demands of a heavy workload were common concerns of Access students. Access courses included study skills as part of the curriculum either through a free-standing module or by integrating such skills into other modules. For the science students, little difference of view emerged as to the efficacy of these different structures. Their main criticism concerned lack of practice in formal examination techniques. In the two social science courses, study skills were taught via a free-standing module. Students mentioned note-taking as a gap in study skills as was practice in the analytical reading of complex texts. Interestingly enough, however, this group of students felt more positive

about study skills on looking back at their Access preparation from the vantage point of HE. This view is reflected by one student who said:

> *During the Access course I was critical of the work given in the last term, that is working on your own, footnoting, research etc. I now think this was the most beneficial part of the Access course and a major help for my current essays in [terms of] research and layout.*

A science student who had also been critical similarly reported:

> *At the time we did the study skills module it seemed a waste of a module. ...Now I can see what they are going on about.*

Although the majority of students in both the science and social science courses reported feeling reasonably secure in study skills, about a third of science students felt they were lacking in this area.

One area where almost all students were agreed was in the unexpected pace and volume of work in higher education. They thought they knew what to expect and said that they had been well warned by their Access tutors but as one student said:

> *The only way to prepare you for that [the pace] is just to be in there doing it. I don't think you could prepare someone for it. ...I've been here ten weeks and I'm still not used to it — just the amount of work which [staff] get through in one lecture.*

Entwistle and his colleagues (1991) reported similar concerns from school students, in terms of the subject content of their Highers or 'A' levels, the kind of knowledge to which they were exposed and their study skills.

Assessment

A modular curriculum presents one kind of challenge to traditional assumptions about the nature of knowledge. A more fundamental challenge to traditional assumptions about ability is posed by criterion-referenced assessment. This system is used in almost all access courses. Students' attainments are assessed in terms of the learning outcomes specified for each module. Students are judged either to have achieved the learning outcomes or not; they are not graded in relation to each other as in norm-referenced systems. As we argue in Chapter 5, criterion-referenced assessment is a time-bomb ticking away as far as entry to higher education is concerned. Traditionally entry has been rationed through norm-referenced qualifications. Particular grades are specified for particular subjects and the more prestigious the subject and the institution the higher the grades potential applicants must obtain to gain entry. Higher education institutions publish their entry requirements so that students know they have to obtain four 'B' grades in Highers, for instance, to gain admittance. If HE, under the aegis of SWAP, can specify what students need to know and be able to do in order to be admitted as undergraduates then, in principle, such a system could be used to

admit all students. Staffing and other resource implications are, of course, enormous, but once the principle of criterion-referenced assessment has been accepted for adult students, it is difficult to deny it to school leavers. HE entry and associated assessment requirements could therefore become much more overtly political questions than ever before.

Criterion-referenced assessment

What did Access students and their tutors have to say about criterion-referenced assessment? Students in the early stages of their access course found the straightforward pass or fail approach to assessment helpful. Since almost all students achieved the learning outcomes of the introductory modules, criterion-referenced assessment helped to restore confidence in students who had long been away from the education scene and who had not, in many cases been particularly successful at school. However, as the access year progressed students began to report a wish for more detailed criticisms of their work and in some instances to ask for grades. They complained that regardless of obvious differences among them in abilities and amount of effort made, there were nearly all receiving identical assessments. Students' confidence could be dented if everyone seemed to be passing everything. The following two quotations give a flavour of the comments made:

> *We're all passing! ...I know I am far better at some things than others.*

> *I know for certain subjects, I'm doing better than other ones but it's just praise all the way! I don't know whether or not they don't want to deflate me or make me downhearted. I would like a more honest critical assessment of how I'm doing — I feel at times it's a bit patronising.*

'Constructive criticism' — written comments on work — was indicated by several students as being the type of change to assessment they favoured. They were enthusiastic when they received extended feedback on other occasions. As one student pointed out, feedback helped you to learn:

> *The red pen is a terrifying thing but it is quite useful, you actually get instruction through that.*

Some Access co-ordinators confirmed the student view that the amount and nature of feedback by tutors could be improved. A small number of students favoured grades as a way of finding out about progress especially if extended feedback was not provided. One student suggested that good grades would boost students' confidence whilst poor grades would ensure they worked harder. However, the majority favoured better feedback as opposed to grades.

The issue of grading is likely to remain and even intensify if the demand for HE places continues to exceed supply and if league tables of student performance and drop-out rates are to feature as an accountability mechanism for HE. We shall return to this issue in Chapter 3 and in our concluding chapter.

Continuous assessment

Assessment systems can be 'big bang', end-of-term or end-of-year events where students have one major opportunity to demonstrate their learning, or they can be continuous where a profile of student performance is built up during the course of a term or year. Sometimes, a mixture of approaches is used with continuous assessment and end-of-term results making up specific proportions of an overall assessment of students' achievements. Access courses used continuous assessment. Access students generally welcomed continuous assessment. It helped to build up confidence and was seen as less stressful than end-of-term examinations. The continuity of assessment also meant a continuity of effort by students:

> *I quite like this method [continuous assessment] because you're learning a bit at a time, you're gaining something all the time as you go through the year. You know you can't feel the whole thing at the end like [in] an examination.*
>
> Social science student

Similarly tutors liked continuous assessment as it encouraged students to develop good study habits and to 'continue to work [and] put in a good effort over the whole course'.

The science students, however, were worried that meeting the demands of continuous assessment had set them on a treadmill of short-term recall, with no time to digest and fully understand what they were learning. A typical comment was:

> *You're getting continually assessed, which is good, it's gradual, it's building you up and that does boost your confidence until you think back, 'Oh gosh! What did I do a couple of months ago?'*

Interestingly enough, the social science students did not express as many fears about this. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the two social science courses tended to emphasise process rather than content and through the investigations module, deliberately tried to integrate students' learning from a range of modules

The one area where there was a broad consensus of student view about Access assessment was a regret that Access did not provide formal exam practice. SWAP is not opposed to examination practice but opportunities to experiment with or to rehearse examination techniques tended to get squeezed out of a very full programme of teaching until it was a vestigial part of study skills in some cases. Clearly there are many factors for Access co-ordinators to take into account in considering whether to introduce examination practice into their courses. The ethos of the courses is against it, as is the fragility of students' confidence in their own abilities. Nevertheless, our data showed that students worried about lack of examination practice. A compromise suggested by students themselves was to have an optional exam towards the end of the second or third term for these students keen to 'have a go' at examinations. In this context we should make it clear that students were not asking for examinations *instead* of continuous

assessment. Rather it was something that could be added to the existing pattern of assessment where short answers, essays and investigations already featured in continuous assessment systems.

In summary, then, the students worried about assessment on Access on three fronts:

- the pass/fail of criterion-referenced assessment left them uncertain of their abilities and of whether their confidence was justified
- the pressure of continuous assessment led science students in particular to doubt their understanding and long-term recall of what they had learned
- university examinations would find them unprepared and (with typical Scottish pessimism) 'find them out' as frauds.

In the event, the broad picture from science students was that, having felt anxious about assessment on Access, they felt able and, indeed, were able to cope with assessment in HE. Just over a third of the science group reported a variety of worries about tests and examinations during their first HE year but almost all passed successfully into second year. On the other hand, the social scientists who seemed less worried about assessment, experienced more difficulties in HE at least in terms of passing exams. About one third, of an admittedly small and unrepresentative group were required to resit one or more subjects. Many factors can contribute to lack of examination success and personal and financial concerns feature prominently in our data—a depressingly familiar tale of adult experience in higher education. We consider student problems and the support available to them in HE and Access in Chapter 4. For the moment we would urge Access tutors to consider the following:

- the need to design assessment to promote consolidation and integration of knowledge
- the advantages and disadvantages of providing opportunities to practice examination techniques
- the need to provide constructive feedback to students on their attainments and progress pointing out strengths and weaknesses.

Teaching methods

The overriding aim of the research was to investigate the effectiveness of Access courses in preparing adult students with few formal qualifications for entry to higher education. Good teaching methods would form an obvious part of such preparation and we were interested in how students saw the methods used on Access as compared to those in HE. The students, however, subverted discussion of teaching methods by preferring to discuss the qualities of their tutors. We feel there is an important issue here, concerning relationships between tutors and students and the responsibilities for learning that each accept.

As we have seen, students' self-confidence could be built up through exposure to appropriate knowledge and by successful progression through continuous assessment and criterion-referenced assessment. Underpinning all this, however, were positive relationships with Access tutors who transmitted their belief in students' abilities and in the worthwhileness of their quest for a degree. Of course, the tutors did not achieve their results with students simply by being nice

people. Their teaching approaches were not always recognised as techniques by the students, but techniques they were nevertheless. For example, the self-effacement of a tutor within a group or particular seating patterns in the room were viewed by tutors as purposeful but by students as a happy accident.

What kinds of techniques were valued by students? Unsurprisingly perhaps they appreciated a mixture of methods. They especially welcomed talk and chalk in the early, 'greedy for facts' stage, although with more questions and discussion than we typically associated with this method. They liked opportunities to work with and learn from each other but some students felt this could make you lazy in that you were apt to let others do the work. Practical work in science made topics easier to understand. The investigations in social science were useful in practising library and research skills.

It will come as no surprise to learn that long lectures were seen as boring and an ineffective way of learning. Similarly, independent study, if interpreted as letting students get on with it with practically no guidance, was unhelpful. Students did not want to be spoon-fed; they wanted to be independent learners but this took time and careful planning. The first extract gives a view of unsupported study as unhelpful. The second reveals an appreciation of a gradual approach:

> *We were handed out notes and that was it. We were just told to read up the notes and study them. ...We were given no help whatsoever; we were told that was student centred learning. But in my case — I ...had never had any chemistry at all, I had no knowledge. ...I felt it was very much the wrong approach.*

And in contrast:

> *That was the best way to do it, not monopolising all the time and not being left all the time to do it all yourself. There was a fine balance and he was always there. [He would give you] a full explanation if you wanted it, no problem; We'd just go over it on the board.*

The majority of students did not feel well prepared for what was thought of as the main teaching method in HE, lectures. They tended not to see this as a failing in Access; after all, students entering HE from school were in the same boat, but they worried about their abilities to cope with lecture halls filled with 500 or more students. They had welcomed involvement in participation in Access classes and were unsure how they would find HE teaching methods.

Looking back to Access from HE these students were even more appreciative of the sympathetic teaching they had received. Higher education methods came in for pretty damning criticism as the following comments illustrate:

> *We were warned what it would be like ... but it is chalk and cheese. One moved from a classroom with 18 people and a friendly dialogue with a tutor ... to a lecture theatre. When I was at the maths lecture this morning, I'd say there were between 300 and 500 people in the lecture hall. ...The effective way to learn was the way we had it during the Access course because it was a dialogue between adults.*

I don't really see how you can prepare people. If [Access] was the same as university people wouldn't want to go.

The corollary of this problem was that students were reliant on self-study and independent learning. In addition, higher education tutorials offered students the chance to have their work criticised and their skills assessed. This was not always an opportunity used by tutors, to the disappointment of students. The support they had become used to in Access had gone; at university the Access student was 'just another face in the crowd'. If the student could cope with this all well and good. Fellow students from Access were an invaluable source of support and morale-boosting here, as Chapter 4 will show.

We should add that the students were sympathetic to the pressures on higher education staff, although reluctant to forego the reassurance of support. Perhaps the weaning process is necessary, to help students survive the course, but it disappointed some students who began to see higher education as 'just jumping through the right hoops'. Once in higher education, the more limited personal contact between tutors and students may have dented student confidence. Faith in their own grasp of study skills and academic abilities would be needed to combat a lack of face-to-face support. We discuss progression, welfare and support in Chapter 4. It is worth asking whether younger students coming straight from school go through the same potentially alienating process in the early stages of HE as the culture shock described by this small sample of Access students.

3 A different kind of access

You know your way about, you know how the university works. It's a big boost.

In Chapter 2 we discussed six Access courses, all of which were delivered according to the conventions of SWAP in terms of modular structure and assessment. Chapter 1 noted that, prior to the setting up of SWAP, universities already had access schemes to encourage 'second chance' students. These were usually run by the university Continuing Education department or in some cases by a particular faculty of the university. This chapter looks at two Access courses which were closer in some ways to these more established means of providing mature students with a way into higher education. Although each of the courses was offered under the SWAP banner, each differed from the conventional SWAP approach and each could be seen as university-driven. The adaptation of conventional access approaches had been negotiated between the college, the receiving university and SWAP. Two rather different course structures had been arrived at, each offering access to the arts/social science faculties of the local university. For ease of reference, we shall call the two courses Blue and Green.

Both Blue and Green had closer and more visible ties with a local university than had other Access courses in our sample. Both Blue and Green had course structures and assessment practices which replicated those of the receiving university. These factors could be seen as contributing to student confidence. But in both cases, the students themselves were a little different from their peers on other Access courses. This too may have played a part.

A different kind of student?

The underlying assumption of Access is that students from a wide range of backgrounds, with few if any formal qualifications, will be taking the Access courses. These students, whose previous experience of education may be negative, need to be prepared in a specific way to participate in higher education. Chapter 2 discussed the background and qualifications of the entrants to the six conventional Access courses in our sample. Here we look at the background of those who entered the more unconventional (in Access terms) Blue course and Green course in the arts/ social sciences.

Although college Green simply took everyone who applied (as it was the first year of operation of the course and applicants did not exceed the total numbers of places available), and college Blue selected from the pool of applicants, the students for these courses turned out to be initially more confident and more qualified than other Access students. Their formal qualifications are set out in Table 3.1, with the qualifications of the other Access students for comparison.

Table 3.1: A comparison of Access students' qualifications

Qualifications	Blue/Green students	Other Access students
None	5	9
1-3 'O' grades	4	14
4-6 'O' grades	3	11
>7 'O' grades	–	5
1 Higher	1	20
2-3 Highers	6	11
>4 Highers	2	4
Professional diploma	5	–
Total	**26**	**74**

If we draw a line through the table to separate out those with one Higher or less, 50% of the Blue/Green students fall into the 'less qualified' group and 50% into the 'more qualified' group. The other Access students have 80% in the 'less qualified' category and 20% in the 'more qualified' category. The latter percentages are much closer to the relative percentages for Access students nationally. As the broad percentages indicate, the Blue/Green students were more likely to have had academic success.

College Blue did not use formal qualifications as a criterion of selection, but it may be that those with such qualifications were more confident in themselves and more confident of their chance of success at university. It may also be that the Blue college, which offered a wide range of courses, was able to direct more tentative Access applicants into a more appropriate course at a different level. Equally, the Blue university offered a pre-Access course into which less confident Access applicants might be steered. Nevertheless, it was the case that the Blue group included such people as a young woman only six years out of school, where she had acquired university entrance level qualifications. This student had given up a well paid job to enter Access, which showed laudable seriousness of intent, but having a job at all placed her outside yet another of the major SWAP target groups, the unemployed. Not all of the Blue students were as well qualified, but it did seem to us that about half of this group were people who could be described as having a second bite at the cherry rather than people who had had no chance of higher education. They were perhaps people taking a second chance to enter the élite rather than people in the vanguard of mass entry to higher education.

Higher education and its changing role are discussed in later chapters. Here we might say only that for some at least of the Blue (and Green) students it was not so much a matter of building confidence as of directing and grooming a confidence which was there. This confidence did not always derive from past academic success. For example, there were students in both groups without formal qualifications but with experience of life, who were confident of their stamina and determination:

> *I don't have anything from school — my father was in the army and I went to 14 different schools in ten years, but I've been running my own business ... I think I've got the sense to know what I can do.*

I know they want to find out about your motivation, will you cope with the course, but at the same time there's this feeling that they're telling you to be grateful for the chance. You should thank them for letting you into their university ... I don't want to tug the forelock...

On the other hand, even with this degree of self-confidence, the students were taking the Access course. They did see themselves as requiring to be prepared for university. They looked to the Access course to show them what university would be like, what would be expected o[illegible]n and whether they could meet the demands. Both groups assumed tha[illegible]re of the course was designed to help with those questions.

Course structures

Course Blue was very similar to a traditional university access course. The FE college staff used university facilities and worked with university staff to deliver the course. The students on course Blue were in effect students of the university as soon as they entered Access. The characteristics of Blue were:

- FE staff and HE staff worked together in organising and delivering the course;
- it was a part-time course demanding one and a half days formal attendance and a suggested 20 hours of private study;
- in the first block or term, a pattern of lecture, tutorial and essay was established. This covered eight academic subjects; lectures were delivered to the whole Access intake but there were six tutorial groups. Each group had its own course tutor, from the FE college or from HE. Essays were marked but not counted towards a final assessment;
- two specialist options were selected by the students in block 2, from the subjects presented in block 1. During blocks 2 and 3, that is from January until the end of term, the students were expected to study for the production of two major essays (one for each specialist subject) and for an end-of-year examination. Each of these modes of assessment counted for half of the students' final marks;
- a study skills class was also available.

Course Green started off as a more conventional Access course in the arts/social sciences, a new venture for college Green. The department offering the course had close ties with the local university; one tutor was a former (mature) student, another tutor was a post-graduate student and there were other personal and professional ties. Course Green was also being offered in the consortium which already had the example of the traditionalist course Blue as an accepted Access format. College Green prided itself on listening to the students; the students were initially happy with modules but lobbied strongly for an addition of more traditional assessment and for more lecture practice. The student representative on the course committee was one of our sample, and spoke very forcefully about exams as lending credibility to course Green for the students. All these circumstances, plus active support from the Green university at joint SWAP, FE and HE committee meetings encouraged the co-ordinator at college Green to move towards a more hybrid Access course. The characteristics of Green were:

- the course was organised solely by FE staff, but HE staff in relevant departments were consulted and their advice taken;
- it was a full-time course requiring regular attendance;
- in the first block or term, six subjects plus one elective were delivered through modules. An element of lecturing, note-taking and essay writing was introduced in response to student demand and staff unease. This pattern carried through into block 2;
- in the third term, the students had to choose two specialist subjects from four offered. In fact, the choice was reduced to two subjects out of three, given constraints on class numbers and tutors' timetables. The three subjects were: history, English literature, and psychology. By this term, teaching followed a university style approach of lecture, tutorial and essay;
- the students had to write two major essays and take an end-of-year examination. Each of these counted for 50% of the student's final grade.

The Blue and Green courses were superficially more like 'real' university than the courses described in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, their aims were the same as those of other SWAP courses, that is to prepare the students for higher education. We now look at how they succeeded.

The students' responses

For the Blue students, the panorama of academic subjects offered in the first term was an attractive 'taster', not a fragmentation of learning. The second term, where they specialised in two subjects, was the 'content' term, for them. The students saw the content as an introduction to, or even an experiment with a topic area. They were conscious of learning skills and processes, and were highly critical when they perceived this learning as being interrupted, as happened with the sudden transition from a demanding essay schedule in the first term to a leisurely production of two essays — albeit major ones — in the second block:

> *I felt I had lost direction, there wasn't the same pressure at all and it was hard for me to concentrate with such a long deadline.*

Questions of content versus process did not worry these students, for whom process was self-evidently the more important part of the Access course. From their viewpoint, the continuing rehearsal of processes was a valuable one. On looking back from HE, however, they realised that the realities of workload and pace of work had not been learned by them. These part-time students had in many cases put a full-time level of work into the Access course. Those who could afford the time devoted the suggested 20 hours of private study to intensive work on their two chosen topics. They set up patterns for themselves which they could not possibly repeat in the first year of HE with three subjects, one (or even two) of which was completely new to them. During the first HE year, over half of the students began to feel that their personal standards were slipping. There were mixed responses to this. Some people rethought their schedules and accepted lower marks; others tried hard to be perfect:

There was one [Access student], I found her in the Ladies crying her heart out because she got 60% instead of 70% or whatever she expected. It's crazy, she's passed ... It's just mad to drive yourself like that...

The Access course had taught some of the Blue students, but not all, to do too much or to expect too much of themselves.

During their course, the Green students too had felt reassured that content reflected the Green university first year. For example, the reading list given out for English had been designed by a member of staff at the university, who had also suggested the texts used in later blocks of work, as modules were left behind. They too felt that rehearsal of processes like extracting information, writing essays and taking notes were a vital part of future success in HE. Once in HE, there were content areas new to them to which they could apply these familiar processes:

Access can't prepare you for everything you might take at university. Sometimes you don't know what a subject might be like and you find you don't like it, so maybe you don't do so well, but you can make a change.

The tutors [in a particular subject area] think they're starting at a low level, but their idea of nothing, no background, is really [assuming] some knowledge. The kids from school don't have that, but I do, I know what they're talking about and how to get it down. Access gave me a flying start.

These positive reactions were balanced by the same problems as reported by the Blue students and indeed other Access students; the workload and the pace of work were so much more intensive:

Because I managed well on Access, I thought it would just be 9 to 5, I could cope with it easily, but it's not like that at all. The timing of the classes, and getting hold of books — it's all much more difficult. And the extra travelling hasn't helped either.

Although both Blue and Green students felt unprepared for the workload, they did feel prepared for the kind of work expected of them. They were divided on whether Access students could be prepared honestly for the university workload without frightening them off.

In comparison to students on the other Access courses, a higher proportion of the Blue/Green students successfully progressed from Access into HE. At the end of first year in HE, a higher proportion of Blue/Green students successfully passed into second year. Their confidence had been dented by the workload problem, but by the end of the year, only three out of the 26 students failed an exam. In each case, a single paper was failed and the failure was by a minimal number of points. Indeed, eight of the 26 gained exemptions based on the quality of the year's work. This may reflect a specific initial selection of students but it may also reflect a very major difference in the preparation offered on the Blue/Green courses. Unlike students on the other Access courses, these students were

assessed by examinations. On entering university they had had an inoculation against the major problem of first year, the end-of-year examination.

Assessment

The Green students started off their Access year with criterion-referenced assessment, part of the modular approach. This was seen positively as a confidence builder at first, but then viewed critically as not helpful in identifying personal strengths and weaknesses. The Green students had similar complaints to those reported in Chapter 2, but in their case the course co-ordinator was able to respond by changing the assessment pattern. The change to an essay plus examination assessment was welcomed by all the students, even one who was an exam-phobic:

> *Nobody likes exams — and maybe they're not the best way to show what you have learned — but it's how the university works. It's better to get used to them now than wait. I feel that with the support of the group, my friends on the course, and from [the tutor] this is the best time for me to get over this fear.*

Both essay and examination were graded, which raises the question of what happened to students with poor grades, when the Access course apparently carried the guarantee of a place (or the offer of a place) in HE. We shall return to this question.

The Blue students were exposed to norm-referenced assessment from the start. In their first term they had a conveyor belt system of short essays, graded on a one to five scale. These rather more confident people wanted more information than a simple grading could convey, even if that grading was a high one:

> *Every essay I turned in, it was the same grade, it was always an A, a one. It worried me, I didn't think I could be that good, so I deliberately handed in one that I hadn't done too much work on — and I still got a one!*

> *It was a good mark, but I didn't know wl so I asked [the tutor]. All he could say was 'it was a good essay' so I'm afraid I said 'well, that's not enough information to help me'.*

Both these students passed easily into second year, and in fact the first speaker won the class prize. However, the evidence of some students getting top grades for everything discouraged those who were doing less well. They suspected that grading standards varied and worried about their grade level rather than their learning skills.

The Blue and Green students had a different assessment preparation in the first block of Access, but both groups ended up with a final assessment consisting of two major essays plus an examination on two topics. This assessment was approved of, as we have already reported, but did raise problems. For example, one student who performed badly was counselled into a non-university course. She then found this 'not challenging enough' and has only now, after a year she

sees as wasted, found the place in HE that she wanted. If Access is to build confidence, then part of that confidence building could justifiably be seen as practising examination techniques in a mock exam if not a real one. On the other hand, if Access does have 'university style' assessment and if this is graded, then the temptation will be to put the grades to use.

There are therefore two major questions which arise from the specific assessment practices favoured by the Blue/Green co-ordinators. Firstly, does early inoculation against HE assessment help the students? For the Blue/Green groups, experience of assessment was viewed very positively and most were eventually successful in their end-of-year exams. Secondly, would graded Access assessment lead to selection of students and a transformation of the Access qualification in terms of entry requirements for HE? Grades allowed the Blue/Green tutors to encourage students to lower (or raise) their sights, but similar adjustments were made on other Access courses too, on the basis of the student's work.

If grades led to disinterested advice, and if the eventual choice were up to the student, then grades might be useful. However, if grades were to be seized on by HE as a means of choosing the 'best' students, then the whole idea of Access *as guaranteeing an offer of entry to HE* would be undercut. It would be disingenuous to pretend that Access students are never the objects of a selection process, even without examinations and grades. In at least one HE institution, intending Access entrants were given a reference, a letter from the college which had prepared them. This reference gave the HE institution reassurance (or not) on issues such as motivation or perceived student ability:

> *...but it only works because we know and trust them [at the FE college]. It would be a different thing if we had applications from all over the place.*

The portability or transferability of an Access credit may be an issue tied up with assessment. We shall return to the view from higher education in Chapter 5. For the moment we stay with the Blue/Green students and in this final section look at teaching methods.

■ Teaching methods

As with the main Access cohort, the qualities of tutors were as important to the Blue/Green students as the teaching approaches:

> *It was really A who led me to choose [subject taken in first year]. She was so enthusiastic, she really sold me on it. And then, she'd been a mature student herself, she knew what it was we worried about.*

It was the tutors who validated the student in his/her role as a university entrant, who organised the groups as a support network and who supported the students in the idea that university was for them. On the Green course, these tutors were the FE staff. On the Blue course, tutors were from FE or HE, and in addition there were what could be called the guest lecturers who gave an introduction to their field in the first block. These people also tended to be enthusiasts; in the first place,

they were apparently volunteers, and in the second place they were not averse to scouting out potential stars in this 'second chance' group of intending students.

On both courses, the quality of the lecturing and the personal qualities of the staff were highly praised. The students certainly felt well-prepared for note taking, for extracting information and for working in tutorials. Testing their ideas on the group, talking and listening, then building towards a reasoned conclusion were seen as the positive benefits of tutorials for both groups. In fact, the Blue/Green students were experiencing an ideal or dream university on their Access course, which many took to be reality. The jarring dissonance between this ideal and day-to-day university life came as a shock for at least half the group:

> *The trouble was, Access was too good!*

The dissonance arose out of two different aspects of university life. Firstly, the lecturers and tutors in everyday HE varied tremendously in their abilities and enthusiasm. The students had developed an ideal of the university tutor, and acknowledged in advance that busy lecturers would probably fall short of this. In the larger of the two universities, the depth of the fall was rather more than they expected. Similarly, the students were prepared in the abstract for mass lectures, they knew that they would be only one of many first years. They were not prepared for the indifference of their fellow students towards learning:

> *They're like badly-behaved school kids, they chatter and pass notes, they don't pay attention.*

In the tutorial context, things were just as bad:

> *I overheard two of them at the door, one said to the other 'what's this tutorial supposed to be about?' I think the university puts one of us [mature students] in each tutorial group because we're the only ones who can be relied on to do the work.*

> *They're not like us, they don't make any effort to help or support each other. I really miss the atmosphere in our [Access] tutorials. Some of them only started speaking to me once they saw that I was getting good results, before that they'd just walk by and ignore you. I don't want to be best friends, it's just common politeness that they don't seem to have.*

These speakers were at the extremes of disenchantment. Others were more level-headed or perhaps more fortunate in who they met:

> *It's a good tutorial group — it's particularly good being my age, because I can talk to the boys as well as the girls, without giving out the wrong signals. At least I hope so! The danger is, as the tutor said, I have to guard against being Mum to them.*

Age was only one of the filters through which these former Access students

viewed teaching in HE but it was a powerful one. The small group of seven students under 30 seemed to integrate readily into mainstream student life. The older students didn't or couldn't find validation of themselves from their younger co-students in the much larger Blue university, where they were also less likely to be treated by staff as something special. The Green university had a higher intake of mature students, and the Access group there seemed to have settled much more happily into university life.

For some students, the fact that HE staff treated them as just another student was a rejection. Perhaps the students' confidence was still fragile, and needed boosting. When HE staff did not provide this, students might have taken a jaundiced view of teaching methods. On the other hand, maybe some of the teaching **was** poor, slip-shod or ill-prepared and these Access students were willing to say so. Their preparation had given them a taste of what university education could be like; when the reality fell short their criticisms may have been justified.

Summary

This rather downbeat view of teaching in HE came in the main from the Blue group, and should not in any case obscure the reality that all the students had done well during the year and none had dropped out. Perhaps if they had been less well prepared for assessment the picture would have been gloomier, but, as it was, the Blue/Green group could be justifiably proud of their high standard of work. They had earned their exemptions and their examination passes. The Blue/Green courses were a different kind of Access, and one which had proved successful in several ways:

- confidence had been built up (or reinforced, perhaps) for this better qualified and more secure group
- the processes of learning and study were recognised by the group, who could marshal the appropriate skills for HE work
- the group had come to terms with HE assessment practice and felt equipped to cope with graded essays and with examinations.

On the more negative side, the reality of HE had turned out to be less attractive than at least one of the groups anticipated, and both groups had faced workload problems. This had not prevented successful progression into second year. In comparison with students from other Access courses, these students were more likely to progress into HE and to stay there. We cannot judge whether this was because of better preparation or because of more stringent initial selection of students, or both.

4 Progression and support, gains and problems

It's always there if you need it.

Previous chapters have looked at different ways in which adult students were prepared on Access courses for HE. One aspect of this preparation was the guidance given to the students. It has been suggested that both staff empathy and good guidance are crucial to the progress of adult students (MacRae, 1989). Staff empathy has already been discussed, in terms of the qualities of tutors; now we turn to the question of guidance.

Over the last ten years there has been an expansion of continuing education both in relation to numbers of adults reached and to the diversity of provision for these adults. To meet this, there has been a growth in educational guidance for adults (Bridge and Salt, 1993; Lowden and Powney, 1993). For adult students particularly, the idea has been raised that educational guidance should move away from the support of individuals towards a more radical, collective approach (Rivis, 1988). One aspect of this might be the advocacy of change in FE or in HE, for example, a more proactive rather than reactive stance from adult educational guidance (Payne, 1985). These views reflect debate over the nature of higher education, an issue which we consider in the next chapter. They also seem to reflect a definition of guidance as on the student's side against what may be wrong in FE or HE for the adult entrant. Yet we might speculate that guidance in the Access context at least has also a rather different aim. Britain does not have a system of open access to higher education. Universities are to be penalised if students drop out; it is important to them therefore to encourage the entry of students with staying power. This would normally be done by selecting the academic élite from the schools, but the entry of mature students brings other factors into play. For Access students, one of these factors is the non-conventional, even non-élitist academic grounding given to them. From the perspective of HE, an important role for any guidance delivered would therefore be in helping select students with good staying power at the pre-Access stage.

In relation to our sample of Access students, we can explore the role of guidance and support in relation to their progression into Access, through Access and into HE. At the pre-entry stage, many applicants were interviewed and asked to write a short piece about themselves. These interviews gave the intending students a chance to find out more about Access, and helped the course co-ordinators to select entrants. During the Access year, guidance was often informal from tutor to student on an *ad hoc* basis, although towards the end of the year it became important to direct the students into a course which would be appropriate. Once in HE guidance might be needed again, to keep the students on course academically or to help with financial or personal problems. This

chapter looks at what kind of guidance students were given and whether it helped them, before turning to their academic progress and the gains they reported.

The entry point

The pre-Access interview gave the co-ordinators the opportunity to select students and to offer initial guidance. The interviewers were usually from the FE institution staff, and were furnished with SWAP guidelines on target students; that is, entrants were actively sought from groups under-represented in HE. All the colleges interviewed entrants quite rigourously. Many of the student sample remarked on the emphasis given to the importance of self-motivation in the pre-entry interview and the insistence on spelling out possible problems for adult students. The interviewers tried to look ahead beyond the Access year to explain what entry to HE might involve:

> *I probe quite a bit, without being too nosey, about support from family, boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse. We've found over the five years that this is a major thing. It's very sad — we've lost some very good students this way ... but husbands or boyfriends or live-ins become a bit jealous. 'Who do you think you are?' kind of thing 'going to be a graduate!' Or unwillingness of the male member of the family or boyfriend or whatever to accept the fact that it's a five year course in front.*

Their concern was not just with preventing drop-out from Access. It was also about the long-term progression of the students. Nevertheless, for one or two colleges which were under subscribed, the lure of filling places may have affected disinterested advice:

> *I just 'phoned up at the last minute, I saw it in the paper, and they said 'come along'.*

Similarly, one college faced with applicants over-qualified according to SWAP criteria may have found it difficult to refuse potential successes in favour of the unqualified dark horse. For this college, HE representatives were closely involved in the Access course and in student selection. Access itself had to be 'sold' to senior staff at the receiving university. Because this Access course was tied very firmly to one specific university, unlike most of the other Access courses, this may have been an instance where guidance was tempered with an eye to future drop out rates from HE.

Despite this initial selection process aimed at assessing student motivation, we found half a dozen students who said at their first interview with us that they did not intend to go on to HE, or at least, not immediately. These students may have been less blunt with the Access interviewers — and in fact may have been hedging their bets with us, in case they failed. Four did go into HE at the end of the day. Overall, about 10% of those contacted during Access eventually decided not to go on at the end of the year. There were a variety of reasons for this; it was not a response to perceived academic failure. Reasons ranged from the simplest — a move abroad — to a complicated mixture of financial and personal. In a broader survey of Access, the impact of combined factors behind student withdrawal is

discussed (Munn *et al*, 1993), and this did seem to apply to this sample. Several reasons usually lay behind the decision not to progress, for the individual student.

Could a better pre-entry guidance have avoided this state of affairs? It is doubtful, considering that, in the first place, the students' circumstances could and did change unexpectedly during the year, with family illness, for example. In the second place, the whole Access group contained a proportion of people who looked on Access as a trial run of their capacities — intellectual, financial or personal. This was alluded to by several students. As one student who did go on to university put it:

> *For me the Access course was really to see if I could manage it, on my own, with two small children. If I could do it for a year, then I'll go on.*

After this trial run, some may have decided that they could not manage after all. This does represent wasted places, but it would be counter to the whole spirit of Access if potential students were refused on the grounds of their financial status, for example. The assumption has to be made by those providing pre-entry guidance that applicants are serious about entering HE, even though their circumstances may look unfavourable.

In Chapter 3 we looked at the implications of a guaranteed offer of a place in HE in relation to the grading of students' work on two rather different Access courses. There we argued that if grades are used to help guide the students, they *might* prove more useful than more covert means of direction such as private letters exchanged between friendly FE institutions and HE institutions. On the other hand, if grades are used to deny the Access students admission to a course, then this seems counter to the role of Access as innovatory in mass education. The attraction of Access for the majority of students is that, for the price of one year's work, entry to HE appears to be guaranteed. In fact, the student is guaranteed the offer of a place somewhere in the system, not necessarily the place he or she wants. Matching students to places, and holding quotas of these places is a difficult exercise and one open to criticism if an HE institution is being pressed by other qualified applicants. As one senior staff member at an old-established university put it:

> *The guaranteed place system for SWAP students is an expression of our feeling of social responsibility at X university.*

To sustain this positive feeling towards SWAP, the Access places have to be filled, and filled with students who stay the course. This means that Access cannot afford wasted places in HE, but equally cannot afford to take in too many students and thus either have competition for places or fail to meet the initial guarantee of an offer of a place in HE.

For a few students in remote parts of Scotland, taking an Access course did not lead into HE and perhaps could not, given their geographical isolation from HE institutions. They may have hoped that Access would be credit for some future course, or that Access would act as an introduction to studying prior to taking an OU course or be a path to an HND/HNC at a local college, or simply improve their employment prospects. These students may not have displaced more committed

potential HE entrants, but their presence on Access raises questions of the transferability of Access qualifications and the shelf life of Access qualifications. We discuss this again in the next chapter.

The transition from Access

The over-arching aim of the SWAP programme is not participation in Access courses but participation as a stepping stone to higher education. Figures from the Scottish Office Education Department indicate that on average over the past two years, over two-thirds of those who started on Access both completed the course and intended to go on into HE (Munn *et al*, 1993). About 3% of those who intended to progress to HE changed their minds (SOED, 1992b). Looking at our own sample, 85% of the science students made it into the start of HE, and 92% of the arts/social science students. Whether this reflects the ambitions and differing circumstances of the two sub-samples, we cannot say. We might speculate that it reflects the closer ties between Access and the arts/social science group. For a large sub-set of the latter students, the very visible ties between Access and a specific university (see Chapter 3) may have led to greater confidence in the accuracy of information or advice given as guidance. The guidance itself may have proved inaccurate or inadequate, but at the transition stage the students felt particularly well-informed as well as specifically well-prepared.

In either case, science or non-science, the percentage which proved confident enough or well-enough situated to progress into HE needed guidance on appropriate future courses at least, if not further counselling on the realities of three or four years in HE. The guidance offered to the students during Access had largely been informal and voluntary; most of the tutors and co-ordinators on Access had no training in relation to guidance. In addition to *ad hoc* discussion and informal advice, some colleges offered more structured guidance in the form of brief progress interviews or a guidance module. The completion of a guidance module might be seen as a shift from external advice giving to a more personally creative guidance. In a brief historical overview, Hopson (1985) suggests that there has been a change in the direction of guidance for adults from advice to the promotion of self-help. However, the guidance offered by the tutors and co-ordinators tended to be stronger on advice than on promoting self-help. For example, a student deemed by the course tutors to be overly ambitious and academically less capable was steered away from a degree course at a specific university into an HND course at the college. This student subsequently found the work 'not challenging enough' and after a year has now gained a place on a degree course through her own efforts, at a different university. The student may or may not succeed, but we might speculate whether the advice given was overly paternalistic towards someone seen as a non-traditional entrant to higher education. Similarly, the concern displayed by tutors for the future welfare of their Access students is laudable:

> *Even now that I'm finished, the last thing every one of them [the staff] said was 'If you've got any problems, come back. Feel free to come back', which is above and beyond the call of duty. Nowadays you just don't meet that attitude very often. I quite like them.*

It also displays uncertainty over the students' capacities for self-help, perhaps.

Advice about choice of course, choice of level of study and choice of institution was sought by the students, but a substantial sub-group had their own agenda. These students had their sights set on university, and for two colleges, a specific university, so much so that one person from the latter sub-group who (successfully) applied to a different institution was regarded as rather odd. Other students had their sights set on particular courses or subjects. Advice from course tutors may have fallen on deaf ears, even if it was sought by the students. Seeking advice and talking about HE expectations in terms of work may have served to reassure the students and allow them to rehearse their worries as much as to offer solid ideas about directions after Access. All credible sources of information form part of the advice network; former students, for example:

> *... it was X for me [newer university] because it's more practical. Y [older university] is very theoretical. And we got a lot of negative feedback from Y about students having trouble with the maths and things and it being such a big place and it seemed to be just sink or swim. And I eventually thought I'd be fooling myself to go there because Y only takes the best, they take the top 8% like, everybody with 'A's if they could get the choice.*

It seemed to us that the students worried more about and looked for advice on the work level in HE and their own intellectual capacities than about practicalities like finance. That is not to say that practical problems did not concern them. They did talk about finance, about relationships and responsibilities. It was rather that these problems or potential problems were temporarily pushed under the surface on the grounds that the Access year had been manageable therefore HE would be manageable. A wider survey of former Access students now in HE (Munn *et al* , 1993) indicated that, on looking back to Access, former students regretted the lack of proactive financial advice and advice about handling a heavy workload. We turn now to our sample and how they felt about the advice given at the transition stage, on looking back from the end of their first year in HE.

■ Staying the course: the first year

If one role of pre-entry guidance is to select students with staying power once in HE, then the guidance offered to our sample generally succeeded. About six in eight of the students were still on track at the end of first year. Of the remainder, about one out of eight had withdrawn, either during the year (to take jobs) or after receiving their first year results. The other one in eight had made changes in their level of study (from degree to HND) or intended to make a subject change of some sort. Better guidance, in the form of fuller information about workloads or class timetabling, for example, might have avoided these changes or departures from HE. On the other hand, the students are adults, and were in many cases determined on a particular course of study. The confidence inst[illegible]d by Access was very important, and is a salient feature of adult education (Swift, 1989). However, this confidence may have been over-confidence in some cases. We have alluded to one case where an Access tutor gave strongly directive guidance to a student perceived as less capable, but we might question whether guidance should be as directive as in that instance.

Although only a small proportion of the group dropped out or had to change course a little, almost two-thirds of the students were having problems or had faced problems during the year. In the main, these problems were financial, although of

different kinds. For some of the students the problem was coping as a single parent on a small grant. In some cases this led to taking part-time work, which in turn led to limited time for study. In other cases, a husband or partner had lost his job, leaving the student in a moral dilemma as to whether or not to continue the course and at the same time struggling to cope with a reduced income. The students with families also had organisational problems at the least, if not relationship problems. In a few cases, initially supportive families had become less understanding, not an unexpected situation with mature students (Lewis; 1988). Personal problems of illness or family illness also occurred and again affected study and the completion of assignments set. Overall, science students (who had identified a knowledge gap at Access level) were more likely to be having academic problems. It is noteworthy, however, that our science sample contained many young men with no dependent children and so it is perhaps not surprising that they did not report family problems. The social science/arts students had problems with the pace and volume of work rather than the actual content. For advice and help with problems, these adult students were more likely to turn to friends on the course rather than to HE staff. Even academic problems were discussed with friends rather than tutors. Academic staff tended to be consulted when a combination of problems delayed an assignment, for example, or if illness — an admissible problem — was involved. There were one or two cases of students who approached their director of studies seeking advice about future direction in year two, in view of their academic performance or dislike of a subject in year one. In very large departments this may have been less likely:

> *Do you know that they have a notice that says 'No first year students beyond this point'? What do they expect us to do in second year, say 'Oh yes, please, I'd love to do honours with you'.*

In smaller departments there was possibly a better chance of building up a rapport:

> *Dr X [head of department] 'phoned me himself about the results, because he knew how worried I was, and he was very reassuring. Also Y, the tutor for [subject], he's a post-graduate, he sat down with me and explained why I shouldn't worry about the exams and told me about his own experiences.*

The students did not expect week-to-week guidance from higher education; they did not expect the informal staff-student opportunities for discussion available on Access. They knew that 'it was there if you needed it' and some did turn to the university counselling service with a personal problem. The students did not complain that any guidance they solicited was inefficient or unhelpful, but were appreciative of the help given. Nevertheless, the implication from what they said was that the students decided when help was needed, not the staff. This could well mean that students struggled on with academic problems instead of seeking help at an earlier and possibly more remediable stage of the problem. As we point out in Chapter 5, however, some HE providers had developed proactive systems to identify students' academic problems. This was especially the case in maths

and science courses. On the other hand, a more positive view of the data would be that the students were not passive recipients of help deemed necessary by someone else, but active instigators of the assistance on offer. We might query whether they knew when they should seek advice, but we must recognise that the students themselves had the right to choose.

At the end of first year was an obvious time for students to look for advice. They had to decide which subjects to take in the coming year and at which level, in some cases. Their decisions seemed to be made on the basis of their results, of what they enjoyed and in some cases on the grounds of a future career plan. However, not all of the students defined future success as getting a job, as we now report.

Looking ahead

We reported that about six in eight students succeeded in their chosen course. In fact, some people succeeded beyond expectations, winning the class prize or coming within top marks or gaining triple exemptions from first year exams. Even at this early stage, some of the Access students had been 'head-hunted' for particular honours degrees. In addition to these people still on the original track, another one out of eight remained in the system but had detoured onto a different course. All of these students were moving on to second year and, they hoped, eventual success in their aims. Of course, as Calder (1993) points out in a very perceptive paper, success for adult learners can mean a variety of things. In the Access context, the success of SWAP itself would be an increase in numbers of non-traditional students in HE, and the successful completion of courses by these students. But we could legitimately ask, what happens next? Regardless of any dramatic life changes of the kind realised so convincingly by Willy Russell in *Educating Rita*, the Access students might expect some future results from their efforts. The science students, whose courses of study offered a fairly specific qualification, looked back from HE to suggest careers information would be useful both on Access in HE. Almost all of these students had a scientific or technical or engineering career in mind. Their choices of specific subjects or courses had not perhaps been as informed as they would have liked. Provision of disinterested and reliable careers advice would have helped them make decisions, and saved some at least from taking a wrong turning.

The arts/social science students were a little older overall, and rather more sceptical of their chances in the job market:

> *By the time I've finished I'll be 50 — who'll employ a little old wifie like me!*

> *I'm doing this for myself. I can't afford to set my heart on a job, not at my age [46]. If one turns up, great, but this is for my personal satisfaction.*

Although in theory the sub-group of arts students were taking the widest and most general of the degree courses, they did not see this as fitting them for a range of different kinds of work. Very few had definite career plans, and where they did the plans seemed to arise out of work they had already done at a less skilled, lower level. They did not, on looking back report a gap in careers advice. They were

possibly going to consult careers advisers in Higher education. Like their science and social science peers, fuller and more accurate information about courses would have been appreciated by this group while still on Access, but from the perspective of workloads and timetabling rather than future career direction. Public statements acknowledge the need for an advisory service geared to the needs of non-traditional students (CNAA/UDACE, 1991), but who defines these needs? The vagueness of the arts students may have been a protective device against ill-wishing an ambitious future. Certainly, some of the students had sought academic advice which could conceivably have helped in future career choice (for example someone who had transferred to a law degree) but this seemed to be rare. The future was being left to take care of itself.

If our students had been given the kind of guidance they wanted (or thought they wanted) their academic path might have been smoother. Students lost at the transition stage or at the end of first year might have stayed the course. Is this the only role for guidance offered to adults, to see them safely through their chosen educational course? Perhaps it is; after all, the students are adults, not children. A great deal of the writing about adult learners is about overcoming barriers to get in and stay within the system (see Bridge and Salt, *op cit*). Not much is written about what happens when these adults emerge from their educational experience.

Personal gains: the social network

Throughout the Access course, students spoke of the close-knit supportive atmosphere:

> *I'll need to get adjusted to the university way of life — it's like a family cocoon here, the 17 of us. We all seem to get on so well.*

This very positive environment was often contrasted unfavourably with what was characterised in anticipation and in the reality as the more individualistic, competitive and anonymous environment of higher education. As we have noted, this impeded the opportunity for informal guidance, in the students' view. However, this impersonality also fostered the continuance of Access friendships. These friendships were as much a source of help and of guidance as anything offered formally or informally by HE staff. For example, one student having doubts about the course of study chosen was helped by such a friend:

> *I've been very lucky really that M has helped me. I was struggling with [the subject] and she spent a lot of time explaining and making it clear. She's been a good friend to me.*

This specific student was reluctant to approach HE staff for help, even though she acknowledged their approachability. Other adult students may have felt this reluctance, especially older students:

> *You look at the lecturers and they're about your age. You feel guilty somehow that you're not at their level, you don't know what they know.*

A network of friends in effect served two purposes for the students. Firstly, they could test ideas, discuss problems and seek advice from peers they felt to be sympathetic and knowledgeable. Secondly, making new friends on Access and participating in a new social life exercised skills which for some students (but not all) were dormant or untested. In learning how to be a student and in defining their role the students were socialised into an environment new to them. Taking the initiative and exercising social skills may have allowed them some degree of objectivisation of the process of transformation into a 'real' student. These adult entrants had discarded the idea that education is for other people (see McGivney, 1990). They were now moving into a stage where they had to decide whether or not to become like the kind of people who **did** enter HE. The support of like minded friends with similar histories of Access helped them to decide, at least for the older students. This was easier for students moving *en bloc* from an Access course to a particular university. Where Access students dispersed over a range of HE institutions the presence of other adult students in these institutions and the existence of adult self-help groups tended to be viewed positively. We should not forget that about half of these mature students were under thirty. For these latter students, the exercise of social skills and the confidence gained on Access may have given them the confidence to seek new reference groups, new models of being a student:

> *It's just great, the social life is great and I've made lots of new friends and it's broadened my ideas a lot.*

In either case, whether younger or older, the 74 students who completed the first year of HE were highly aware that Access had given them an insight into their own worth as well as valuable practice in social skills. These personal gains had helped the students to guide themselves through their first year of higher education and to make choices for second year.

Summary

This chapter has focused on the advice and guidance offered to the students at three stages: prior to Access, within Access and within Higher education. We have discussed the role of guidance services in providing disinterested information in a context where getting the 'right' student and keeping this student within the HE system is important. We have also touched on the problem of non-directive guidance and the importance of self-help and self-confidence in allowing the student to define his or her own path. The main points emerging from the experiences of our sample of adult students were:

- the pre-entry selection of students did try to balance SWAP criteria against potential academic success; the key factor in choosing entrants was their motivation. Good motivation was seen as keeping students in the system;
- on Access, the students were less sure of their intention to go on into HE, either through modest caution or realistic assessment of their (different) personal situations. Access was a trial run in coping as much as an introduction to study;

- two-thirds of the science sample went on into HE, and over four-fifths of the arts/social science students. The arts/social science students included a large sub-group who could be offered precise information about the one specific university they hoped to attend;
- most of the students stayed on course in HE and passed successfully into second year, although about two-thirds had problems either academic, financial or personal;
- many students in HE had to look for help under their own initiative; this may have meant that some people waited until it was too late. Some HE institutions operated 'early warning' systems. About one in eight students withdrew at the end of first year. The reason was usually academic failure, sometimes compounded with another problem;
- in looking ahead, the science students had particular ideas or career directions, and would have liked more advice and guidance on these plans. The arts/social science students were more uncertain; they may have been in need of advice although apparently unaware of their need;
- informal advice and help from friends was a major support and gain from Access, which spilled over into Higher education. Either friendship networks were retained, or social skills polished on Access were used to create new networks.

5 Views from higher education staff

It's a very particular route into HE...it's the tip of the [demand] iceberg.

This chapter presents the views of a small number of higher education staff about the effectiveness of Access courses in preparing students for higher education. In all 32 staff were interviewed in 13 higher education institutions. They were drawn from science, engineering, social science and arts faculties and chosen because they had either had close involvement with SWAP through, for example, curriculum committees or had direct experience of teaching SWAP students. In detail, the sample consisted of 13 SWAP co-ordinators, ten science and nine social science staff. Interviews were semi-structured, tape-recorded and transcribed. They covered four broad areas:

- the effectiveness of SWAP courses as preparation for HE in terms of content, teaching methods, assessment and study skills
- the nature and extent of any difficulties experienced by SWAP students in higher education
- institutional, faculty or course response to SWAP students
- the future of Access programmes.

The sample was small and unrepresentative, yet in some areas patterns of response emerged across different faculties and institutions which broadly confirm the findings of other researchers on, for example, HE staff's enjoyment of teaching mature students. In other areas, such as the kind of problems and difficulties students experienced, there was no clear pattern. The nature of the sample means that we are able to highlight and offer a commentary on the areas mentioned above. Our findings are illustrative rather than generalisable.

SWAP as preparation for higher education

As might be expected of any innovation, there was praise and criticism. SWAP was not perfect but neither was it an unmitigated disaster. It was generally regarded as a worthwhile attempt to encourage wider participation in HE but there was scope for improvement in the content and design of Access courses.

Turning first to the positive features of SWAP, staff identified these as being:

- the broad preparation offered by Access courses which enabled students to sample different subjects and kept degree subject choices flexible
- the opportunities for students to progress 'sideways' to programmes in further education as well as upwards to advanced level courses. There were many possible routes from Access to other programmes of study
- the provision of a national Access programme encouraging consistency among FE colleges in provision so that an Access qualification was 'portable', and not linked only to one higher education institution

- curriculum review procedures which enabled course content to be regularly amended and updated.

As we shall see below, there was some criticism of the content and level of some Access modules but those staff involved in SWAP curriculum committees believed these committees were a valuable mechanism for raising such concerns and for encouraging development. In the following extract from an interview, a lecturer involved in redesigning some modules talks about course content 'getting better':

> *The problem has been that the courses were originally very much off-the-shelf, as it were, ...[modules] were not designed as preparation for higher education and they included very little which was specifically prepared in collaboration with HE. ...that's changing. ...It's getting better.*

Certain Science/Technology and Social Science Access modules had been rewritten by members of one consortium (FE and HE members) in collaboration with SCOTVEC and these were seen as a great improvement on earlier versions. However, there were a number of concerns about the appropriateness of modules as preparation for HE.

Concerns about modules

There were three main concerns about modules, the fragmentary nature of learning they were believed to encourage, their perceived superficiality and their coherence and progression.

Staff in both the sciences and social sciences expressed a concern that modules were not sufficiently linked to each other and so students doing 22/23 modules for their Access programme were covering 'a little bit of this and a little bit of that' with little or no attempt to encourage an overview of a particular subject or integration of different aspects of the same subject. This was undesirable as preparation for degree level work where the emphasis was on seeing connections between topics and developing conceptual frameworks. This view, of course, is in direct contradiction to the praise for Access programmes in allowing students to sample a variety of subjects and perhaps reflects some of the difficulties HE staff themselves are experiencing as their degree courses 'go modular'. As the following lecturer makes clear, courses needed to be designed which featured integrated, or clusters of modules:

> *I think that either clusters have to be defined or we have got to accept that SCOTVEC modules do not exist at present to prepare people for HE.*

Although an extreme view, some students also reported similar concerns. Chapter 2 described their views and highlighted students becoming progressively more concerned about the fragmentation of knowledge as they moved from Access to higher education. As one student, who recognised the positive, confidence-building aspects of a modular curriculum stated:

The negative aspect of it is that you compartmentalise things. You put it in your brain and then you put it out of your brain and then you move on to the next thing. You don't bring all your information and your knowledge with you through the course.

It is worth highlighting the concern about fragmentation and compartmentalisation of knowledge because it is not an inevitable characteristic of a modular curriculum. Revision programmes across a series of modules, projects designed to put modules together and combining learning outcomes from two or three modules in designing provision are all strategies designed to counteract fragmentation. These ideas will no doubt be addressed in the future development of SWAP, and tutors encouraged to integrate modules.

A separate, but perhaps related issue was the nature of the knowledge being acquired by students. Covering 22 or 23 modules within a year implied superficiality. Degree courses demanded understanding of theories and a view of knowledge as tentative or contested. Two extracts from lecturers' interviews convey something of the flavour of this concern:

If you are only going to spend a short time with a module, then you are only touching the descriptive elements of a social science subject. If you like, you're getting the facts without getting the inner depth of the topic, the theories and the ideas that lie behind that. So modules, in my opinion, tend to skim the surface far too much.

I sometimes think students doing modules have a false impression that there's a sort of bounded amount of knowledge — "we did six weeks on 'class', now we know about class". Rather than [taking the view that] after six weeks you've got a thousand questions about class.

It is interesting that Access tutors in the social sciences also recognised that students were 'greedy for facts' (Chapter 2) at least during the early stages of their courses and that it was only with hindsight that social science Access students came to recognise the importance of process skills. It is perhaps not surprising that students returning to education with the explicit aim of progressing to degree level study seek the comfort of certainty — factual knowledge that can be reproduced as the 'truth' and which will provide a foundation for further work. Again, however, lack of depth and a concern with content rather than process are not inevitable features of a modular curriculum. Indeed process skills are the focus of the 'Investigations' modules now used in many social science Access courses and, as previously suggested, designing a modular programme to provide depth rather than breadth is possible. Whether it is desirable is another question which is addressed in the final chapter. The opportunities provided by curriculum committees to review the nature of knowledge being acquired by students could be used to review programmes of study. If students' knowledge were generally accepted as being too superficial then learning outcomes could be redesigned to encourage students to become aware of theories and of the tentative and often conflicting theories which exist.

The third area of concern mentioned by higher education staff was that of coherence and progression in modular programmes. The most frequently cited example was mathematics. The following comment is typical:

> *The Access modules in mathematics were essentially requiring students to do more than they required to do in some areas of mathematics in order to survive in first year at university and yet there were very notable gaps. ...There was the amazing situation where one of the maths modules would not have been done in any university department of mathematics until third year.*

The maths modules have now been redesigned but issues of coherence and progression can be difficult to resolve, especially in the social sciences where the existence of knowledge hierarchies might be disputed. Again we point to the opportunities presented by curriculum committees to discuss concerns about coherence and progression. Many staff highlighted the need for regular collaboration between FE and HE to promote high quality programmes. The following view is typical:

> *The key in my view to any success for Access programmes, whether they're run on modules or not, [is] to have a close collaboration between HE and FE and an on-going collaboration, not just when the programme is set up.*

It was hoped that such collaboration would eventually encompass teaching methods as well as curriculum content. For those who were not members of curriculum committees awareness of students' entry qualifications was often sketchy. Even where tutors knew that they were teaching Access students they often knew little or nothing about the course the students had followed. As tutorial numbers rise this is perhaps understandable. As we shall see below, some tutors employed strategies such as essay writing and informal tests to try and determine students' knowledge and skills; others believed that admittance to the university meant that students were capable of getting a degree and that they had to take responsibility for their own learning.

For the moment, our concern is with HE staff's views of a modular curriculum. Many of the HE staff in our sample expressed reservations about modular programmes as effective preparation for degree level work. However, as we have tried to suggest, concerns about fragmentation of knowledge, superficiality of content and about coherence and progression can be overcome through sensitive planning of programmes. Modular programmes need not exhibit these undesirable characteristics. Staff awareness of dangers of fragmentation, superficiality and lack of progression is the first step towards tackling such dangers. Indeed, it is worth speculating whether traditionally qualified entrants to higher education come with significantly different subject knowledge and skills. Research by Entwistle *et al* (1989) for example suggests that students entering electrical engineering degree courses with Highers and 'A' levels experience cognitive difficulties which can lead to a drop out during the first year of courses. The increasing diversity of qualifications with which students now enter higher education may encourage HE staff to look afresh at the assumptions they make about the knowledge base of their students.

Assessment

One way in which SWAP students are notably different from traditional HE entrants is in the experience of assessment their courses provide. Access programmes typically use continuous assessment and there are no end-of-term examinations requiring the traditional extended essay responses. Students in some Access courses can practice examination techniques and sit a mock exam. Higher education courses use a variety of assessment techniques but the vast majority require students to sit an examination before they can progress into second year. The importance of the examination in determining progress varies but examinations there are.

As might be expected, HE staff who used a range of assessment techniques such as project work, multiple choice tests and group work, saw Access students as being well prepared for these kinds of assessments. They believed these techniques encouraged good study habits in students and more thorough learning than the last minute cramming for traditional examinations. Some staff also welcomed the student profile information provided by the Access assessment system, including the number of 'tries' students have had to attain learning outcomes. Those HE staff who relied more heavily on the three hour examination where students were required to write two or three long essays were critical of Access preparation. Their criticisms were not confined to students' lack of practice in this kind of examination. Rather they extended to more general criticism of learning outcomes for some modules which were seen as being too descriptive and lacking intellectual challenge. The following extract sums up this point of view:

> *[the courses] tend to use shorter forms of assessment, closed questionnaires, a short report, a brief examination, whereas the ones we tend to use are methods of assessment which allow, indeed encourage, a student to handle abstract ideas, ...not just to describe activities and processes, but actually to have an ability to criticise these by using authors and texts. I don't see anything — from my knowledge of Access, which encourages this type of critical thinking.*

However, the most fundamental criticism of Access assessment was an ideological one concerning the absence of grades for students' attainments. Modules are criterion-referenced. This means that students are assessed on whether they have attained the learning outcomes specified for each module. That is to say, students either achieve these learning outcomes or not. The focus is on the learning outcomes not on differences among students. Assessment systems which focus on differences among students are norm-referenced. These systems grade students against each other rather than in terms of set criteria. HE staff, for the most part themselves products of norm-referenced assessment systems and accustomed to operating norm-referenced systems within HE, complained about the lack of differentiation among SWAP students. The complaint from one lecturer,

> *because of the modular structure, it's difficult to identify differences between students,*

betrays a lack of understanding of the nature and purpose of criterion-referenced assessment. Higher education has traditionally relied on students' grades as a way of rationing entry. As long as the number of places in HE is restricted, demand is controlled by specifying the grades students have to achieve. The more popular the subject the higher the grades. Thus students need higher grades to enter English and history degree courses, for instance, than electrical engineering or chemistry degree courses. A system organised on the basis of rationing entry has relied on grades as a way of allocating the limited number of places at its disposal. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the two university driven Access courses had introduced grades, although still holding to the SWAP promise of the offer of a guaranteed place.

A higher education system geared to providing wider access, to providing places for all those who can benefit from what higher education has to offer, has no need of grades. Instead, it needs to stipulate what prospective students need to know and be able to do in order to benefit from the courses on offer. In principle, if students meet these criteria of knowledge and skills they can be admitted. This represents such a fundamental shift in the way we have been used to thinking about entry to higher education, that it is hardly surprising to find a fondness for graded results among HE staff. Nevertheless, the ideological chasm between SWAP's endorsement of criterion-referenced assessment for Access courses and HE adherence to grades for most of its student entry is a time bomb ticking away if Access student numbers continue to increase. If criterion-referenced systems are a valid basis for entry for some students why not for all? Conversely if higher education places are at a premium with well-qualified school leavers being denied entry for some courses, how will Access schemes be viewed?

We looked for differences in attitudes towards grading between arts and social science staff on the one hand and science staff on the other. We hypothesised that the former would be more likely to see grades as a general measure of students' ability and favour norm-referencing, since specific subject knowledge in, for example, sociology or economics was not paramount. Science staff, we suspected, might be more interested in students' specific knowledge and skills and so be more sympathetic to criterion-referencing, to the specifics of what students had learned. This proved to be naive; lecturers across departments and faculties were keen on grades.

Study skills

Access courses were seen as providing students with useful study skills. Such skills included using a library, time management and note taking. Indeed, some staff felt that Access students were better prepared in this respect than school leavers and more traditionally qualified adult students. Views differed on the most effective way to teach study skills, and the study skills Access module was criticised by those who knew it as being too elementary. Nevertheless, there was a general recognition that study skills was an important part of the Access curriculum and that they should be supported in higher education. Students' apathy towards learning study skills was reported by some HE staff, echoing the experience of tutors on Access courses. For example, an engineering lecturer in HE reported disappointing feedback on the study skills being taught as part of the first year programme:

The overall feedback has been that the students see it as a waste of time. ... So, we're not going to throw it out ... but try to integrate it more into the course. ...students often don't realise they have study skills problems.

However, an engineering lecturer in another institution saw study skills as being more pertinent to social science and arts courses than to science and engineering:

Most people who advocate [study skills] really came from an arts background. They concentrate on the use of libraries, how to summarise things [etc] whereas in engineering it's largely a matter of doing the problems.

Here, the view seemed to be that as long as students had the knowledge and ability to cope with the intellectual demands of the course, study skills were either unnecessary or irrelevant. To non-engineers this seems, on the face of it, a rather impoverished view of engineering.

Summary of HE staff's views

This account of HE staff's views of Access courses has shown broad support for the idea of SWAP. In particular, the benefits were seen as:

- having one nationally recognised Access programme
- the flexibility and choice offered by the structure of Access programmes
- the opportunities for students to exit 'sideways' to take non-advanced courses and upwards to HND/HNC provision as well as to degree courses
- curriculum review procedures which encouraged close collaboration between further and higher education institutions in providing and developing high quality courses.

Our interpretation of HE staff's views is that they generally see the SWAP strategy as worthwhile and beneficial. The concerns they voiced concentrated on particular aspects of provision and were very similar to those described by Access students both during their Access courses and when they reached higher education. These were:

- a perception of modules as encouraging fragmented learning
- the superficiality of some modules — breadth was being valued over depth
- the lack of coherence and progression provided by modular programmes
- the lack of challenge presented by some learning outcomes
- students' lack of experience of formal examinations
- the reliance on criterion-referenced approaches to assessment.

We have suggested that concerns over the structure of Access courses can be dealt with and indeed, during the course of this research Access modules have been amended. This, together with a greater emphasis on projects or investigations which promoted revision and integrated work, would allay many of the worries expressed by HE staff. In our view the most serious issue is the tension between criterion-referenced and norm-referenced approaches to assessment because they represent different ideological perspectives and are unlikely to be easily reconciled. (See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion).

Higher education's response to Access students

So far the focus of this chapter has been HE staff's perceptions of the effectiveness of Access courses in preparing students for entry to higher education. We now turn to perceptions of the kind of environment higher education institutions provide for former Access students. In Chapter 4 the support offered was discussed in more detail from the students' viewpoint.

One purpose of SWAP was to act as a catalyst on higher education institutions, encouraging them to review their teaching methods and generally to be more accessible and welcoming to adult students. As Gallacher (1993) reports:

> One of the stated aims of SWAP had been to bring about change in higher education, to create an environment which would encourage wider participation, particularly from mature students. So far, it would appear that its impact in this respect has been relatively limited. There has been a relatively high level of support for SWAP at institutional level ... However, in terms of the day-to-day working of the institutions the impact has been more limited.

As Access students make up only a very small proportion of the student body it is not entirely surprising that their presence in HE has had little effect to date. Statistics on the numbers of former Access students now in Scotland's higher education institutions are not easily available. SOED (1993c) report that for the year 1989-90, 525 students progressed to higher education and that in 1990-91 over 700 students did so. Using figures reported by the Scottish Universities Council on Entrance we can see from Table 5.1 that about half of these students progressed to one of the eight universities in existence at that time. It should be borne in mind, however, that these figures include students from all Access courses. SWAP students nevertheless, dominate this category.

Table 5.1: Entrants with UK qualifications other than SCE/GCE in Autumn 1990 and Autumn 1991

Qualifications	Entrants 1991	*1990*
SCOTVEC National Certificate Modules	77	*58*
SCOTVEC Higher National Certificate/Diploma Units	372	*309*
BTEC National Certificate/Diploma	68	*57*
BTEC Higher National Certificate/Diploma	70	*129*
Scottish Access Courses	364	*260*
Other UK Access Courses	51	*31*
Partially completed UK degrees (including OU credits)	169	*182*
Other UK qualifications	80	*72*
No formal qualifications	93	*44*
Total	1,344	*1,142*
Percentage of all UK-domiciled entrants	10.0%	*9.1%*

Table 5.1 is interesting in that it shows numbers of non-traditional entrants to the eight universities are rising. One in ten entrants to full-time courses in autumn 1991 were categorised as holding qualifications other than SCE or GCE. Access students represented about 27% of these non-traditional entrants.

Changes in teaching methods

The small numbers of Access students currently in higher education institutions meant that changes in HE were more likely to come about because they were seen as beneficial to all students rather than to particular groups. For example, opportunities provided by new technology could be an impetus for change. However, some staff reported that the pressure of increased student numbers had led to less change, not more. One institution had reluctantly given greater emphasis to lectures as a teaching method purely on grounds of economy. The lecturer stated:

> *Lecturing is by far the cheapest way of teaching. [When] you have small groups [there is] a huge amount of marking [and this is very expensive in tutor time].*

Interestingly enough, other institutions which had high proportions of adult students in general, had moved away from lectures towards more group methods on the grounds that this was what students preferred. The lecturer explained:

> *We've gone much more for student-centred learning approaches and tutorial systems and away from large group teaching. It is very expensive on staff resources but mature students tend to prefer that type of approach.*

More generally, adult students were welcomed as being highly motivated, ready to debate with staff in tutorials and, in some instances, made tutors think seriously about their methods of teaching and assessment. One tutor mentioned the impact that adult students could have on courses which traditionally had very few adults on them:

> *Adult students make lecturers question how they've been doing things, because they begin to ask questions about the way the course is structured and type of assessment records that are used which seventeen year olds are perhaps less likely to ask. ...It might not be so much that adult students need different provision; it might be that the whole course should be different and it is only once the adult students come in and begin to throw up some of these issues that they are sort of highlighted.*

Changes in HE, then, in terms of teaching methods were more likely to be driven by financial considerations or by perceptions that change would be beneficial to all students. Some subject departments, however, offered additional support for special categories for students. For example, the science departments in one institution had identified all first year entrants with non-traditional qualifications and provided extra tutorials, particularly in mathematics for these students. In some English and social science departments students were asked to write an

essay in the first week of term so that those who needed extra teaching in grammar and in structuring essays could be identified and helped straight away. This kind of extra academic support was sometimes more reactive than these examples. Some tutors reported that students were offered help once they had shown signs of difficulty, such as failing Christmas examinations.

Supporting students is a costly activity, especially as adults were perceived as more likely to ask for help and to take up more staff time than younger students. Some institutions' solution was to encourage adult self-help groups. This was easier in institutions and courses where there were larger numbers of adult students and where former Access students progressed to one particular HE institution as a cohort. The advantages of self-help groups were seen as fostering a sense of independent study, discouraging over-reliance on tutors and providing a reference point for sharing financial and other problems associated with a return to study. Disadvantages of self-help groups were identified too. The main one was that they could encourage adults to rely too heavily on one another and fail to develop their own ideas. Another worry was that such groups could discourage adult students from mixing with other students. One of the benefits of university was the opportunity given to students to meet people from all walks of life and there was a concern that self-help groups could be exclusive.

There was one school of thought that adult students were no different from younger students and, therefore, did not require any special treatment. Once students had been admitted to an institution the assumption was that they were capable of getting a degree. Problems in academic performance were more likely to be caused by lack of motivation or personal or financial difficulties than with degree course content. The nature of our research means that we are unable to say how widespread this view is. If it is at all typical, then there is some way to go in sustaining wider access to higher education, raising as it does the nature of institutions' responsibility for the personal and social welfare of students as well as for their intellectual development. Furthermore, it raises questions about HE staff's readiness critically to examine their curriculum and teaching methods. Let us consider each of these points in a little more detail. As we saw in Chapter 4, former Access students reported a range of personal and social difficulties as well as academic problems. Although our sample is a relatively small one, the students' accounts are borne out by a survey of a larger number of Scottish Access students (Munn, Johnstone and Lowden, 1993) and by the growing literature on the experience of mature students in higher education (eg, CNAA, 1991; Woodley, 1984; Munn *et al*, 1992). Given the interrelatedness of personal, financial and academic problems — as reported by students — there are implications for a high quality provision of student welfare services in higher education, if students' chances of sustaining participation in higher education and achieving a degree are to be maximised. The lack of recognition of the need for such provision and for a critical review of teaching methods and curriculum provision among staff, is therefore worrying.

We know from the substantial literature on changing teachers' practice in schools, that changes in curriculum provision and teaching methods are difficult to accomplish unless teachers themselves see the need for change and are actively involved in planning it. It seems reasonable to assume that changes in higher education provision will be similarly difficult unless staff believe there is a need

for change and are involved in planning it. The assumption that if students are admitted to higher education, they are capable of getting a degree, gives staff permission not to reconsider their own role in this process. An emphasis on students' responsibility for their own learning implies that it is the students' fault if they do not complete their courses or achieve poor degrees. As higher education institutions begin to admit a wider range of students than ever before both in terms of social status and entry qualifications it is inevitable that the nature of the institutions will change. There are huge implications for staff development, not least in recognising pedagogy as problematic and as a respectable area of intellectual enquiry and concern. Attention to and recognition of teaching as well as of research is long overdue and we welcome recent moves in this direction from the higher education funding councils.

Other changes

Higher education institutions have responded in other ways to the presence of Access students, ways which do not directly impinge on teaching. These are the provision of summer schools and the practice of franchising part of their degree programmes to further education colleges. We look briefly at each of these.

Where a gap between Access and HE standards was perceived, several of the 'older' universities offered additional preparation at summer schools. These schools gave Access students an opportunity to experience HE teaching and assessment methods and a chance to meet some of the staff they would encounter on their first year courses. The students we were able to interview, who had had experience of summer schools, said that they were very beneficial in topping up their Access preparation. The main disadvantage was the loss of a chance of a summer job as the courses were usually full-time and lasted several weeks.

Franchising arrangements between further and higher education institutions involve the contracting out by HE of part of their degree programmes to further education. The arrangements seem most developed in science and engineering courses. Students study at their local FE college and upon successful completion of one or two years of advanced study transfer to the university for the final year(s) of the degree. These arrangements are generally regarded as beneficial by all concerned. From Access students' point of view they remain in familiar surroundings, the college where they completed their Access course; they can obtain an advanced level qualification such as an HND en route to a degree, a step by step approach which minimises the risk of failure; and they avoid the additional travelling costs of university attendance — particularly acute in rural areas. Higher education regarded such arrangements as a demonstration of their readiness to widen access by facilitating direct entry to years two or three of their degree programmes. Staff also pointed out that such schemes were a cost-effective way of filling second and third year places when university students had 'dropped out'. It seems likely that franchise arrangements are likely to develop further as a more general response to the recognition of a need for a higher education system with flexible entry and exit points.

Higher education staff also identified gaps in provision. The most frequently cited was the lack of carefully planned part-time degree provision particularly in the 'older' universities. Staff in these universities were conscious that they offered part-time Access courses — either through SWAP or through their

Continuing Education Departments — but that they did not offer a good range of part-time degree courses. Partly, this was just a matter of tradition but the increasing workload reported by several HE staff made them reluctant to consider new kinds of provision. There were also worries about the length of time it might take students to graduate and, interestingly, the intellectual probity of providing part-time degrees in certain subjects, especially science. This is summed up by the following lecturer:

> *Part-time provision of degrees ... that's the bit many of us are falling down on, ... you have to come to University for four years to get your degree. That is just definitely a big problem. But, having said that, it's very difficult to see, particularly in science courses.*

The other major gap in provision was seen as lack of Access penetration to rural areas. Borders and Fife were cited as examples of areas where there had been a low response to Access provision because likely participants lived too far from the colleges. In fact only the four most densely populated Scottish regions had an Access entry of over 100 students in the year 1991-92. Each of these regions (Grampian = 122; Tayside = 154; Lothian = 536; Strathclyde = 819) also had a major urban centre.

As a way of countering this location of Access in urban areas, open learning access courses were problematic. Curriculum materials were owned by particular colleges and SWAP consortia had found it difficult to put together a coherent package which involved colleges sharing materials. There were also fears that under the new Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act, competition among institutions would intensify and so make collaboration among colleges more difficult. One member of a consortium summed up the problems with open learning access provision as follows:

> *We haven't succeeded in the rural areas yet. In this consortium we very early on tried to work on open learning but we discovered, with great sadness ... that so much of the material was proprietary to the colleges. There doesn't seem to be [any one college] which has a complete set of it. ...Public money, so far as I can see, is being used to develop [open learning] materials in all sorts of institutions but everybody owns a wee bit of it and nobody shares it with anybody else. I can only see that getting worse.*

Elsewhere (Munn, Tett and Arney, 1993) we have urged the need for incentives for collaboration among institutions if wider access is to be encouraged and sustained. The above seems to be a telling example of where such collaboration among FE colleges and between these colleges and HE institutions, including the Open University might be promoted.

■ Summary

This chapter has concerned HE staff's perceptions of Access courses and students and the response of HE to Access students as undergraduates. We emphasised the following:

- HE staff supported the idea of SWAP as encouraging wider access to degree courses and promoting collaboration between the further and higher education sectors
- there were concerns that modules could fragment learning and be rather superficial in content
- there was some way to go in reconciling traditions of norm-referenced assessment in HE with the criterion-referenced approach in Access courses
- the rather limited response in some HE institutions to a changing undergraduate population, particularly in student welfare services and a reluctance to review teaching methods
- the move towards more student-centred teaching approaches in some institutions as a response to increasing numbers of adult students, the move towards greater reliance on lectures in others due to financial reasons
- innovative forms of provision to facilitate wider access such as franchising
- concerns about gaps in provision and in particular part-time degree courses and open learning access.

In the final Chapter we attempt to draw together our findings from staff and students and to consider their implications.

6 Conclusion

It gives you confidence - you are not stupid after all.

SWAP is an innovative and radical approach to widening access to higher education. It differs from Access schemes in England and Wales in that it involves all further and higher education institutions in a national scheme and provides the guarantee of an offer of a place in HE to students who successfully complete their Access courses. Indeed, one of the principal attractions of SWAP over other entry routes to HE was the guarantee of an offer and the prospect of an assured route to a degree. Most students who progressed to HE did so to an institution within their SWAP consortium. This is not surprising as adult students, particularly those with husbands, wives and children are usually less mobile than younger students. There were a few instances where students moved to an HE institution outside their Access consortium. Numbers are small and moves were accomplished reasonably easily but these examples raise a question about the 'portability' of an Access qualification and it becoming a national qualification in the same way as Highers. This could become an important question if numbers of Access students continue to grow, and if the 'ring-fencing' of HE places for Access students is threatened by the overall numbers of HE places being held steady or expanding less rapidly than anticipated. Indeed the Access programme itself might come under threat in such circumstances. This would be a pity as SWAP has shown itself to be successful on a number of different criteria.

SWAP successes

SWAP has been remarkably successful in attracting traditionally under-represented groups in higher education:

- almost half SWAP students are over 30
- over half SWAP students are female
- over one in three had been unemployed prior to enrolment to SWAP courses
- over 40% of students in 1991-92 came from areas boradly designated as 'deprived'
- the number and range of Access courses has grown steadily to include business studies, health care and social science as well as science and technology.

Bald figures tell only part of the story. As will be evident from Chapters 2 and 3 the vast majority of students praised SWAP as giving them confidence in their abilities and in raising their self-esteem. In large measure this boost in confidence is associated with the modular structure of Access courses and the methods of assessment used. This is an educational outcome which is hard to measure but which is of crucial importance in both social and economic terms. Belief in an ability to learn is clearly important if workers are to develop and upgrade their

knowledge and skills; and the personal and social benefits of education are so well-established as hardly to need reiterating. SWAP, then, is an example of a clearly targeted programme to widen access to higher education that has achieved a great deal in the short time it has been in existence.

All innovations experience difficulties and 'teething troubles'; indeed we know from the extensive literature on innovations in education that an innovation changes as it moves from planning to implementation. SWAP is no exception and it is to be expected that Access courses will continue to develop as staff in FE and HE build up experience of teaching them and student progress in HE is monitored. What are the key areas of future development suggested by this research?

Key areas for development

Reviewing the data from staff and students it seems to us that there are three areas which SWAP needs to take forward. These are:

- curriculum structure
- assessment policy
- student welfare

We offer a brief comment on each of these below as a starting point for debate for those concerned.

Curriculum structure

All eight Access courses presented students with a wide range of subjects in the first term. Thereafter they varied in the degree of specialisation offered and two social science courses introduced new subjects in the third term. While on Access courses students generally welcomed the opportunity to sample a wide range of subjects but on looking back from HE there was a tendency to regret the time spent on subjects which were irrelevant to their HE courses. Associated with this regret were worries about the level of content being taught on Access. Fourteen students criticised maths — a core subject in all the science/technology Access courses sampled, five were dissatisfied with their preparation for computing and five more were dissatisfied with physics. In social science, almost all of the students had felt well-prepared for HE in terms of subject knowledge. After a term in HE this had been eroded. Many HE staff were also critical of the maths preparation for science, technology and engineering students; while some social science HE staff criticised content on Access courses as being too 'cut and dried'. There was also debate about the relative weight to be given to process skills. The students not only had conflicting views, their views changed as they progressed. Access staff and HE staff also recognised a role for process skills in a variety of ways. This complex picture was discussed in Chapter 2.

It seems to us that key points from the data on curriculum structure are:

- breadth offers students the opportunity to sample new subjects, avoids too early closing off of degree choice and recognises that students' goals on joining Access may change.

  For all these reasons we would be cautious about shifting the balance towards depth rather than breadth.

- to avoid fragmentation and 'too many introductions' more explicit connections between modules should be made and the use of 'integrated modules' or projects for this purpose could be more fully exploited.
- the level of subject content needs to be kept under review. Modules were not originally designed with progression to HE in mind. SWAP curriculum committees should be pro-active in reviewing content and develop a forward plan for curriculum review if they have not already done so.
- the role of process skills as part of learning needs to be kept under review. Student demand for and understanding of the place of process skills was confused; a more explicit recognition of the relative roles of process and content could clarify the situation by opening up those central aspects of the curriculum to debate.

Assessment policy

Perhaps the most contentious area of Access provision is the commitment to criterion-referenced assessment. As described in Chapter 2, this approach to assessment focuses on what students know and can do in terms of pre-specified criteria, it does not compare students' attainments in relation to each other. For almost all students, criterion-referenced assessment boosted their confidence, at least during the early stages of the Access year. As the year progressed, however, they wanted more precise information about their strengths and weaknesses and many wanted practice in traditional examinations. Where such examinations featured, as in the Blue and Green colleges' social science Access courses (reported in Chapter 3) it was welcomed; so were opportunities offered on some courses to experience or practice such examinations. Many HE staff would have welcomed grades to help distinguish students' different abilities; while some criticised the learning outcomes or criteria as being too undemanding.

Other aspects of assessment practice on Access courses were generally welcomed by staff (FE and HE) and students. Continuous assessment, for instance, was viewed as encouraging good study habits in students and more thorough learning than last minute cramming for traditional examinations.

What are the implications for Access course development?

- learning outcomes for modules could be made more intellectually demanding. This relates to the suggestion above that subject content needs to be kept under review. Furthermore, if more project work and integrated modules featured on Access courses, an opportunity to specify more demanding criteria would open up naturally.
- grading as opposed to criterion-referenced assessment is a vexed question, involving values and principles about the purposes of assessment. Students' desire for better feedback from tutors could be met without grades. Constructive comment by tutors takes time but would probably be a more informative basis on which to improve performance than grades. As Chapter 3 showed, where grades were used there were worries that tutors were using different standards.
- the widespread use of grades would change the nature of Access courses and make them more like mainstream qualifications. This implies that students with poor grades would not be offered an HE place, thus

undercutting one of SWAP's most attractive features, the guaranteed offer of a place in higher education. Even more fundamentally it would be a return to a notion of education as something which punishes failure rather than builds on success. Would such a notion be attractive to SWAP target students?

Student welfare

The students were highly appreciative of their Access tutors and frequently turned to them for advice on their academic progress and on choosing an appropriate HE course. It seemed to us that students worried more about and looked for advice on the work level and load in HE and their own intellectual capacities than about practicalities like finance. As might be expected guidance was perceived by students as more accessible on Access courses than in HE. Classes were smaller, tutors perhaps easier to contact informally and maybe the culture of these innovative courses raised awareness of student welfare issues. Almost all Access students had fairly lengthy pre-entry interviews where student motivation, home circumstances and family support were probed.

In HE some course tutors designed assignments and other tasks to provide information about the academic help students were likely to need. In the main, changes in teaching or welfare provision were more likely to be driven by financial considerations or to come about because they were seen as beneficial to all students rather than to particular groups. Indeed some staff and students believed that Access students should melt into the student body and not expect special provision.

Access students found self-help groups of adult students in HE beneficial. They were also aware that they could ask tutors for help and advice but were sometimes reluctant to do so, believing that it was up to students to solve their own problems. A very few students had taken advantage of specialist counselling services; those experiencing personal or financial problems tended to turn to family and friends for advice and support. Few students had firm career plans and few were aware of the existence of HE careers services.

This suggests to us the following:

- guidance on Access courses is warmly appreciated by students. There may be merit in FE and HE staff sharing experience in this area
- adult student self-help groups could be encouraged in higher education. The potential drawbacks of such groups, exclusivity and restrictions on mixing with younger students, are, in our opinion, offset by the support they can offer to potentially isolated and vulnerable students
- Higher education career services need to be better known amongst all students and not just those nearing graduation.

The changing nature of higher education

Higher education is undergoing a period of rapid change, in funding arrangements, in accountability mechanisms, including audits of teaching and research quality and in the nature of its undergraduate population. The typical undergraduate, someone entering HE straight from school with a clutch of Higher or 'A' Levels,

is beginning to disappear as more adult students and students with non-traditional entry qualifications form an increasing proportion of the student body. Access students are only a small sub-group of this new population of adult entrants, yet their experiences could yield valuable information about the learning processes of adults. They have non-traditional qualifications and they also have non-traditional preparation for entry to higher education. Access courses focus on how to learn as well as on what is to be learnt, with specific relevance to adult learners. The students in our sample were aware of this, and were able to reflect on their own learning processes. Further reflection - and analysis of that reflection - would be of interest to all of those who teach adult students.

The ever expanding student population is forcing the pace of change. Technology is beginning to open up all kinds of possibilities for HE teaching and learning, as signalled in the MacFarlane report (1993). These developments, within a context of accountability, are forcing questions about degree length, specialisation and modes of study back onto the agenda. Many universities are 'going modular' in their degree course design, including Scotland's oldest, St. Andrews. Is it too fanciful to suggest that in this changing scene, universities have something to learn from Access courses in terms of course structure, diagnostic assessment and student welfare systems? As FE and HE institutions develop contact with each other through SWAP, course franchising and other arrangements, perhaps we will see a tertiary sector offering diversity and choice and a range of entry and exit points for an increasingly heterogeneous student population. Modular course provision would allow this to happen if it were underpinned by good student guidance. The experience of Access provision has thus a great deal to offer.

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Appendix 1: The students – details of the sample

Note: In each of the tables below, students who withdrew from Access courses or from HE are shown as the numbers in square brackets.

Table A1 Ages of students on beginning access courses

Category	Science (1991)		Arts/Social Science (1992)	
	Males N = 29	Females N = 19	Males N = 11	Females N = 41
25 and under	12[2]	11[6]	1	6[1]
26-30	10[2]	2[1]	3[2]	9[1]
31-39	4[1]	5[1]	3	11[4]
40-49	3[1]	1[1]	3[1]	13[2]
50 and over	–	–	1	2
	Total N = 48		Total N = 52	

Table A2 Gender

Category	Science	Arts/Social Science
Males	29[6]	11[3]
Females	19[9]	41[8]

Table A3 Qualifications on entry to access courses

Category	Science	Arts/Social Science
None	2[1]	12[2]
1-3 'O' grades	6[4]	12[4]
4-6 'O' grades	8[3]	6[1]
> 7 'O' grades	5[1]	-
1 Higher	15[4]	6
2-3 Highers	8[2]	9
> 4 Highers	4	2[2]
Professional Diploma*	–	5[1]

* Five of the students had post - school qualifications in nursing (2), journalism, hotel management and art.

Table A4 With dependent children (aged 18 or under)

	Science	Arts/Social Science
Males	5[2]	5
Females	7[3]	23[1]

Appendix 2: Project Advisory Committee

Professor Lalage Bown (Chair)	formerly University of Glasgow
Dr. Melvin Dalgarno	Centre for Continuing Education, University of Aberdeen
Mr. Gerry Devlin#	SWAP — West
Mrs. Judith Duncan	Research and Intelligence Unit, Scottish Office Education Department
Mr. Jim Gallacher	Centre for Continuing Education, Glasgow Caledonian University
Ms. Lorraine Judge*	SWAP — West
Ms. Ann McKay	NORSWAP
Professor Tom Schuller,	Centre of Continuing Education, University of Edinburgh
Dr. Dorothy Welch	SWAP — East

* Until 1992
\# From 1992