Moving Forward; Thinking Back:
Young People’s Post-16 Paths and Perspectives on Education, Training and Employment

The Post-16 Phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study:
Full Report

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July 2004
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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the 100 young people who agreed to be interviewed for the post-16 phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study. We are indebted to them for their goodwill and honesty both in their post-16 interviews and during earlier phases of this study at Key Stages 3 and 4. We are also very grateful to the post-primary schools and colleges of further education in Northern Ireland which kindly accommodated our visits to carry out the post-16 interviews.

Many thanks are also extended to the post-primary schools which supplied us with data on the post-16 destinations of their pupils. These schools’ contribution to the research first began when these young people were in Year 8, and we very much appreciate their continued support throughout the research.

We would like to convey our appreciation to the sponsors of the post-16 phase of the study: the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Special thanks are extended to the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) for good counsel over the course of the study.

We would like to acknowledge several colleagues at NFER for the expertise they have brought to the study. In particular, we are extremely grateful to Simon Rutt for undertaking the statistical analysis. We are much obliged to Pippa Lord who undertook fieldwork and commented on early drafts of this report, and to Ruth Watson for her work in compiling the post-16 destinations and for contributing to the fieldwork. Our thanks are also extended to: Kay Kinder, Ann Black, Julie Thompson, Sally Wilson, Megan Jones and especially to Hilary McElderry for her help in the organisation of the fieldwork.
Summary

1 Introduction

1.1 The background to the study
This summary sets out the main findings from the post-16 phase of the Northern Ireland (NI) Curriculum Cohort Study. This research project began in 1996 and originally tracked 3,000 young people from a representative sample of NI schools throughout their five years of post-primary education (see Harland et al., 1999a and b, 2002, 2003). The 3,000 students completed annual questionnaires, and a sub-sample of 60 was interviewed and also observed in class from the last year of primary school onwards. By the time the cohort reached the end of compulsory education (Year 12) in June 2001, a substantial body of evidence had been accrued on their educational experiences and views of the school curriculum. In order to examine how such experiences and attitudes shape young people’s post-16 paths, the study was extended for two years beyond compulsory schooling.

The post-16 phase of the research was sponsored by the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), and was supported by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

1.2 The purpose of the study
The purpose of the post-16 phase of the research was three-fold:

• to document the post-16 destinations of all 3,000 young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study – that is 10 per cent of all NI students who finished compulsory schooling in 2001

• to examine the efficacy of 16–19 education, and young people’s perspectives on post-16 work-related training and employment and

• to explore young people’s perceptions of the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the light of their post-16 experiences.

In order to address these aims, evidence was amassed through:

• a data collection exercise to ascertain the post-16 destinations of the full Cohort Study sample of 3,000 young people (data collection undertaken from June–October 2002)

• individual interviews with 100 of these young people from a range of post-16 destinations: AS/A2-levels, Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs), BTEC National Diplomas (NDs), work-related training, employment and job seeking (interviews undertaken from January–March 2003).
At the time of these interviews, the 100 young people were 17 or 18 years of age and were approximately 20 months beyond compulsory schooling. All 100 young people had been part of the post-primary phase of this project, and had therefore been asked by the research team to consider their educational experiences at least annually from Years 8–12. As a result of this, these young people may possibly have been more reflective than their peers as a whole when expressing their views on their post-16 destinations and reflecting on the post-primary curriculum in the course of their interviews.
2 The post-16 destinations of the NI Curriculum Cohort Study young people

What were the post-16 paths taken by the young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study? What were the factors influencing their choices? Answers to these questions were sought through statistical analysis of the post-16 destinations of the full 3,423-strong sample and through interviews with 100 of these young people.

2.1 The post-16 destinations of the 3,423-strong sample

The first post-16 destinations of the 3,423 young people in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study are presented in Table 1 and described below.

**Post-16 education**

In total, 70 per cent of the 3,423-strong sample continued in education after finishing compulsory schooling, predominantly in a school setting and to a lesser extent at a college of Further Education (FE). This corresponds with DE and DEL statistics which show that in 2001–2002 – the school year in which our sample started on their post-16 paths – 72 per cent of 16- and 17-year-olds in NI were in full-time education (DE, 2003).

**Work-related training**

The first post-16 destination for 13 per cent of the sample was a move into work-related training e.g. Jobskills/apprenticeship/training leading to National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Twice the proportion of boys to girls embarked on work-related training. And double the proportion of working class\(^1\) young people compared with their middle class counterparts chose this option.

**Employment and job seeking**

Eight per cent of the Cohort Study young people entered employment upon finishing Year 12, and job seeking/unemployment was the first destination from compulsory schooling for two per cent of the sample. Greater proportions of young people from schools with a high take-up of free school meals (FSM) had entered employment or were job seeking at age 16 in comparison with their peers who had attended schools with mid and low levels of take-up for FSM.

**Other post-16 destinations**

The post-16 pursuits of three per cent of the sample included, amongst others, motherhood, emigration and illness. The destinations of the remaining four per cent of the Cohort Study young people could not be ascertained.

\(^1\)Social class was determined on the basis of parents’ occupations.
Table 1  The post-16 destinations of the 3,423 young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>1136</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE college</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployment</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3423</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study Post-16 Phase: post-16 destinations data collection

2.2 The factors increasing the probability of entering post-16 education

An aim of this research study was to establish the factors which affected the odds of selecting particular post-16 paths. To this end, logistical multi-level models were constructed to examine the likelihood of continuing in education post-16 (e.g. in school sixth forms or at FE college) against leaving education at 16 (e.g. for work-related training, employment or job seeking).

In terms of the young people participating in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study, the principal factor that independently increased the probability of entering post-16 education was2:

- Their performance at GCSE/GNVQ: there was a very strong correlation between GCSE/GNVQ results and post-16 education, such that as GCSE/GNVQ scores increased, the odds of continuing in education increased.

And then, over and above GCSE/GNVQ results, each of the following independently increased the probability of young people entering post-16 education.

- Their Year 12 school having a sixth form.
- Their degree of engagement with learning in Year 123: as engagement with learning increased, the probability of continuing in education post-16 increased.
- Their gender: being female.
- Their own perceptions of their progress: young people who increased in their estimation of their progress from Year 10 to the end of Key Stage 4 had a greater probability of continuing in education post-16.

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2These results are drawn from two models, each containing a different number of cases (see Part 1 of this report).
3Degree of engagement was determined through questions designed to gauge level of commitment with learning which were included in the questionnaire completed by pupils in Year 12 (see Harland et al., 2003).
In terms of this 3,423-strong sample, the location, size, religious management or pupil constitution (single sex or coeducational) of the school attended by a young person in Year 12 did not increase the probability of continuing in education post-16.

Further, attending a grammar school in Year 12 did not increase a young person’s likelihood of entering post-16 education. Thus, there was no difference in the probability of two young people with an average GCSE/GNVQ score – one from a grammar school and one from a secondary school with a sixth form – pursuing post-16 education, either at school or FE college. However, the odds in favour of these two young people continuing in education were higher than for a third young person from a secondary school without a sixth form.

Attending a grammar school in Year 12 did, however, affect the location of post-16 education. Those from grammar schools had an increased probability of continuing their education in a school setting rather than at FE college. Middle class young people also had an enhanced probability of continuing their education in a school sixth form, though social class, like a grammar-school education, was not a factor that increased the likelihood of continuing in education per se.

2.3 The post-16 decision-making of the 100 interviewees

The 100 young people who were interviewed for this post-16 research were asked for their rationales for selecting their post-16 destinations. As Section 2.2 has shown, there was a strong association between destination and GCSE/GNVQ score in the full 3,423-strong NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample. This was also evident amongst the 100 interviewees, such that AS/A2-level interviewees attained the highest GCSE/GNVQ results, then decreasing through the other destinations (in order: AVCE/NDs, work-related training, then employment or jobseeking).

Whilst GCSE/GNVQ performance would inevitably have impacted on interviewees’ post-16 choices, this was rarely explicitly highlighted by them as part of their decision-making process. Rather, when giving their reasons for opting for their post-16 destination, the 100 interviewees focussed on the following three influences: future aspirations, family and school.

The influence of future aspirations

Unsurprisingly, the post-16 decision-making of work-related training, AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees was most frequently influenced by factors relating to their future aspirations: they were motivated by their intention to pursue a specific career or by their understanding that further education or training would enable them to secure a ‘better job’.

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4 This is in line with findings for England and Wales, as reported in the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (e.g. Payne, 1998).

5 At the time of their interviews, the post-16 destinations of the 100 interviewees were: AS/A2-levels (39 interviewees); AVCEs / BTEC NDs (21 interviewees); work-related training (26 interviewees); employment (10 interviewees); job seeking (2 interviewees); and other (2 interviewees – naval training / sports scholarship). Two-thirds of the AS/A2-level interviewees and almost all AVCE/ND interviewees also held part-time jobs, and were employed, on average, 14 hours a week. In the 20 months since finishing Year 12, 17 of the 100 interviewees had moved on from their original post-16 destination.
In contrast, however, none of the employed interviewees had chosen to enter work because of their future aspirations; rather they had been induced by their desire to leave education or had starting working when other post-16 plans, such as work-related training, were unsuccessful. Further, for employed interviewees as well as a small number of work-related training interviewees, the immediate monetary benefit of these post-16 pursuits had appealed.

**The influence from family**
Around half of the interviewees reported that their post-16 decision-making had been influenced by their families. Further, in analysis which examined the 100 interviewees’ destinations by their parents’ occupations, it emerged that these young people’s post-16 choices were frequently leading them towards the same broad employment grouping as their parents. For example, amongst interviewees with at least one parent in a professional occupation, the greatest proportion was studying for AS/A2-levels.

**The influence from school**
The impact that advice from school had on interviewees’ post-16 decisions appeared more minimal. In total, 14 interviewees explicitly stated that the careers education they received had assisted them in selecting their post-16 destinations; however, this was 14 out of the 96 who could recall having received some careers education during Key Stage 4. From interviewees’ recollections, it appeared that, whilst post-primary careers education was useful in teaching transferable skills such as ‘how to do application forms’, it was less informative in guiding those who had ‘no idea’ with regard to their future plans. Further, there was some question as to the impartiality of careers education received whilst at school.

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6This corresponds with findings for England and Wales, as reported in the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (DfES, 2003).
INTERVIEWEES’ POST-16 DECISION-MAKING

The influence of future aspirations

*I have always wanted to be a barrister so it [AS/A2-levels] seemed to be the best way of going about it* (male, AS/A2-levels).

*I don’t think it [part-time job in a kitchen] would be the kind of job that I would want to keep for the rest of my life because there’s nothing new about it, so it kind of persuades you to stay on for A-levels* (female, AS/A2-levels).

*I wanted sort of practical experience, because you see jobs in the paper and you have to have this qualification and then they say ‘three years’ experience’* (male, work-related training – mechanical engineering).

The influence from family

*Mummy doesn’t actually work ... She didn’t continue school after GCSE, like she regretted it, so that’s why I actually said I wanted to go on to further education ... actually make something with my life* (female, AVCE/NDs).

*I think possibly [it’s] just because of the background that you grow up in. It’s just where we live in society ... I just always assumed that I would do it [stay on in education for AS/A2 levels] (male, AS/A2-levels).*

The influence from school

*We never really done nothing [in careers classes]. We just, like, sat there and did, like, a booklet and sometimes went on the internet but it wasn’t really advice as such, or anything* (female, employment – classroom assistant).

*There was a lot of information given [in careers education] about, you know, go to sixth form and what you can do there, but not about your other options, really* (female, AS/A2-levels).
3 Perspectives on 16–19 education, work-related training and employment: the views of 100 interviewees

What do young people make of their post-16 destination – be it education, work-related training or employment? In the course of the interviews conducted with 100 young people for this research, their experiences of and attitudes towards their post-16 undertakings were explored.

3.1 Perspectives on post-16 education

**Breadth of study**

The majority of the 60 AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees favoured the specialisation of post-16 education to the wider coverage at Key Stages 3 and 4. Taking fewer examined subjects was perceived to make studies more manageable overall and the majority of these interviewees preferred to trade breadth for this increased manageability. Further, students appreciated the opportunity to focus on those subjects of greatest personal interest and relevance to future plans. However, despite the prevailing preference for the specialisation in post-16 education, over half of the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees reported that they did miss certain subjects, particularly physical education (PE) and modern foreign languages (MFL).

The introduction of AS-levels had not necessarily increased the breadth and balance of post-16 study overall. There was an equal division between AS/A2-level interviewees who had taken the opportunity to retain some breadth in their subjects (e.g. mathematics, economics, information and communications technology (ICT) and history AS) and those who had maintained a ‘bias’ (e.g. ancient history, RE, English and history AS).

**Assessment**

In terms of assessment, AS/A2-level interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about the AS/A2 structure of their courses, finding the ‘split’ an aid to manageability, a useful indicator of progress and a means to secure the best final result. Half of the AS/A2-level interviewees had repeated AS-level examinations in Year 14 to ‘pull up’ their grades. However, with the regularity of assessment in both AS/A2-levels and AVCEs through modules, biannual formal examination sessions and coursework, there was a sense that post-16 education was dominated by assessment.

**Manageability**

Interviewees in post-16 education were more challenged by the amount rather than the level of work. However, there was a sense of resignation that heavy workload was to be expected of courses at this level.
**Enjoyment**

For the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees in this study, the enjoyment of post-16 education was primarily related to its manageability, such that as the amount and level of work increased, the level of enjoyment declined. The focus on subjects of greater personal preference was a factor in increasing the enjoyment of post-16 studies, and there was evidence that enjoyment of courses could be enhanced where there was relevance to future study, career plans or ‘real life’.

**Relevance**

Interviewees in post-16 education principally measured the relevance of these studies in terms of their usefulness to future education or employment. All but one of the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees were planning to proceed to higher education, and their views on relevance might be indicative of a perception that post-16 study was simply a passport to higher education, without particular purpose in its own right.

Among both AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees, the view prevailed that the chief benefit of Key Skills programmes was as a boost to Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) points.

**The differing perceptions of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND students**

- AS/A2-level interviewees commented more frequently than AVCE/ND interviewees on the increase in the level and amount of work they perceived over the two years of post-16 study (i.e. from Year 13 to Year 14). They were also somewhat more inclined to note the negative impact this could have on enjoyment.

- Overall, AVCE/ND interviewees appeared more content with their post-16 undertakings than AS/A2-level interviewees: by a small margin, these AVCE/ND students expressed fewer reservations regarding the narrowed breadth and balance of study, manageability and overall enjoyment.

- AVCE/ND interviewees were less ‘utilitarian’ than AS/A2-level interviewees in terms of their views on the relevance of their courses, though both groups principally saw relevance as linked to future education or employment aspirations. Whereas AVCE/ND interviewees were more positive in terms of their courses’ application to everyday life, AS/A2-level interviewees did not tend to recognise or seek relevance beyond the ‘means to an end’ utility of proceeding to higher education. This view could, in part, be attributed to the fact that certain AS/A2-level subjects – in particular physics, mathematics and chemistry – were perceived to be lacking in application to day-to-day life. However, even where there was appreciation of the ‘real-life’ relevance of subjects such as AS/A2-level RE, history and politics, this was regarded as a ‘bonus’ by some AS/A2-level interviewees, secondary to study or career relevance.
3.2 Perspectives on work-related training

Without exception, the 26 work-related training interviewees reported that they were enjoying their courses, and all but three preferred these current undertakings to school. Interviewees unanimously regarded the amount of work on their work-related courses as manageable, and three-quarters remarked that the level of work was ‘fine’. The enhanced satisfaction and manageability that these interviewees associated with their work-related training, compared with school, was related to the more practical nature of these courses and to the fact that the focus was now on one area of personal interest.

Two-thirds of the work-related training interviewees spoke positively about their Key Skills courses, viewing them as having some relevance either currently (e.g. in the practical work on their courses) or in the future (e.g. as an enhancement to their employment prospects, particularly for those who did not hold GCSE qualifications in these areas).

3.3 Perspectives on employment

The ten employed interviewees offered mixed views with regard to their satisfaction with their current occupations. Where these interviewees appeared content with their working lives, this was frequently associated with the money they were earning and the fact that they no longer had to spend their own time studying rather than the actual nature of their employment.

The employed interviewees’ preference for school or work, in terms of the manageability and challenge of these undertakings, was dependent on the particular
occupation in which they were engaged. Those in routine jobs, with little prospect of promotion and no opportunity to study for qualifications, generally favoured school, while those interviewees who had the opportunity to undertake further qualifications or training and/or were working for companies with career structures, preferred working life.

**PERSPECTIVES ON POST-16 WORK-RELATED TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT**

**Work-related training**

I prefer working with my hands instead of my head (male, work-related training – welding).

It’s one subject that you like doing, one subject you enjoy doing, so … you are actually smiling while you are doing your work (female, work-related training – beauty therapy).

You’re not just sort of instructed to do everything … Here [at FE college], like, it’s up to yourself, you know, whether to work or not, like (male, work-related training – joinery).

**Employment**

It doesn’t really bother me [employment as a telephonist]. At the end of the day, it gets you some money, like (female, employment – taxi firm telephonist).

School did tax my brain a bit more, you know. I find myself getting real lazy … probably work would be a time to switch off, you know, because I don’t have to think about too many things (female, employment – shop assistant).

### 3.4 Comparing the different post-16 destinations

Interviewees in work-related training expressed fewer difficulties with regard to the manageability of their post-16 courses compared with interviewees undertaking AS/A2-levels or AVCE/NDs. None the less, both those in post-16 education and work-related training articulated the view that manageability had been aided by the narrower focus at post-16 compared with Key Stage 4. These groups were also united in their appreciation of modular assessment and the opportunity to repeat examinations as necessary. Compared with AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees, those in work-related training gave the most positive views about the Key Skills.

Interviewees in work-related training offered more positive views of their current undertakings than their employed counterparts, and to an extent, those taking AVCE/NDs were more satisfied than those on AS/A2-level courses. However, the tempering comments from those studying for AS/A2-levels differed from those in employment: the former felt particularly challenged by the amount of work required of them, while the latter could find the loss of social interaction with their peers and the monotony of their day to be hindrances to enjoyment.
4 Retrospective opinions on the post-primary curriculum: the views of 100 interviewees

Do young people believe that the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 equips them for the post-16 path they take? All 100 interviewees were asked how far they felt Years 8–12 had prepared them for their post-16 destination. Further, their retrospective reflections on their post-primary studies were sought in order to gauge whether, with hindsight and greater maturity, their opinions at age 18 differed from those they had held at the time.

4.1 Interviewees’ views on the extent to which the curriculum at Years 8–12 had prepared them for their post-16 destination

On the basis of the perspectives of the 100 interviewees in this study, the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 appears proficient in equipping young people for the next phase in education, but is less adept at preparing them if they leave formal education at 16 to pursue work-related training or employment options. All but five of the 60 A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they had been well prepared by Years 8–12 for their post-16 destination, compared with 15 of the 26 interviewees in work-related training and seven of the ten employed interviewees.

Those work-related training and employed interviewees, who did not believe that they had been adequately equipped for their post-16 pursuits by the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4, gave the following reasons for feeling ill-prepared:

- post-primary education was geared towards those undertaking further study at post-16 and did not teach ‘a trade’
- few subjects had formed a knowledge base for their post-16 destination or had given them an insight into the type of work (often physical labour) involved
- the more applied use of subjects in work-related training or employment was perceived to be different from the approach taken in school.

4.2 Interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum

The 100 interviewees were asked whether, in the light of their experiences since finishing Year 12, there were any changes that they would make to the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4.

All but one of these 100 interviewees made comments expressing some basic support for aspects of the curriculum as they had experienced it. One-sixth of the interviewees – the majority of whom had been classed as ‘highly engaged’ when in Year 12 – stated that they would make no changes at all to the post-primary curriculum. And the remaining five-sixths, whilst suggesting areas for improvement, did still register support for subjects which constituted the curriculum. Half of these young people had been categorised as having a low level of engagement when they had been in Year 12.

7The one exception was a former grammar-school girl, now undertaking an AVCE at FE college.
In explaining their post-16 heightened appreciation of the curriculum – ‘I thought I was just getting taught rubbish, but I wasn’t’ (male, work-related training) – there was retrospective recognition that it was beneficial to try a range of subjects so that ‘you can make choices’, and also a realisation that whilst a subject might be seemingly irrelevant to one’s own interests and aspirations, it could fit the enthusiasms and goals of others: ‘What you want to do might not be what the next person wants, and I think that a lot of people just have to sit back and realise that’ (female, work-related training).

A key area where there had been an acknowledged turnabout of opinion was the timetable allocation for English and mathematics. Earlier findings from the NI Curriculum Cohort Study have indicated that during Years 8–10 in particular, students believed that too much time was devoted to these subjects (Harland et al., 2002 and 2003). With hindsight, one-third of interviewees explicitly stated that these subjects should be afforded this time8. Interviewees in work-related training especially stressed the need for mathematics.

4.3 Interviewees’ suggestions for amendments to the post-primary curriculum

Notwithstanding the retrospective reflection which enhanced these interviewees’ estimation of the curriculum, they still highlighted avenues for improvement and, in this regard, their suggestions mirrored those made earlier in the Cohort Study during their years in post-primary education (Harland et al., 2002 and 2003). Interviewees cited the following areas:

- increased emphasis on skills (ICT, life/independence skills, study skills, social skills) and aspects of personal and social development (careers education, personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) and PE)

- changes to the content and mediation of subjects, to include more practical work, more personal choice within subject areas, increased opportunities for the application of knowledge and coverage of current affairs, and less focus on assessment and examinations

- the inclusion of vocational learning in the curriculum, cited by work-related training and employed interviewees and also by a small number of AS/A2-level students, so that young people whose talents lay in vocational fields had opportunities to excel and could make more informed decisions about their post-16 options.

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8When interpreting these findings, the smaller scale of the interviewing strand in this post-16 phase of the research ought to be borne in mind. For example, here the views of the 100 post-16 interviewees are being compared with the opinions of 3,000 youngsters who completed annual surveys from Years 8 to 12 for the Key Stages 3 and 4 phases of the study.
INTERVIEWEES’ SUGGESTIONS FOR AMENDMENTS TO THE POST-PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Increased emphasis on skills
People need more than academics. You know, they can’t just be stuck in a book … We need those things. They’re skills we’re going to need … drama is good for confidence … sport for teambuilding (female, AS/A2-levels).

I know a lot of theory [from GCSE and AS/A2-level IT] … but say if I had a new computer, I don’t think I could set it up. I mean that’s astonishing, isn’t it? (male, AS/A2-levels).

Changes to the content and mediation of subjects
More practical work
The more practical it is, the more you want to do it. Everyone enjoys practical work (male, work-related training – mechanical engineering).

Coverage of current affairs
You do need some kind of basic level of knowledge that makes you look at the world around you and think about it … to prepare you for being part of it … There is really no emphasis on that in school, and current affairs are mentioned rarely to never (female, AS/A2-levels).

Inclusion of vocational learning
Opportunities for taster courses
It would be good if you could do plumbing for a couple of weeks and then do joinery and then do electrician, all different ones and see which one you think you like and which one you can pick [for post-16] (male, work-related training – joinery).

Opportunities for all to develop their talents
I think there should be more room [in the post-primary curriculum] for people who aren’t as academic and would be very skilled. I think there should be more opportunity for them to learn, like there’s a lot of people from my school went to do hairdressing and … apart from saving them a lot of time, it would help them to become better hairdressers faster, so it would … just sort of provide that extra option for people who want to, rather than go into the academic work, go into a skilled profession (female, AS/A2-levels).

5 Conclusion
When reflecting on their post-primary education almost two years on from the end of compulsory schooling, all but one of the 100 interviewees made comments expressing some basic support for aspects of the curriculum as they had experienced it, though five-sixths went on to suggest areas for improvement, too. When these young people had been in Year 12, a substantial proportion had been categorised as having a low level of engagement with their studies. Whilst their retrospective warming towards the curriculum is undoubtedly welcome, it is possibly too belated. Statistical analysis to identify the factors that increase the probability of pursuing post-16 education showed that a young person’s engagement with learning in Year 12 had an influence over and above performance at GCSE/GNVQ. Thus, as engagement with learning increased, the probability of a young person entering post-16 education after Year 12 increased. Therefore, in order to enhance their appreciation of the curriculum whilst young people are still in compulsory education rather than two years hence, it may be worth considering the suggestions for improvement offered by the young people interviewed for this research: increased emphasis on skills and personal and social development; changes to the content and mediation of subjects; and opportunities for vocational learning.
Questions raised by the research

• Given the association found to exist between sixth form provision and entry into post-16 education, could any enhancements be made to school sixth forms or links strengthened between schools and FE colleges in NI?

• How can the status of post-16 education at FE college be raised? Whilst attracted to its ‘freer’ ambience, a number of interviewees hinted that ‘the tech’ was perceived to be ‘for people who couldn’t do their A-levels’.

• What should careers education entail and by whom should it be led so that young people can draw more readily on this to inform their post-16 decision-making?

• Whilst the vast majority of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees preferred the specialisation of post-16 education, there were countering comments suggesting a desire to retain some breadth, were it not for the amount and depth of study required at this level. Is there a need for greater variety in post-16 education, where students are able to make choices around breadth versus depth, as well as between different subject areas?

• Is it cause for concern that interviewees of certain AS/A2-level subjects perceived little relevance in their courses other than as the means of securing access to the next level of education? In addition to preparing students intellectually for the standards required in higher education, should post-16 education contribute more to personal, social, spiritual and health development than perceived by AS/A2-level students interviewed here?

• In post-16 education, should students feel more tested by the level of work rather than by the amount of work as they do at present?

• Of the young people who were employed at the time of their interviews, several of those in more routine occupations (e.g. factory operative, shop assistant) had started these jobs after having abandoned work-related training. How might such individuals be supported in continuing in their work-related training or helped to move on to other courses so as to avoid entering routine employment which they subsequently found lacking in challenge and prospects?

• Young people who are highly engaged with their studies in Year 12 were found to have greater odds of entering post-16 education. Therefore, is there scope for further incorporating the improvements to the post-primary curriculum suggested by the 100 young people interviewed for this research: increased emphasis on skills and personal and social development; changes to the content and mediation of subjects; and opportunities for vocational learning.
Introduction

The study

0.1 Background and aims
Between 1996 and 2001, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) carried out a longitudinal cohort study tracking over 3,000 pupils throughout their entire post-primary experience in Northern Ireland (NI) (see Harland et al., 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003). The 3,000 students completed annual questionnaires, and a sub-sample of 60 was interviewed and also observed in class from the last year of primary school onwards. In addition, their schools were surveyed yearly, and teachers of all subject specialisms were interviewed at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4. The Cohort Study pupils finished compulsory education in June 2001.

Having amassed this extensive data-set of these pupils’ experiences and perceptions of their post-primary school careers, the Cohort Study was extended for two years beyond compulsory schooling.

The purpose of this post-16 phase of the research was three-fold.

Aim 1 To document the post-16 destinations of all 3,000 young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study – that is 10 per cent of all NI students who finished compulsory schooling in 2001.

Aim 2 To examine the efficacy of 16–19 education, and young people’s perspectives on post-16 work-related training and employment.

Aim 3 To explore young people’s perceptions of the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the light of their post-16 experiences.

This post-16 study is timely given the current policy context in Northern Ireland and beyond: the future development of further education in NI (DEL, 2004); the review of the NI curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 (CCEA, 2003a and b); and the wider discussions around skills development and 14–19 education (e.g. Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002; DEL, 2002; Working Group on 14–19 Reform, 2004).
0.2 Methodology
The research methods for the post-16 phase of the study comprised:

- a data collection exercise to ascertain the post-16 destinations of the 3,000-strong sample (June–October 2002), followed by
- individual interviews with 100 of these young people (January–March 2003).

Further details of both phases of the data collection are presented below.

0.2.1 Destinations data

Destinations data collection procedure
In order to gather the post-16 destinations of the 3,000 young people who had participated in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study, the research team contacted the 48 post-primary schools attended by the sample in Year 12. To ensure that the information returned from each establishment was comparable, these schools were asked to supply the post-16 destination of each individual under the headings of the ‘Class System’9, as follows:

- still attending this school
- attending a secondary school
- attending a grammar school
- attending FE college (course equal to or less than A-level)
- Jobskills at FE college
- Jobskills/training/apprenticeship
- employment
- unemployed/job seeking
- unknown
- other (please specify).

These data were requested from schools in early June 2002. In the autumn term, non-responding schools were followed up through reminder letters, telephone calls and faxes.

Returns were received from 47 of the 48 schools – a 98 per cent response rate. In total, the destinations of 3,423 young people were collected.

Destinations data analysis
In the analysis of the destination data, the proportions of the 3,423-strong sample pursuing the different post-16 routes were first calculated. Then, the post-16 destinations were disaggregated by the features of the post-primary school that the young people had attended in Year 12, as well as by their own characteristics. Logistical multi-level modelling techniques were then employed to establish which of

9A system used in NI to categorise destinations at 16.
the following school and pupil characteristics increased the probability of a young person in this sample pursing a particular route post-16:

**School characteristics**
- type of school: grammar or secondary
- location: Belfast, Northern Eastern, South Eastern, Southern or Western Education and Library Board (ELB)
- level of eligibility for free school meals (FSM): low, medium or high
- religious management: Catholic-managed, Protestant-managed or integrated
- pupil constitution: single sex girls, single sex boys or coeducational
- size: in terms of pupil numbers
- whether or not the school had a sixth form.

**Pupil characteristics**
- gender
- social class: based on pupils’ responses to an enquiry about their parents’ occupation(s) included in the questionnaires they completed during post-primary school
- level of attainment at GCSE/GNVQ
- degree of engagement with learning: ascertained through items designed to gauge level of commitment to school in the Year 12 pupil questionnaire.

**0.2.2 The 100 interviewees**
The second phase of the research involved interviews with 100 young people, selected from the above 3,423-strong sample. The processes involved in selecting and securing the involvement of these young people are set out below, together with details of the constituents of this sample.

**Selecting the 100 interviewees**
It was intended that the 100 young people participating in these interviews would comprise the following:

- the 59 young people who had formed the case-study sample in the post-primary phase of the project i.e. the young people, drawn from five post-primary schools, who had been interviewed annually or biannually since their final year at primary school
- 41 young people new to the interview phase but who had been part of the survey sample during Key Stages 3 and 4.

Because the study aimed to explore the views of young people from a range of post-16 routes, it was decided, in consultation with the project sponsors, that the principal selection criteria for the 41 new interviewees would be their post-16 destination. Thus, it was agreed that, having taken account of the destinations of the original 59 case-study young people, the remaining 41 interviewees would be chosen to ensure
that the interviewee sample comprised representatives of each type of post-16 destination in roughly equivalent proportions to the overall 3,423-strong sample. (There would, however, be some over-sampling of less-commonly undertaken post-16 pursuits e.g. employment, to make certain that the views were garnered of a sufficient number of 17- and 18-year olds who had proceeded straight to work.)

Potential interviewees could have been selected from any of the schools involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study in Year 12. The 41 new interviewees were ultimately drawn from 10 of these post-primary schools. The bases for selecting the 10 schools were as follows:

- that across the schools a variety of characteristics were represented – type (grammar/secondary), religious orientation, pupil constitution (single sex/coeducational), location

- that young people from the schools had proceeded to various post-16 destinations – to ensure that the interviewees for each destination type had attended a range of schools from Years 8–12 (Key Stages 3 and 4).

Within these schools, potential interviewees were selected by the research team (more potential interviewees were selected than needed, so that those declining could be replaced).

**Contacting the 100 interviewees**

NFER held no personal contact details for any of the 100 interviewees. Therefore, the research team approached the post-primary schools attended by these young people in Year 12 for assistance.

Where proposed interviewees had stayed on post-16 at their original school, arrangements were made with the school for researchers to visit to carry out interviews with these individuals there. If proposed interviewees had proceeded to other destinations, NFER requested contact details for these young people. NFER then wrote to the proposed interviewees, and followed this up with a telephone call (usually in the evenings when the young people had returned from school/college/training/work) to ask if they would be willing to be interviewed.

Two schools were unable to provide contact details but instead kindly agreed to pass on letters to the proposed interviewees. This correspondence contained a proforma (with a stamped addressed envelope) for the young people to return to the research team, or a telephone number for them to ring or text, if they wished to participate. Another school preferred to make contact with the proposed interviewees itself (all had left the school at the end of Year 12), and then forwarded to NFER only the details of those who agreed to be interviewed.

In total, contact was made with 149 young people (including those approached through their post-primary school) in order to secure the involvement of 100 interviewees. Individual interviews with 100 young people were conducted primarily in February and March 2003, and took place in schools, colleges, training centres, homes (in eight cases) and over the telephone (in six cases).
The characteristics of the 100 interviewees

Table 0.1 presents the post-16 destinations of the 100 young people taking part in the interview phase of the research.

Table 0.1 The post-16 destinations of the 100 young people in the interview sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-16 destination</th>
<th>Boys (N)</th>
<th>Girls (N)</th>
<th>Overall (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AS/A2-levels (school or FE college)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVCEs / BTEC National Diplomas (school or FE college)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related training (Jobskills at FE college/training centre, apprenticeship, training)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (naval training, sports sponsorship abroad)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *NI Curriculum Cohort Study post-16 phase: interview sample*

The overall sample of 100 interviewees had attended 15 post-primary schools in Year 12, spread across the five ELBs in NI: one integrated school; six Protestant-managed secondary schools; one Protestant-managed grammar school; four Catholic-managed secondary schools; and three Catholic-managed grammar schools (one single sex boys, one single sex girls and one co-educational). Within each destination category, care was also taken to ensure interviewees from different school types were represented. For example, the 26 interviewees in work-related training were drawn from one integrated school, six secondary schools (split evenly between Protestant- and Catholic-managed), and two grammars (also split evenly in terms of religious orientation).

Further details of the destinations of the 100 interviewees are set out in Figure 0.1.
The vast majority of these students studied four subjects to Advanced Subsidiary (AS)-level and then, after completing Year 13\textsuperscript{10}, elected to ‘drop’ one of these subjects and continued the remaining three to A2. There were slight variations however: four of the young people combined one or two A-levels with an Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) and three students, the highest achievers at GCSE/GNVQ, opted to study all four subjects to A2. The 39 AS/A2 interviewees were studying for these qualifications at nine schools and three FE colleges in NI. Nine of these young people had attended secondary schools in Year 12 that did not offer A-level courses and had transferred to other schools or FE establishments for post-16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AS/A2 levels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The vast majority of these students studied four subjects to Advanced Subsidiary (AS)-level and then, after completing Year 13\textsuperscript{10}, elected to ‘drop’ one of these subjects and continued the remaining three to A2. There were slight variations however: four of the young people combined one or two A-levels with an Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) and three students, the highest achievers at GCSE/GNVQ, opted to study all four subjects to A2. The 39 AS/A2 interviewees were studying for these qualifications at nine schools and three FE colleges in NI. Nine of these young people had attended secondary schools in Year 12 that did not offer A-level courses and had transferred to other schools or FE establishments for post-16.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AVCE/National Diplomas\textsuperscript{11}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sixteen interviewees were studying for AVCEs, and five were working towards a Business Training and Education Council (BTEC) National Diploma (in engineering, sports science, electronics and computing and food technology). Half of these 21 young people had stayed on at their post-primary school, whilst the remaining half, including all those undertaking BTEC National Diplomas, were attending FE college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work-related training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twenty-four of these interviewees were undertaking courses resulting in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the remaining two in BTECs. Courses included: engineering, welding, vehicle maintenance, joinery, bricklaying, electrics, plumbing, retail, beauty therapy and hairdressing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The type of employment undertaken by these ten interviewees included: shop assistant (four), classroom assistant/nursery nurse (two), factory operative (two), civil service (one) and taxi firm radio operator (one). Three of the ten were employed in businesses owned by their own families.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jobseeking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two of the young people were unemployed at the time of the interview: a full-time mother who was undertaking voluntary work at a local community centre as well as studying towards an NVQ in play-work one evening a week; and a young woman who had left her NVQ course because of ill health and was not currently undertaking any form of education or training.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other destinations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two interviewees could not easily be placed in any of the destination categories outlined above. One of these individuals was in the Royal Navy where, in addition to his naval training, he was working towards an engineering degree, and the final interviewee was studying at a high school in the United States on a sports scholarship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Interview data analysis}  
All 100 interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim or summarised. Analysis was undertaken using MAXQDA, a software package to assist qualitative data analysis.

\textsuperscript{10} Year 13 (lower-sixth), the first year of post-16 education.  
\textsuperscript{11} Because only five interviewees were undertaking NDs, in the report they have been considered alongside those taking AVCEs, though where their views differ, this is noted.
0.3 Structure of the report
Following this introduction, the structure of this report is as follows. Each Part of the report addresses an aim of the research.

Part 1 The post-16 destinations of the NI Curriculum Cohort Study young people (AIM 1)
- Statistical analyses of the post-16 destinations of the full Cohort Study sample of 3,423 young people in terms of the type of school they attended in Year 12 (e.g. grammar/secondary); their own characteristics (e.g. gender); and the attitudes they expressed towards the school curriculum during their years in post-primary education.
- The rationales for selecting their post-16 route offered by the 100 interviewees.

Part 2 Perspectives on 16–19 education, work-related training and employment: the views of 100 interviewees (AIM 2)
- The 100 interviewees’ experiences and opinions of their post-16 undertakings in terms of enjoyment, manageability, relevance, variety and, as appropriate, assessment and the Key Skills.

Part 3 Retrospective opinions on the post-primary curriculum: the views of 100 interviewees (AIM 3)
- The 100 interviewees’ perceptions of the extent to which the curriculum at Years 8–12 had prepared them for their post-16 destination and for everyday life.
- Their opinions on what should constitute the post-primary curriculum in the light of their post-16 experiences, and the extent to which the views they now hold differ from their attitudes when they were in Years 8–12.

Appendix A Tables presenting the post-16 destinations of the 3,423 NI Curriculum Cohort Study young people by school and pupil characteristics.
Part 1

The post-16 destinations of the NI Curriculum Cohort Study young people

1.1 Introduction
This part of the report addresses the first aim of the study: to set out findings related to the post-16 destinations of the sample of over 3,000 young people who were tracked through their post-primary education from Years 8–12\(^{12}\) for the NI Curriculum Cohort Study. This totalled over 10 per cent of all 16-year-olds finishing compulsory education in NI in 2001.

Part 1 begins by drawing on information provided by their post-primary schools to relay the first post-16 destinations of the full NI Cohort Study sample of 3,423 young people. Then, in order to establish the factors influencing the post-16 routes chosen, these destinations data were analysed in terms of the 3,423 young people’s own characteristics; the characteristics of the schools they attended in Year 12; and the attitudes expressed towards the curriculum in questionnaires they completed for the Cohort Study during Key Stages 3 and 4. Following this, Part 1 turns to the interviews conducted with 100 of the young people to explore the considerations that figured in their minds as they made their post-16 decisions. Finally, the post-18 plans of these 100 interviewees are briefly considered.

The structure of Part 1 is outlined below.

Section 1.2 The post-16 destinations of the 3,423-strong NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample

- The initial post-16 destinations of the 3,423 sample (1.2.1)
- Post-16 destinations analysed by post-primary school and pupil characteristics (1.2.2)
- Factors increasing the probability of undertaking post-16 routes (1.2.3)

Section 1.3 The post-16 decision-making of the 100 interviewees

- Post-16 decision-making: the influence of future aspirations (1.3.1)
- Post-16 decision-making: the influence from family (1.3.2)
- Post-16 decision-making: the influence from school (1.3.3)
- Changes in interviewees’ post-16 plans (1.3.4)

Section 1.4 The post-18 plans of the 100 interviewees

\(^{12}\)Key Stages 3 and 4.
1.2 The post-16 destinations of the 3,423-strong NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample

This section sets out the post-16 destinations of the 3,423-strong sample of young people who participated in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study. Information on the destinations was supplied by the post-primary schools attended by these young people in Year 12, and relates to their first destination upon finishing compulsory education in June 2001. The section begins by documenting the destinations of all 3,423 young people, and then moves on to explore associations between their post-16 routes and their personal characteristics, the type of post-primary school they attended and the attitudes they held towards the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4.

1.2.1 The initial post-16 destinations of the 3,423 sample

The post-primary schools of the Cohort Study young people were asked to provide details of their destinations under the headings of the ‘Class System’ 13 in order to ensure comparability of data. Table 1.1 presents the first destinations of the 3,423-strong sample under the ‘Class System’ headings. As this table shows, the ‘Class System’ did not reveal the type of school (grammar or secondary) attended by those who had stayed on at their own post-primary school for post-16. Therefore, in order to distinguish the proportions of the sample in post-16 education in secondary schools and grammar schools, these data were re-categorised, as shown in Table 1.2. In addition, ‘motherhood’, ‘year out’, ‘illness’ and ‘deceased’ – all of which appear in Table 1.1 – were subsumed into the ‘other’ 14 category for Table 1.2, because the count for each was fewer than ten.

In Tables 1.1 and 1.2, the post-16 destinations of ‘school’ and ‘FE college – courses up to A-level’ have been taken to signify forms of post-16 education and have been shaded dark grey. Categories related to Jobskills, either at FE college or through training providers or apprenticeships, have been considered as forms of work-related training and are highlighted in light grey.

---

13 A system used in NI to categorise destinations at 16.
14 ‘Other’ destinations included emigration, a gap year, entry into the armed services etc.
Table 1.1  The post-16 destinations of young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study (Class System headings)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary school</td>
<td>1495</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another secondary school</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another grammar school</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE college – courses up to A-level</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE college</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployed</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year out</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (inc. emigration)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3423</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study Post-16 Phase: post-16 destinations data collection

Table 1.2  The post-16 destinations of young people involved in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study (re-categorisation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>1136</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE college</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployment</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3423</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study Post-16 Phase: post-16 destinations data collection

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 show the following.

- In total, 70 per cent of the NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample continued in education after finishing compulsory schooling, predominately in a school setting and to a lesser extent at FE college.

- The first post-16 destination for 13 per cent of the sample was a move into work-related training (e.g. Jobskills at FE college, Jobskills/apprenticeship/training leading to NVQ qualifications).
• Eight per cent of the Cohort Study young people proceeded straight to work after finishing Year 12, and job seeking/unemployment was the first destination from compulsory schooling for two per cent of the sample.

The concentration of the Cohort Study young people in post-16 education corresponds with the Departments of Education (DE) and Employment and Learning (DEL) statistics which show that in 2001–2002 – the school year in which our sample embarked upon their post-16 paths – 72 per cent of 16- and 17-year-olds were in full-time education (DE, 2003). Compared with these NI-wide statistics, a greater proportion of young people in this Cohort Study chose to undertake post-16 education at school (51 per cent of our sample were in school compared with 45 per cent of all 16- and 17-year-olds in NI; the corresponding figures for those in FE college were 19 and 28 per cent respectively15).

Table 1.2 also shows the type of school attended by the Cohort Study young people for post-16 education, with the highest proportion – one-third – in grammar schools. Based on the findings of the interviews conducted for this project, it would be expected that the majority of the 1,136 young people in grammar schools would be taking AS/A2-level courses and, to a lesser extent, AVCEs. Almost one-fifth of the young people (601 individuals) were undertaking post-16 studies at secondary schools. The interviews suggested that courses offered here included AVCEs or at times AS/A2-levels. Regarding the courses studied by the 19 per cent of the sample at FE college (661 young people), the interview data showed that these included a spectrum of qualifications: AS/A2-levels, AVCEs, National Diplomas (NDs) and NVQs.

When making choices as to where to pursue post-16 education, comments made during the interviews carried out for this study would seem to suggest that this was at times a relatively straightforward decision. Amongst interviewees who had continued in education post-16, if their preferred post-16 course was offered at their post-primary school, the vast majority opted for the familiarity that this location offered:

*I have been here five years so you are kind of used to the whole routine, used to the whole building and everything, so it’s just easier with all your friends and stuff. It’s just a lot easier because you know all the teachers as well* (female, AS/A2-levels).

In instances where their post-primary school did not have a sixth form or did not offer their favoured post-16 course, a small number of these interviewees hinted that they had preferred to move to another school sixth form over an FE college because of the perceived status of the latter: *‘People think the tech is for people who couldn’t do their A-levels, didn’t have the GCSE grades or whatever to stay on at school’* (female, AVCE/NDs). For others, though, the ‘freer’ ambience of FE college appealed.

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15The England and Wales Youth Cohort Study’s examination of the activities of 16-year-olds finishing compulsory education in 2001 – the same time as our NI cohort – showed that a slightly higher proportion of those in education at 16 in England and Wales were in the FE sector rather than school (DfES, 2003).
1.2.2 Post-16 destinations analysed by post-primary school and pupil characteristics

The above destinations data were analysed in terms of young people’s own characteristics and those of the post-primary school they attended in Year 12, in order to describe the constituents undertaking each route post-16. The results of this analysis are set out below and show, for example, the post-16 routes taken by young people educated in Year 12 in secondary schools compared with those who attended grammar schools, or the destinations of boys in the sample compared with girls.

The key findings to emerge from the breakdown of the destinations data by school and pupil type are outlined below (with tables showing the full set of figures for each breakdown set out in Appendix A).

Post-16 destinations analysed by post-primary school characteristics

Type of post-primary school

- Almost all (95 per cent) of young people who had attended grammar schools up to Year 12 remained in education compared with nearer three-fifths (57 per cent) of those who were educated at secondary schools. The high proportion of former grammar-school pupils still in education is largely explained by the fact that the vast majority of these young people had remained in grammar schools post-16, and, in most cases, at the school they attended in Year 12.

- In total, one-fifth (20 per cent) of young people from secondary schools went on to pursue work-related training, compared with three per cent of their grammar-school peers.

- Similarly, 14 per cent of young people from secondary schools moved into employment or job seeking whereas only one per cent of ex-grammar pupils took these routes.

Free school meals’ eligibility level of the post-primary school

- Ninety per cent of young people whose post-primary school had a low level of eligibility for free school meals (FSM) remained in education. In contrast, around two-thirds of those from post-primaries with medium levels of FSM eligibility, and just over half of those from post-primary schools with a high FSM eligibility level, continued in education.

- Almost three times the proportion of young people from schools with high FSM eligibility embarked upon work-related training than their peers from low FSM schools. In terms of entering employment, the ratio was 6:1.

- Further, whilst numbers are small, a greater proportion of young people originally from schools with high FSM eligibility were unemployed (four per cent compared with one and two per cent respectively for low and mid FSM schools).
Religious orientation of the post-primary school

- There were two small differences between the post-16 destinations of young people according to the religious management of the school they had attended in Year 12. Firstly, 73 per cent of the sample from Catholic-managed schools chose to remain in education compared with 67 per cent of their peers from Protestant-managed schools. Secondly, ten per cent of our sample from Protestant-managed schools moved into employment compared with six per cent of the pupils who had attended Catholic-managed schools.

Post-16 destinations analysed by young people’s characteristics

Young people’s gender

- There was a considerable difference between the proportions of boys and girls who remained in education after Year 12: three-quarters of girls (76 per cent) did so compared with around three-fifths of boys (62 per cent).

- There were further differences in terms of the locations where the genders were undertaking post-16 education. Whilst the percentages of boys and girls continuing their post-16 studies at grammar schools were identical, around one-fifth of girls in the sample were furthering their education at secondary schools compared with around one-tenth of boys, possibly indicating that some of the courses offered in these institutions enthused boys less. The proportion of girls deciding to study at FE college (21 per cent) was also slightly higher than the percentage of boys (17 per cent) selecting this option.

- More than twice the proportion of boys than girls in the sample took up work-related training (20 per cent and eight per cent respectively).

- In comparison, there was a smaller difference between the genders in terms of the proportions entering employment (9 per cent of boys compared with 6 per cent of girls).

- The higher proportion of girls than boys in this sample engaging in post-16 education corresponds with NI-wide findings from DE (2002 and 2003). Further, in the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study, among 16-year-olds who also finished compulsory education in 2001, more girls than boys proceeded to post-16 education (DfES, 2003).

Young people’s social class

- There were sizable differences between the post-16 choices of middle and working class young people. In total, 86 per cent of the middle class young people in the sample remained in education, compared with 69 per cent of their working class counterparts. Most marked was the difference between the proportion of middle (57 per cent) and working class (26 per cent) young people furthering their education at grammar school.

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16Social class was determined on the basis of parents’ occupations. It was not possible to ascertain the social class of 1,055 of the sample, therefore this analysis is based on 2,368 young people.
Twice the proportion of working class young people (15 per cent) compared with their middle class peers (seven per cent) had chosen to pursue work-related training options. Similarly, a larger proportion of working class (eight per cent) than middle class young people (three per cent) entered employment upon finishing Year 12.

Young people’s attainment
Other recent research, for example the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (DfES, 2003), has found performance at GCSE/GNVQ to be strongly linked with post-16 destination, and this was also evident in this study. For those 3,175 young people for whom NFER held GCSE/GNVQ results, the score for each subject was determined using the following scoring system, and the average over all their subjects was calculated.

GCSE
A* = 8;  A = 7;  B = 6;  C = 5;  D = 4;  E = 3;  F = 2;  G = 1;  U/X = 0

GNVQ Part One
Distinction = 15;  Merit = 12;  Pass = 10;  Fail = 0

The average GCSE/GNVQ score for young people in each post-16 destination category is shown in Table 1.3. There was a significant difference between post-16 destinations depending on average GCSE/GNVQ score. Post-hoc tests17 showed that young people with the lowest mean GCSE/GNVQ scores moved into employment or were jobseeking, and this differed significantly from all other destinations. Those young people who went on to education in grammar schools had the highest mean GCSE/GNVQ score, and this, too, was significantly different from all other destinations.

17Post-hoc test: a statistical test to establish which groups differ significantly from each other.
Table 1.3 Young people’s post-16 destinations and their average GCSE/GNVQ score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Average GCSE/GNVQ score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar</td>
<td>1116</td>
<td>6.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE college</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployment</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3175</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study Post-16 Phase: post-16 destinations data collection

This section has highlighted differences in the post-16 destinations of young people in terms of the characteristics of the post-primary school they attended and their own personal features. However, which of these, and other variables related to young people’s experience, were actually affecting the likelihood of their taking a particular post-16 path? It is to this question that we shall now turn.

1.2.3 Factors increasing the probability of undertaking post-16 routes

The analysis presented in section 1.2.2 above has considered the post-16 destinations of the Cohort Study young people in terms of their personal characteristics and the characteristics of the post-primary school they attended in Year 12. However, there are some interrelationships between these variables that have contributed to the above results. For example, the finding that 95 per cent of young people from grammar schools have continued in education post-16 is partly explained by the GCSE/GNVQ results they attained. Therefore, in order to extrapolate which of these variables had most influence upon young people’s post-16 destinations, logistical multi-level models were constructed. The purpose of these was to establish which of the following pupil and school characteristics increased, or decreased, the probability of a young person in this sample pursing a particular route post-16:

- location of the school: Belfast, Northern Eastern, South Eastern, Southern or Western Education and Library Board (ELB)
- type of school: grammar or secondary
- pupil gender constitution of the school: single sex girl, single sex boys or coeducational
- type of management: Catholic-managed, Protestant-managed or integrated
- pupils’ level of engagement with learning in Year 12: through their responses to items in the Year 12 survey designed to gauge level of commitment to school, young people were categorised into three ‘engagement’ groups: low, mid or high
- school level of eligibility for free school meals: low, mid or high
- size of school: in terms of pupil numbers
• social class of pupils: middle class or working class
• gender of pupils
• whether or not the school had a sixth form
• pupils’ GCSE/GNVQ scores.

The above variables were examined in three multi-level models against the following destination types:

• remaining in full-time education post-16 (either at school or in FE college)
• staying on in a school setting post-16
• routes on leaving school at 16.

The results of these three multi-level models are presented below, followed by the findings from further models which analysed young people’s attitudes towards the post-primary curriculum against their destination. This section concludes by presenting an overview of each multi-level model in order to sum up the factors increasing the probability of undertaking particular routes post-16.

Factors increasing the probability of entering post-16 education (either at school or FE college)

This model examined the likelihood of remaining in full-time education post-16 (e.g. in school sixth forms or at FE college) against leaving education (e.g. for work-related training, employment, job seeking).

In terms of this 3,188-strong sample of NI young people, there was a very strong positive correlation between performance at GCSE/GNVQ and remaining in education such that, as GCSE/GNVQ scores increase, the likelihood of remaining in education also increases. Then, over and above GCSE/GNVQ results, the following three factors were found to independently increase the probability of remaining in education post-16. In order of impact, they were:

• the Y12 school having a sixth form
• degree of engagement with learning in Year 12: as engagement with learning increases, the probability of remaining in post-16 education increases
• gender: being female.

In terms of this 3,188-strong sample, the location, size, religious management or pupil constitution (single sex or coeducational) of the school attended by a young person in Year 12 did not increase the probability of remaining in education post-16. Nor did attending a grammar school. Rather, the school having a sixth form was influential. By way of example, there is no difference in the likelihood of two young people with average GCSE/GNVQ score – one from a grammar school and one from a secondary school with a sixth form – pursuing post-16 education. However, the odds in favour of these two young people continuing in education are higher than for a third young person who attended a secondary school without a sixth form in Year 12.

18The logistical multi-level modelling analysis excluded young people in the ‘other’ and ‘unknown’ destination categories.
Pulling together the above three factors, the following examples illustrate the difference made to the likelihood of entering post-16 education for this sample.

- A highly engaged female in a school with sixth form in Year 12 – i.e. an individual possessing each of the influential characteristics – has, with average GCSE/GNVQ score, a 95 per cent probability of moving on to post-16 education.

- A low-engaged male in a school without a sixth form in Year 12 – i.e. an individual without the influential characteristics – has, with average GCSE/GNVQ score, a 66 per cent probability of moving on to post-16 education. If he attends a school with a sixth form, his probability rises to 85 per cent.

Being female and the school having a sixth form have both been identified as influential factors in remaining in post-16 education in the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (e.g. Payne, 1998).

**Factors increasing the probability of entering post-16 education in a school setting**

Whereas the above model established factors related to the likelihood of pursuing post-16 education – be it at school or FE college – this model examined the probability of continuing in full-time education in a school setting i.e. ‘school stayers’ against ‘school leavers’ (those leaving school at 16 for education at FE college, work-related training, employment, job seeking). (Amongst the 100 interviewees, the majority of young people furthering their education in school sixth forms were undertaking AS/A2-levels, and if they are typical, then this model may go some way to set out the factors associated with the likelihood of embarking upon these courses instead of other post-16 qualifications, training, employment or job seeking.)

Again, there was a very strong positive correlation between performance at GCSE/GNVQ and staying on in education in a school setting. Then, over and above GCSE/GNVQ results, the following factors were found to independently increase the probability of staying on in a school sixth form (in order of impact):

- the Y12 school having a sixth form
- degree of engagement with learning in Year 12: a high level of engagement raised a young person’s odds of continuing their education in a school sixth form
- gender: female
- class: middle class
- type of school: grammar.

As can be seen, the first three factors were those which, as set out in the first model, also increased the odds of remaining in education overall (though gender, whilst still a significant factor, was less strongly associated with staying on in a school setting than it had been in remaining in education either at school or FE college).

However, there were also some noteworthy differences between the factors which increased the likelihood of staying on at school post-16, and those associated with the probability of remaining in education either in FE college or school.
Firstly, middle class young people had an enhanced probability of continuing their education in a school sixth form, though class was not a factor which increased the likelihood of remaining in post-16 education per se.

Secondly, there was a positive relationship (interaction) between GCSE/GNVQ score and attending a grammar school in Year 12. This means that a young person with average GCSE/GNVQ score from a grammar school has a greater probability of pursuing post-16 education in a school setting than their secondary-educated peer who also has average GCSE/GNVQ score.

Factors increasing the probability of pursuing the various routes open to school leavers

This model considered only those leaving school at 16 and, amongst these school leavers, examined the likelihood of pursuing education at FE college against entering work-related training, employment and job seeking.

There was a strong positive correlation between GCSE/GNVQ score and embarking upon college education for school leavers. Over and above this, the following factors increased school leavers’ probability of undertaking post-16 education at FE college rather pursuing work-related training, employment or job seeking. In order of impact, they were:

- gender: female
- engagement
- type of school: grammar

As can be seen above, for school leavers, there was an association between degree of engagement with learning and pursuing post-16 education at FE college. In the two previous models presented above, a high level of engagement was a factor related to the likelihood of remaining in education overall or of staying on at school. However, for school leavers, both low and high engagement enhanced the probability of proceeding to FE college rather than to work-related training, employment or job seeking. Whilst seemingly counterintuitive, this might be explained by able, but low-engaged, young people choosing to leave school after Year 12 to continue their education at college (regarded as ‘freer’ by those who were interviewed for this research), and less able, but highly engaged, young people selecting further education at college over work-related training, employment or job seeking.

In this ‘school leaver’ model, the FSM eligibility level of the post-primary school attended also emerged as a factor, though was negative and decreased the probability of remaining in education. This meant that young people from schools with a high FSM entitlement had a lower likelihood of entering FE college, and higher odds of proceeding to work-related training, employment or job seeking.

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19 Amongst school leavers, there was a further relationship between GCSE/GNVQ score and attending a grammar school in Year 12: a negative interaction. This means that schools leavers from grammar schools still have higher odds of proceeding to college rather than to work-related training, employment or job seeking; however, there is a smaller difference between the probabilities of grammar and secondary school leavers with high GCSE scores going on to college than there is between the probabilities of grammar and secondary school leavers with low GCSE scores.
Factors increasing the probability of undertaking post-16 routes: the influence of young people’s attitudes towards the post-primary curriculum

As the above discussion has already shown, young people’s degree of engagement with learning was associated with the likelihood of taking education routes post-16. Further logistical multi-level models were constructed to establish whether any other attitudes which young people held towards the curriculum, as captured in the surveys they completed from Years 8–12 for the NI Curriculum Cohort Study, influenced their probability of entering the various post-16 destinations.

Young people’s responses to the following themes in both the Years 10 and 12 questionnaires were included in the models: their views on the breadth and balance of the curriculum; their perspectives of its relevance; their opinions on its manageability; their enjoyment of their subjects; their perceptions of the progress they had made; and their experience of careers education. In addition, the differences in their ratings for these themes in Year 12 compared with Year 10 were also included in the models. As above, these responses were examined against the following destination types:

- continuing in full-time education (either at school or in FE college) post 16
- staying on in a school setting post-16
- routes on leaving school at 16.

Over and above the effect of performance at GCSE/GNVQ, two attitudes emerged as independently increasing the likelihood of choosing education routes post-16: perceptions of progress made and, to a lesser extent, perceptions of the balance of the curriculum.

Young people’s perceptions of their own progress

Young people’s appraisals of their progress in their subjects affected the likelihood of entering education routes. The following two types of response on progress were found to be influential.

High estimation of personal progress in Year 12

Firstly, young people who gave the highest ratings in Year 12 for their progress over all subjects.

- This increased the likelihood of continuing in education in a school setting i.e. ‘school stayers’ against ‘school leavers’ (those leaving school at 16 for education at FE college, work-related training, employment or job seeking).

Greatest increase in the estimation of progress from Year 10 to Year 12

Secondly, young people with the biggest increase in their rating of their progress over all subjects from Year 10 to Year 12 – that is, not necessarily those who gave the

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20These multi-level models are based on the 1,366 young people for whom both Year 10 and Year 12 questionnaire data were available.
highest progress ratings in Year 12, but those for whom there was the largest rise in their ratings of progress from Year 10 to Year 12\textsuperscript{21}.

- This increased the likelihood of proceeding to post-16 education (either at school or at FE college) over leaving education at 16 for work-related training, employment or job seeking.

- Amongst school leavers, this raised the probability of moving on to education at a FE college rather than entering work-related training.

The association between this latter progress ‘type’ and the increased probability of remaining in education is interesting because it shows the impact which changes in pupils’ own estimations of their progress can have on their post-16 choices. This result reveals that – whilst not necessarily giving the highest rating for progress in Year 12 – a young person who had increased in their perception of their progress from Year 10 to Year 12\textsuperscript{22} had a greater likelihood of continuing in education over and above the effect of performance at GCSE/GNVQ.

Young people’s perceptions of the balance of the curriculum
This was a less influential factor than young people’s perceptions of their own progress. However, it is perhaps noteworthy that amongst those leaving school at 16, those who, in Year 10, rated the time spent on their subjects as ‘too much’ on average, had a greater likelihood of embarking upon work-related training, employment or job seeking rather than proceeding to FE college for post-16 education.

An overview of factors increasing the probability of undertaking particular post-16 routes
In terms of this 3,188-strong sample of NI young people, there was a very strong positive correlation between performance at GCSE/GNVQ and remaining in full-time education such that, as GCSE/GNVQ scores increase, the likelihood of remaining in education also increases. Drawing together the above models, over and above GCSE/GNVQ results, the following factors were influential in independently increasing the probability of a young person choosing full-time education post-16.

- Their Y12 school having a sixth form
  - A school sixth form increased a young person’s likelihood of proceeding to full-time post-16 education (either at school or at FE college) over leaving education at 16 for work-related training, employment or job seeking.
  - Examining ‘school stayers’ (post-16 education in a school sixth form) against ‘school leavers’ (leaving school at 16 for education at FE college, work-related training, employment or job seeking), a school sixth form enhanced a young person’s probability of pursuing post-16 education in a school setting.

\textsuperscript{21}As measured by the difference between their average rating of progress across all subjects in Year 10 and their average rating of progress across all subjects in Year 12.

\textsuperscript{22}See footnote 21.
• **Their degree of engagement with learning in Year 12**
  - As engagement with learning increased, the likelihood of proceeding to post-16 education (either at school or at FE college) increased.
  - Examining ‘school stayers’ (post-16 education in a school sixth form) against ‘school leavers’ (leaving school at 16 for education at FE college, work-related training, employment or job seeking), then a high level of engagement enhanced a young person’s probability of pursuing post-16 education in a school setting.

• **Their gender: being female**
  - Compared with boys, girls had an increased likelihood of proceeding to post-16 education (either at school or at FE college).
  - Examining ‘school stayers’ against ‘school leavers’, then girls had a greater probability than boys of pursuing post-16 education in a school setting.
  - Taking only those leaving school after Year 12, then girls had higher odds than boys of undertaking post-16 education in college against embarking upon work-related training, employment or job seeking.

• **Their perceptions of their own progress**
  - Young people who had increased in their perception of their progress from Year 10 to Year 12 over all subjects had an increased likelihood of proceeding to post-16 education (either at school or at FE college).

In line with findings of the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (e.g. Payne, 1998), in this sample, attending a grammar school in Year 12 did not increase a young person’s probability of entering in post-16 education. A young person with average GCSE/GNVQ score from a grammar school was as likely to continue in education, either at school or at FE college, as a peer with this GCSE/GNVQ score from a secondary school with a sixth form. However, both these young people had a higher probability of pursuing post-16 education than their counterpart with average GCSE/GNVQ score from a secondary school without a sixth form. Attending a grammar school in Year 12, however, did increase the probability of undertaking post-16 education in a school setting. Middle class young people also had an enhanced probability of continuing their education in a school sixth form, though class, like a grammar-school education, was not a factor which increased the likelihood of remaining in education overall.

**Key questions**

To sum up, above and beyond the effect of GCSE/GNVQ results, the factors that were found to increase the likelihood of pursuing full-time post-16 education were: the school having a sixth form; degree of engagement with learning; being female; and perceptions of progress23. These findings endorse many of those in Payne’s review of the literature on factors affecting post-16 choices (Payne, 2003). If full-time education is considered a desirable post-16 destination, this raises the following questions.

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23Here the results of two models are summarised together.
• Could any enhancements be made to school sixth form provision or links strengthened between schools and FE colleges in NI?

• How can the curriculum – both in specification and mediation – be enhanced to extend young people’s sense of engagement with learning in Year 12?

• What can be done to enhance boys’ perceptions of post-16 education?

• What can be done to encourage young people to recognise the progress they make over the course of Key Stage 4?
1.3 The post-16 decision-making of the 100 interviewees

The above section documented the post-16 destinations of all 3,423 young people participating in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study, and relayed the factors which increased the probability of proceeding to particular routes post-16. However, what are the considerations which figure in the minds of young people as they choose their post-16 path? This section turns to the 100 young people with whom interviews were conducted in order to set out their rationales for selecting their post-16 destination.

As the Introduction explained, the post-16 destinations of our 100 interviewees at the time of their interviews were:

- AS/A2-levels (39 interviewees)
- AVCEs/NDs (21 interviewees)
- work-related training (26 interviewees)
- employment (10 interviewees)
- job seeking (2 interviewees)
- other (2 interviewees – naval training / sports scholarship).

Two-thirds of the AS/A2-level interviewees and almost all AVCE/ND interviewees also held part-time jobs, and were employed, on average, 14 hours a week.

As Section 1.2 has shown, there was a strong association between post-16 destination and GCSE/GNVQ score in the full 3,423-sample, and this was also evident amongst the 100 interviewees, such that AS/A2-level interviewees attained the highest GCSE/GNVQ results, with an average score of 6.3 (roughly equivalent to an average of a B-grade), then decreasing through the other destinations with AVCE/ND interviewees achieving an average score of 5.1 (C-grade), and work-related training and employed interviewees averaging the equivalent of a D and D-E grade respectively. Because of minimum entry requirements for some post-16 options – in particular AS/A2-level courses – this, in effect, means that not all 16-year olds had the full spectrum of post-16 possibilities open to them. Therefore, GCSE/GNVQ results would inevitably have impacted on interviewees’ choices even if these results were rarely explicitly highlighted as part of the decision-making process (save references to not being ‘academic’ amongst work-related training and employed interviewees).

Rather, when asked for the reasons why they had opted for their post-16 destination, the 100 interviewees offered responses relating to one or more of the following three rationales:

- their own future aspirations
- family influences
- advice from school.

The reasons identified by the 100 interviewees reflect many of the findings in Payne’s review of the literature on young people’s post-16 decision-making (Payne, 2003).

Each of above will now be set out in greater detail. The following sections each begin with a brief overview of the main findings, followed by a fuller discussion by
destination type. The section ends by considering changes in interviewees’ post-16 plans.

1.3.1 Post-16 decision-making: the influence of future aspirations
The key findings to emerge were as follows.

- Unsurprisingly perhaps, the post-16 decision-making of work-related training, AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees was most frequently influenced by factors relating to their future aspirations.

- In contrast, however, none of the employed individuals had chosen to enter work because of their future aspirations; rather they had been motivated by their desire to leave education or had started working when other post-16 plans such as work-related training were unsuccessful.

Post-16 decision-making: the influence of future aspirations by destination type
Three-quarters of the AS/A2-level interviewees asserted that their decision to study for these qualifications had been entirely, or partly, due to their own personal belief that this qualification would most beneficial to their future aspirations, namely university study. Interviewees explained further.

- Intention to pursue a specific career
  The most common reason for choosing to study AS/A2-levels, cited by 18 of the 30 interviewees who explicitly related their post-16 decision-making to their future aspirations, was that they had specific careers plans which required a university degree (e.g. doctor, barrister, architect). Hence, these individuals required AS/A2-levels to secure themselves a place at an higher education institution.

- Belief that a university degree would secure them a ‘better job’
  Twelve of these interviewees did not have a specific career in mind but wished to proceed to university because they assumed that a degree would lead to a ‘better job’. Half of these 12 interviewees revealed that, through their own part-time jobs or knowledge of certain friends’ or relatives’ occupations, they had become aware of the unskilled and monotonous nature of jobs that could be accessed with limited qualifications. The expectation that further qualifications would enable them to enter a more skilled profession had encouraged these young people to remain in full-time education.
**AS/A2-LEVELS**

**Intention to pursue a specific career**
*I have always wanted to be a barrister so it seemed to be the best way of going about it* (male, AS/A2-levels).

*I knew the subjects I needed to get into occupational therapy and there wasn’t any vocational courses that covered that, that would take me to the university level so I just decided to stay on* (female, AS/A2-levels).

**A degree would secure a ‘better job’**
*I just thought I would get a better job if I went on to university and then got a degree* (male, AS/A2-levels).

*You know, you wouldn’t get far with just A-levels now. You know, a degree is a minimum now to have any chance of getting a decent job* (male, AS/A2-levels).

*I don’t think it [part-time job in a kitchen] would be the kind of job that I would want to keep for the rest of my life because, I don’t know, there’s nothing new about it, so it kind of persuades you to stay on for A-levels* (female, AS/A2-levels).

*My mum and dad, they only went to secondary school, they never got the choice and I see where they’ve ended up and they have to work hard for it* (female, AS/A2-levels).

*If I just left school after GCSEs, I wouldn’t have got a proper job. It would have just been what I’m doing now, you know, working in a shop or something. I wouldn’t have been very skilled* (female, AS/A2-levels).

Just under two-thirds of the AVCE/ND interviewees, in comparison with three-quarters of the interviewees studying AS/A2-levels, reported that they had opted to undertake these courses because of their own belief in the benefits these would have for their future. A third of these AVCE/ND interviewees explained that they were studying AVCEs or National Diplomas because these types of course appealed to them more than AS/A2-levels. In a few instances, interviewees had chosen AVCEs over AS/A2-levels because of the more vocational nature of the former: one female, for example, had opted for the AVCE in health and social care instead of AS/A2-levels because she hoped to pursue a nursing career and believed that this course, which involved practical work, would strengthen her career prospects. That AVCEs were considered ‘easier’ and ‘less work’ than AS/A2-levels, together with the range of subjects available for AVCEs and National Diplomas, were also stated by several individuals as reasons why they had opted for these courses.
In total, almost four-fifths of the individuals undertaking work-related training specifically ascribed this choice of destination either wholly, or partly, to their future aspirations. This compares with three-quarters of AS/A2-level interviewees and two-thirds of AVCE/ND students who reported choosing their destination on these grounds. Ten of these work-related training interviewees commented that they had decided not to enter employment and instead opted for vocational training courses because the combination of experience and qualifications would enable them to secure a ‘better job’ in the future. Indeed, four interviewees revealed that they did not aspire to a career in the field in which they were training, but instead saw their qualification in terms of employment security – as exemplified in the box below.

In contrast to the above interviewees who were motivated by their future aspirations, the short-term monetary benefit of work-related training had appealed to six interviewees. These six young people, who achieved higher than average GCSE/GNVQ scores for this destination type, had considered continuing in education post-16 (i.e. studying AS/A2-levels or AVCE/NDs) but had eventually opted for work-related training because of their more immediate goal to earn a wage. In addition, two of the employed interviewees had chosen to start working they ‘wanted the money’. Thus, the financial incentive associated with work-related training and employment was explicitly stated as a motivation for almost one-quarter of the interviewees who had opted for these post-16 destinations. These interviewees had embarked on their post-16 paths in 2001, prior to the introduction to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and one of these young people explicitly stated that, if he had received money for doing so, he would have stayed on in education:

*I think if, in some form, you got paid, I would have probably stayed on, but it was just the money made me leave in the end like wanting more money over school* (male, work-related training).
In contrast to previous groups of interviewees, none of the employed young people had decided to enter employment because of their future aspirations. In addition to the two aforementioned interviewees who had entered employment because they ‘wanted the money’, seven of the employed interviewees explained that they had started their jobs because they did not want to stay in education. Four of the ten interviewees had been offered full-time jobs following time spent in that particular workplace for school work experience, for a part-time job or on an NVQ placement (meaning that they had not completed the qualification). One male was offered his job in a butcher’s shop following a week’s work experience in Year 12. He considered the offer and decided that he would accept it because the job was ‘not too bad’. Consequently, he was unable to complete his compulsory education and therefore possessed no formal qualifications. This possibly raises risks associated with job offers which may not be in the best long-term interests of young people.

Both unemployed interviewees had left school with plans of furthering their education. However, one interviewee had had to leave her NVQ course because of ill health, while the other young person had abandoned an AVCE because of impending motherhood.

1.3.2 Post-16 decision-making: the influence from family
The key findings to emerge were as follows.

- Around half of the interviewees reported that their post-16 choices had been influenced by their families. This was particularly the case for those in work-related training where family influences were cited by two-thirds of interviewees, and to a lesser extent for AS/A2-level and employed interviewees, followed by those undertaking AVCE/NDs.

- Further, in analysis which examined the 100 interviewees’ destinations by their parents’ occupations, these young people’s post-16 choices were most frequently leading them towards the same broad employment grouping as their parents e.g.
professional/managerial, intermediate or routine occupations. For example, amongst interviewees with at least one parent in a professional occupation, the greatest proportion was studying for AS/A2-levels. This corresponds with findings from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (DfES, 2003) which found that in its sample, young people with at least one parent holding a degree were much more likely to be studying for AS/A2-levels.

**Post-16 decision-making: the influence from family by destination type**

Half of the AS/A2-level interviewees explicitly stated that their family had influenced their decision to stay on at school post-16. The vast majority of these pupils noted that their parents’ desire for them to study AS/A2-levels had simply added credence to their intention to remain at school. However, in a few instances, parents appeared to have been quite insistent that their offspring remained in full-time education. One female admitted, ‘My parents were quite specific about me doing it!’, and another relayed, ‘There was times when I’m thinking, “Is this really what I want to do or is it just because they want me to do it?”’.

In addition to the 19 interviewees who felt their decision to study AS/A2-levels had been influenced by their family, a further 14 AS/A2-level interviewees ascribed their decision to their family background, viewing AS/A2-levels as the ‘natural progression’ from GCSE/GNVQs. This can be related to the fact that all 33 of the AS/A2-level interviewees who volunteered information about their parents’ occupations, had at least one parent in employment and over two-thirds of these had at least one parent in a professional/managerial occupation:

> It’s not an option in my family. It’s just what’s expected (female, AS/A2-levels).

> I think possibly just because of the background that you grow up in. It’s just where we live in society. It is almost just assumed to be the norm, so yes, I just always assumed that I would do it [stay on in education for AS/A2 levels] (male, AS/A2-levels).

Of the remaining AS/A2-level interviewees, seven had at least one parent in an intermediate occupation and three had parent(s) in routine jobs. Amongst these young people, there was a sense that their parents were encouraging their children to take on the opportunity of further study which had eluded them: ‘My dad was a builder and my mum is just a housewife ... I mean my mum and dad, they didn’t really pay much attention to school ... there’s a lot expected of me’ (male, AS/A2-levels); ‘I’ll be the first person in my family to go to university, so the pressure’s on!’ (female, AS/A2-levels).

Just over one-third of AVCE/ND interviewees, compared with half of AS/A2-level students, explicitly stated that their families had influenced their decision to enrol on an AVCE/ND course. In these instances, parents encouraged their children to take the full-time education route as opposed to a more vocational work-related training option or employment: ‘My mummy always says that you’re better getting the education behind you than going into a job’ (female, AVCE/NDs).

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24When categorising the interviewees’ parents’ occupations, the new National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) was used, and the labels of the ‘3-class system’ adopted: professional/managerial, intermediate and routine/working occupations. Classification was determined by the highest occupation in each family.
Just under half of the 21 AVCE/ND students who volunteered information regarding their parents’ occupations had at least one parent in a professional/managerial occupation. This was a considerably smaller proportion than the number of AS/A2-level students with professional parents, and hence may indicate why only two AVCE/ND interviewees, compared with 14 AS/A2-level students, believed that the ‘natural choice’ was to continue in full-time education. Of the remaining AVCE/ND interviewees, nine had parents who worked; seven of these in intermediate occupations and two in routine occupations. The remaining two young people had parent(s) who were currently out of work.

Eleven of the AVCE/ND interviewees were embarking on different post-16 routes to those undertaken by their parents. Through their parents’ experiences, these young people were stimulated to achieve their future aspirations:

*Mummy doesn’t actually work, but I suppose she has influenced me to actually get a decent career not just be at home ... She didn’t continue school after GCSE, like she regretted it, so that’s why I actually said I wanted to go on to further education ... actually make something with my life ... to be able to come out with a career, earn a decent wage, you know, get a house. So, definitely, mum, I suppose, has reared me on to actually do it* (female, AVCE/NDs).

Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees undertaking work-related training, a higher proportion than both AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees, explicitly stated that their families had influenced their decision to opt for this post-16 destination. Several of these interviewees explained that their parents had encouraged them to study for a qualification while they were gaining work experience because this would improve their future employment prospects.

Twenty-three of the 26 interviewees undertaking work-related training volunteered information regarding their parents’ occupations. One-quarter of these work-related training interviewees, compared with two and nearly three times this proportion of AVCE/ND and AS/A2-level interviewees respectively, had at least one parent in a professional/managerial occupation. In contrast, half of these work-related training interviewees (compared with one-third and one-fifth of AVCE/ND and AS/A2-level interviewees) had at least one parent in an intermediate occupation. Possibly as a result of their parents’ occupations, many of these work-related individuals felt that, on completion of compulsory education, their ‘natural choice’ was to acquire a qualification in a specific vocational field (e.g. plumbing, hairdressing). The parents of several of these work-related training interviewees owned their own businesses. In such cases, it appeared that this was an incentive for these young people to undertake training in this particular field: ‘I knew there was a business to take over, but if it wasn’t for that, I wouldn’t be 100 per cent sure where I was going to end up’ (male, work-related training).

In the course of their interviews, five of the ten interviewees currently in employment explicitly stated that their parents and families had influenced their decisions regarding their post-16 destination. Of these, two interviewees had started, and then left, the same vocational course which older siblings had completed and a further two had started working for family businesses.

25The six remaining work-related training interviewees had parents who either did not work or whose jobs were classed as routine.
Of the eight employed individuals who volunteered information about their parents’ occupations, one had a parent with a professional/managerial occupation. Four of the interviewees had at least one parent in an intermediate occupation and the remaining three had parents who either did not work or undertook routine jobs.

Both of the unemployed interviewees had mothers with long-term health problems and the father of one of these young people had received a custodial sentence.

1.3.3 Post-16 decision-making: the influence from school
The key findings to emerge were as follows.

- In terms of the number of actual citations from interviewees, the impact that advice from school had on their post-16 decisions appeared more minimal than the influence of future aspirations or from family.

- In total, one-sixth of all interviewees explicitly stated that the careers advice they received had assisted them in selecting their post-16 destination; however, all but four of the 100 interviewees could recall having received some careers education during Years 11 and 12.

Post-16 decision-making: the influence of advice from school by destination type
A quarter of the AS/A2-level interviewees remarked that advice from their subject teachers had influenced their decision to study AS/A2-levels post-16. These young people reported that subject teachers had given them the impression that it was ‘best to stay on at school’ and had encouraged them to do so:

I think it’s encouragement from the teachers, because they would talk about the A-level courses ... and they give you loads of information about what you are going to do, so they kind of persuade you into staying on (female, AS/A-levels).

One-eighth of the AS/A2-level interviewees reported that the official careers education they received during Years 11 and 12 (e.g. careers classes and guidance) had assisted them in selecting their post-16 destination. However, the vast majority of AS/A2-level interviewees did not feel that the careers input they received in these years had facilitated their decision:

There wasn’t really that much provision made from what I can remember. You were sort of expected to talk to your parents and come to a decision yourself. There was a lot of information given about, you know, go to sixth form and what you can do there, but not about your other options really (female, AS/A-levels).

Compared with AS/A2-level interviewees, a slightly larger proportion (one-third) of the AVCE/ND interviewees reported that, when deciding what route to take post-16, they had been influenced by advice from school. Several of these interviewees explained that subject teachers had advised them to choose AVCE/ND courses over AS/A2-levels because they were considered less demanding. Nearly a quarter of the AVCE/ND interviewees explicitly stated that the official careers education they
received in Years 11 and 12 had helped them decide which path to pursue following their compulsory schooling.

As was the case with AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees, a minority of the interviewees undertaking work-related training cited that advice from school had impacted upon their post-16 decision-making. Minimal numbers noted that particular teachers had encouraged them to undertake work-related training, offering them advice about what certain courses would entail. A small number of these interviewees acknowledged the usefulness of the official careers education they received at school. However, one-fifth of the work-related training interviewees explicitly stated that they felt their careers classes had been geared towards pupils staying on at school to do AS/A2-levels and believed that they were not given enough advice about the full range of post-16 options open to them.

None of the ten employed interviewees perceived that advice from school had influenced their decision to start work following their GCSE/GNVQs. Three of these young people commented that the official careers education they attended had not offered any advice regarding the post-16 options available:

“We never really done nothing [in careers classes]. We just like sat there and did like a booklet and sometimes went on the internet but it wasn’t really advice as such, or anything” (female, employment).

Likewise, one of the unemployed interviewees did not believe that the official careers education she received during her compulsory schooling had helped her decide which option to pursue post-16. However, the other unemployed interviewee asserted that she had originally decided to embark on an NVQ in beauty therapy (before her ill health intercepted) because: ‘We were looking at things to do in careers class and that was the only thing I thought that I would like to do.’

**Interviewees’ recollections of careers education**

The above discussion has shown that the majority of interviewees – across all destination types – did not explicitly cite the official careers education (e.g. careers classes and guidance) received at school as an influential factor in the post-16 decision-making. However, when interviewees were probed regarding careers education during Years 11 and 12, all but four could recall receiving some such input. The majority of the interviewees who reported finding this careers education useful explained that this was because it had taught them transferable skills such as ‘how to do application forms’. Possibly explaining its more minimal impact on post-16 decision-making, typically careers education was noted to be of more use to those individuals who already had a particular occupation in mind than to those who had ‘no idea’ with regard their future:

“It was very basic and if you didn’t really know what you were doing, they wouldn’t go through it with you. They would only go through it with people who knew what they wanted to do … but if you didn’t really know what you wanted to do, they couldn’t really help you with it” (female, AS/A2-levels).

At times, pupils who had remained at their post-primary school to study AS/A2-levels questioned the extent and impartiality of the careers input they had received during
their compulsory schooling. For instance, one interviewee felt she had been misled by her school because, with her qualifications (two AVCEs), she was unable to apply for her preferred degree course. Consequently, she needed to take a BTEC qualification, a course she could have enrolled upon following completion of her GCSE/GNVQs two years earlier:

The school doesn’t even give you enough qualifications to get straight into a degree course, so I think they should have told us in fifth year that if you want to go to a university and do a degree course, then look at colleges or another school, because they don’t offer that here (female, AVCEs).

Similarly, another female had wished to do a ND but had not realised that she could undertake this qualification without AS/A2-levels until after she had commenced her AS-level courses.

1.3.4 Changes in interviewees’ post-16 plans
At the time of interview, 17 of the 100 interviewees were no longer in their original post-16 destination. The following summarises how these young people changed their plans.

• Three interviewees changed from AS-levels and were now pursuing: BTEC NDs in two cases and naval training in one case.

• Two interviewees exchanged AVCE courses for NVQs, and another had left an AVCE because of pregnancy.

• Seven young interviewees had originally commenced work-related courses but were currently employed or, in one instance, unemployed.

• Four interviewees had entered employment but were now undertaking work-related training.

Of the 17 interviewees who changed post-16 destination, half had sought advice from local careers centres when they were making these decisions. The following discussion gives more detail on the changing plans of these 17 interviewees, and also sets out instances where interviewees, whilst still pursuing the same destination type, had changed subject matter.

Two interviewees commenced AS-levels but one later transferred to a more ‘hands on’ ND in mechanical engineering and the other to an ND in food technology. Another individual started AS-levels but was not enjoying them and so, after completing his AS-level examinations, applied and was accepted into the Royal Navy:

I found once I went back to school [for AS-levels] I wasn’t enjoying it as much and getting the grades that I used to get. So I thought it was time to find something else ... The Navy was the one that appealed to me most. They offered me most with the engineering degree (male, Navy).
In addition, two AS/A2 interviewees spent the year following their GCSE/GNVQs resitting some of these qualifications and so, at the time of their interview, were in their first year of AS/A2 level study.

Two of the young people changed from studying AVCEs in health and social care to hairdressing or beauty NVQs. One individual had started an AVCE but abandoned this because of impending motherhood and was unemployed at the time of her interview. A further two interviewees were still undertaking AVCEs but in different subject areas from those on which they had originally enrolled, owing to dissatisfaction with their initial courses. Finally, one interviewee spent the year following his GCSE/GNVQs working towards an AVCE and had then accepted an overseas high school’s offer of a football scholarship.

Seven young people had enrolled on work-related training but later abandoned these vocational courses. The fact that these interviewees started on these courses suggests that they realised the significance of further training:

Well, I always wanted to go on, you know, to get another qualification or something but it just didn’t work out ... GCSEs aren’t really enough to get a job so that’s what made me want to go on, just to get something else (female, employment).

However, they explained that they had not been entirely satisfied with the course they enrolled on. Their rationales offered for this discontentment included the following.

- Dislike of subject matter: ‘There was nothing really exciting about it [a secretarial course]’ (female, employment).

- An inability to keep up with college work because the work placement did not facilitate the acquisition of practical skills: ‘It was too hard coming into school [training centre] and doing something different than I was doing out [at work placement] three days a week ... I was doing different things and I wasn’t really doing joinery and I was just getting a bit behind on doing my joints in the workshop’ (male, employment).

- A desire to leave education/training: ‘I think it was more or less just the thought that I’d been in the school for five years and I didn’t really want to be there’ (female, employment).

Leaving work-related training at this stage meant these interviewees felt it was too late to enrol on a further course and hence seeking employment was their only option. At the time of interview, three of the seven interviewees who had left work-related training were currently working for family businesses. One female had had to leave her NVQ beauty course because of ill health and was currently unemployed. In addition to the seven interviewees who had changed destination after commencing work-related training, one male had spent the year following his GCSE/GNVQs studying for an NVQ in agriculture, which he successfully completed, and was currently in his first year of an NVQ in joinery.

Four interviewees had started working and then either decided they were not enjoying their job or wanted to acquire a qualification, so had enrolled on work-related training.
courses. One of these interviewees had started work as a brick layer and then realised that if he was not qualified in this field, he would always receive the same wage: ‘You will always be on the same money from day one until you leave’.

1.4 The post-18 plans of the 100 interviewees

Having considered the 100 interviewees’ post-16 destinations, let us move forward and briefly consider their post-18 plans. At the time of the interview, these young people were 17 or 18 years of age and were two years beyond compulsory education.

In total, 82 of the 100 interviewees reported a desire to embark on further qualifications or training following their post-16 undertakings. This proportion comprised: all but one of the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND students; almost three-fifths (15) of those individuals currently undertaking work-related training; half of the ten interviewees in employment; a full-time mother; an individual on a football scholarship in the United States and a young person in the Royal Navy. The fact that, at the age of 17 or 18, the vast majority of these interviewees planned further study implies that they were aware of the importance of qualifications and training, regardless of the career towards which they aspired.

Of those 18 interviewees that did not wish to pursue further study, four intended to join the Armed Services and hence felt they would have the opportunity to develop themselves further through this manner of training. The remaining interviewees, that is, those who did not intend to pursue any form of further study or training, consisted of: one AVCE student, ten young people undertaking work-related training; two employed individuals (both working for family businesses) and one individual who was unemployed due to ill health. That only one of the 60 A-level/AVCE interviewees opted not to continue in education indicates that it was uncommon for young people to leave education following completion of their A-levels/AVCEs. This possibly raises questions as to whether young people perceived A-levels/AVCEs as having any value as an independent qualification, or whether their attraction was solely their ability to facilitate access to higher education. This last point will be considered further in Part 2.
1.5 Part 1 summary
This chapter has set out the post-16 destinations of the 3,423 young people who participated in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study – that is approximately 10 per cent of all NI 16-years-olds finishing compulsory education in 2001 – and established the factors which increase and influence the likelihood of pursuing different routes post-16.

1.5.1 The post-16 destinations of the 3,423 sample
In total, 70 per cent of the 3,423-strong NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample continued in education after finishing compulsory schooling, predominantly in a school setting and to a lesser extent at FE college. The concentration of these young people in post-16 education corresponds with the DE and DEL statistics which show that in 2001–2002 – the school year in which our sample started on their post-16 paths – 72 per cent of 16- and 17-year-olds were in full-time education (DE, 2003).

The first post-16 destination for 13 per cent of the sample was a move into work-related training (e.g. Jobskills at FE college, Jobskills/apprenticeship/training leading to NVQ qualifications). More than twice the proportion of boys to girls, and working class young people compared with their middle class peers, had chosen this option.

Eight per cent of the Cohort Study young people went straight to work after finishing Year 12, and job seeking/unemployment was the first destination from compulsory schooling for two per cent of the sample. In comparison with their peers in schools with mid and, in particular, low levels of eligibility for FSM, a greater proportion of young people from schools with a high FSM level entered employment or were unemployed upon leaving school at 16.

There was a significant difference between post-16 destinations depending on average GCSE/GNVQ score. Post-hoc tests showed that young people with the lowest mean GCSE/GNVQ scores moved into employment or were job seeking, and this differed significantly from all other destinations. Those young people who went on to post-16 education in grammar schools had the highest mean GCSE/GNVQ score, and this, too, was significantly different from all other destinations.

1.5.2 The factors increasing the probability of entering post-16 education
An aim of this research study was to establish the factors which increased the probability of selecting particular post-16 paths. Logistical multi-level models were constructed to examine the likelihood of continuing in education post-16 (e.g. in school sixth forms or at FE college) against leaving education at 16 (e.g. for work-related training, employment, job seeking).

In terms of the young people participating in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study, the principal factor that independently increased the probability of entering post-16 education was 26:

26These results are drawn from two models, each containing a different number of cases (see section 1.2.3). The results of the logistical multi-level models constructed for this study also reflect many of the findings set out by Payne in her review of the literature on post-16 choices (Payne, 2003).
• **Their performance at GCSE/GNVQ**: there was a very strong correlation between GCSE/GNVQ results and post-16 education, such that as GCSE/GNVQ scores increased, the odds of continuing in education increased.

And then, over and above GCSE/GNVQ results, each of the following independently increased the probability of young people entering post-16 education.

• **Their Year 12 school having a sixth form.**

• **Their degree of engagement with learning in Year 12**: as engagement with learning increased, the probability of continuing in education post-16 increased.

• **Their gender**: being female.

• **Their own perceptions of their progress**: young people who increased in their estimation of their progress from Year 10 to the end of Key Stage 4 had a greater probability of continuing in education post-16.

In terms of this 3,423-strong sample, the location, size, religious management or pupil constitution (single sex or coeducational) of the school attended by a young person in Year 12 did not affect the probability of continuing in education post-16.

Further, in line with findings of the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (e.g. Payne, 1998), attending a grammar school in Year 12 did not increase a young person’s probability of entering post-16 education. Thus, there was no difference in the probability of two young people with average GCSE/GNVQ score – one from a grammar school and one from a secondary school with a sixth form – pursuing post-16 education either at school or FE college. However, the odds in favour of these two young people continuing in education were higher than for a third young person with average GCSE/GNVQ score from a secondary school without a sixth form.

Attending a grammar school in Year 12 did, however, affect the location of post-16 education. Those from grammar schools had an increased probability of continuing their education in a school setting rather than at FE college. Middle class young people also had an enhanced probability of continuing their education in a school sixth form, though social class, like a grammar-school education, was not a factor that increased the likelihood of continuing in education *per se*.

### 1.5.3 The post-16 decision-making of the 100 interviewees

The 100 young people interviewed for this research were asked for their rationales for selecting their post-16 destination. As section 1.5.2 above has shown, there was a strong association between destination and GCSE/GNVQ score in the full 3,423-strong NI Curriculum Cohort Study sample. This was also evident amongst the 100 interviewees, such that AS/A2-level interviewees attained the highest GCSE/GNVQ results on average, then decreasing through the other destinations (in order: AVCE/NDs, work-related training, then employment or job seeking). Whilst performance at GCSE/GNVQ would inevitably have impacted on interviewees’ post-16 choices, this was rarely explicitly highlighted by them as part of their decision-
making process. Rather, when giving their reasons for opting for their post-16 destination, the interviewees focussed on the three following influences – which endorse many of the findings in Payne’s review of the literature on factors affecting post-16 choices (Payne, 2003).

**The influence of future aspirations**
Unsurprisingly perhaps, the post-16 decision-making of work-related training, AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees was most frequently influenced by factors relating to their future aspirations. In contrast, however, none of the employed individuals had chosen to enter work because of their future aspirations. Rather they had been motivated by their desire to leave education or had started working when other post-16 plans such as work-related training were unsuccessful. Further, for some employed interviewees as well as a small number of work-related training interviewees, the immediate monetary benefit of these post-16 pursuits had appealed.

**The influence from family**
Around half of the interviewees reported that their post-16 choices had been influenced by their families. This was particularly the case for those in work-related training where family influences were cited by two-thirds of interviewees, and then for AS/A2-level and employed interviewees, followed by those undertaking AVCE/NDs.

Further, in analysis which examined the 100 interviewees’ destinations by their parents’ occupations, these young people’s post-16 choices were frequently leading them towards the same broad employment grouping as their parents. For example, in line with findings from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (DfES, 2003), amongst our interviewees with at least one parent in a professional occupation, the greatest proportion was studying for AS/A2-levels.

**The influence from school**
The impact that advice from school had on interviewees’ post-16 decisions appeared more minimal than the influence of future aspirations or from family. In total, 14 interviewees explicitly stated that the official careers education (e.g. careers classes and guidance) they received had assisted them in selecting their post-16 destination; however, this was 14 out of the 96 who could recall having received some careers education during Years 11 and 12. From interviewees’ recollections of the careers education they had received at post-primary school, it appeared that whilst this was useful in teaching transferable skills such as ‘how to do application forms’, it was less informative in advising those who had ‘no idea’ with regard to their future plans. Further, as was also documented in the Key Stage 4 phase of this study (Harland et al., 2003), there was some question as to the extent and impartiality of careers education received whilst at school.
Questions raised by the research

• Given the association found to exist between sixth form provision and entry into post-16 education, could any enhancements be made to school sixth forms or links strengthened between schools and FE colleges in NI?

• How can the status of post-16 education at FE college be raised? Whilst attracted to its ‘freer’ ambience, a number of interviewees hinted that ‘the tech’ was perceived to be ‘for people who couldn’t do their A-levels’.

• What should careers education entail and by whom should it be led so that young people can draw more readily on this to inform their post-16 decision-making?
Part 2

Perspectives on 16–19 education, work-related training and employment: the views of 100 interviewees

2.1 Introduction
This part of the report draws on the interviews conducted with 100 young people to address the second aim of the study. That is, it examines the efficacy of 16-19 education, and perspectives and experiences of work-related training and employment.

Part 2 begins by exploring the attitudes that the 60 interviewees who remained in education (undertaking AS/A2-levels, AVCEs or BTEC National Diplomas) expressed towards their post-16 studies. Following this, the discussion turns to the 36 interviewees who left education at 16 and proceeded to work-related training and employment. Their experiences and perceptions of their courses and work are documented. In the overviews, which end each of above sections, any differences in interviewees’ perspectives on 16–19 education (in the first instance) and training and employment (in the second instance) are highlighted.

The structure of Part 2 is outlined below.

Section 2.2 Pursuing education post-16: interviewees’ perspectives on 16–19 education
- Breadth and balance (2.2.1)
- Enjoyment (2.2.2)
- Relevance (including views on Key Skills) (2.2.3)
- Manageability (2.2.4)
- Continuity and progression (2.2.5)
- Assessment (2.2.6)
- Overview of interviewees’ perspectives of 16–19 education (2.2.7)

Section 2.3 Leaving formal education at 16: interviewees’ perspectives on work-related training and employment
- The experiences and perceptions of work-related training interviewees (2.3.1)
- The experiences and perceptions of employed interviewees (2.3.2)
- Overview of interviewees’ perspectives of work-related training and employment (2.3.3)
2.2 Pursuing education post-16: interviewees’ perspectives on 16–19 education

This section considers the perceptions of the 60 interviewees undertaking AS/A2-level, AVCE and ND courses, at a school sixth-form or FE college. These interviewees comprised: 39 AS/A2-level students; 16 AVCE students and 5 ND students. Each was asked to reflect on their experience of post-16 education to date, under a number of themes which had also been the focus of enquiry in the Year 7 and Key Stages 3 and 4 phases of the research (Harland et al. 1999a and b, 2002 and 2003). These themes, which form the sub-headings of the discussion below, are as follows:

- breadth and balance
- enjoyment
- relevance (including views on Key Skills)
- manageability
- continuity and progression
- assessment.

The section concludes with an overview and discussion of findings.

2.2.1 Breadth and balance

Interviewees were asked for their views on the number of subjects they were studying at A-level/AVCE. Of those who commented, four-fifths preferred the smaller number of subjects making up their post-16 curriculum to the broader range of subjects they had studied at Key Stage 4. Seven of these interviewees (one in seven) favoured the wider variety at Key Stage 4, and four interviewees had mixed feelings or no preference.

The key findings were as follows.

- Fewer examined subjects made studies more manageable overall, and the majority of A-level/AVCE interviewees preferred to trade breadth for this increased manageability.

- These interviewees appreciated the opportunity to dispense with subjects they had not enjoyed at Key Stages 3 and 4 and instead to focus on those of greatest personal interest and relevance to future plans.

- Notwithstanding the prevailing preference for a more specialised and thus more manageable curriculum, over half of the A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they missed certain subjects they had dropped for post-16 education, in particular physical education (PE) and modern foreign languages (MFL). To this end, there was a view from a minority that a non-examined ‘enrichment’ element to the post-16 curriculum would be beneficial, with PE, MFL and the arts primarily cited.

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27In the text when AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees have been considered together, they are referred to by the shorthand ‘A-level/AVCE interviewees’.
The advantages of the specialised focus of post-16 education

When asked for their opinion on the number of subjects they were currently taking, a high proportion of A-level/AVCE interviewees initially conceptualised this enquiry in terms of manageability – the amount of work they had to contend with – as opposed to the interviewer’s ‘intended’ question of breadth and balance of subject coverage. To a large extent, therefore, reasons for favouring the increased specialisation of the post-16 curriculum were bound up with these issues of manageability, with several of these interviewees explaining that they now found it easier to concentrate on their studies, or could maintain better focus with fewer subjects.

Also common amongst these interviewees was the opinion that they were ‘glad to be rid of’ subjects they had not enjoyed earlier on in school, or preferred being able to focus exclusively on those of particular personal interest. Related to this, three students explained that they preferred the specialised focus of post-16 studies for the increasing relevance and direction they perceived, as they approached higher education or employment: ‘Well, if you know what you are going for [at university], I find it a bit better just to go for the one area. Might as well get used to what you are going to do’ (male, AVCE/NDs).

Again linked with manageability, there was a perception that the ability to concentrate on areas of interest and dedicate more time to each subject could result in better retention of knowledge, a higher standard of work and greater achievement. A small number of students in fact suggested that further narrowing of the range of subjects earlier on in school, with more specialisation at GCSE/GNVQ (Years 11 and 12), would be beneficial, for similar reasons.

Among the AS/A2-level interviewees who had taken a fourth subject at AS-level, there was an equal division between those who had taken this as an opportunity to retain some breath and balance of subjects (e.g. mathematics, economics, ICT and history AS) and those who had maintained their ‘bias’ in choosing a related fourth subject (e.g. ancient history, RE, English and history AS). Thus, the introduction of AS-levels did not necessarily increase breadth of study for these students.
ADVANTAGES OF THE SPECIALISED FOCUS OF POST-16 EDUCATION

Fewer subjects
*I think it’s better now because you get to concentrate more solely on individual subjects than having to spread out through like French and geography and stuff like that. It’s just more concentrated on the individual topic, which is easier* (male, AVCE/NDs).

Focus on areas of interest
*It’s the ones you are really interested in. When you are doing subjects you don’t like, you find it a lot harder, whereas if you’re doing ones you like, you’re able to do well in it. It’s better being able to do the ones you want to do* (female, AS/A2-levels).

Retention of knowledge
*You learn a lot more ‘cos you’re not learning too many different subjects at the one time* (female, AVCE/NDs).

*I’ve begun to realise that with fewer subjects, I definitely have been able to take more things in and keep them in my head, whereas if you are doing nine subjects, like I was doing at GCSE, it was very hard to keep one thing in for geography and then go on to science and do totally different things and all. It was just your head was all muddled up with that many subjects to do* (male, AS/A2-levels).

Suggestion of more specialisation at Key Stage 4
*I think a lot of people would have got a lot better results if they had been able to focus more on a smaller number of subjects rather than having to spread them over. Because there’s a lot, obviously, that are compulsory like English lit. and RE and everything, so a lot of people didn’t enjoy certain subjects, didn’t put as much effort into them* (female, AS/A2-levels).

Just over one-third of the AVCE/ND interviewees spontaneously commented on the variety within their post-16 courses. All felt that their AVCE/ND course(s) included a variety of content areas, despite ostensibly being one or two subjects. A student of health and social care, for example, described how her course incorporated elements of biology, communication, sociology and medical care. Three students commented that the modular structure, each with a different focus, gave their AVCE/ND courses a sense of variety comparable with that of GCSEs. AS/A2-level interviewees did not identify such variety within their courses, and one student, who had begun AS-levels and subsequently changed to AVCEs, believed that her two subjects at AVCE offered greater variety overall than had the three she initially studied at AS-level.

The limitations of the specialised focus of post-16 education

As stated earlier, a minority of A-level/AVCE interviewees (seven altogether) preferred the breadth of study in Years 11 and 12 to the increased specialisation at post-16. Amongst this seven was a slightly higher proportion of AS/A2-level interviewees than AVCE/ND. Three AS/A2-level students specifically noted that they would have preferred to be studying a wider range of subjects in less depth post-16, and, countering the prevailing trend, two AVCE/ND students felt that the variety at Key Stages 3 and 4 was, in fact, an aid to their concentration and interest (and thus manageability and enjoyment). However, only two of these interviewees (both AS/A2-level) explicitly commented that they felt restricted by the limited breadth of their post-16 studies, expressing concerns about the narrowness of their future options.
LIMITATIONS OF THE SPECIALISED FOCUS OF POST-16 EDUCATION

When you are doing only three or four subjects, you feel very specialised. I mean obviously when you are doing GCSE, I was interested in and enjoyed more than three or four subjects. And when it came to having to narrow it down to three or four, it was really hard ... I don’t like having to narrow down what you do and confine it so early on. I mean, you’re only 16 and you’re closing down all these doors to what you can do for the rest of your life because your subject choice is so narrow at A-Level (female, AS/A2-levels).

The only thing I don’t like about doing my three subjects at the minute is it’s very all in the one direction. I mean, like, I don’t have very much choice. At university, I’ve chosen engineering – but the only other things I can get up to really, with my three A-levels, are physics courses, maths courses and maybe law or something like that but I don’t want to do that (male, AS/A2-levels).

Some subjects you would quite like to do, you know. Some of them you would quite like to carry on, but the amount of work that you get for three is too much. It’s already quite a lot, so you couldn’t really keep, say, like, another one on that you would quite like to do if you were interested in it ... I suppose when you get to like upper sixth and lower sixth it’s sort of more what you are going to do for university, so it influences that (male, AS/A2-levels).

Notwithstanding the general preference for fewer subjects, over half of the A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they did miss one or more of the subjects they had studied earlier on in school. While the range of subjects was mentioned, French and PE were the two most commonly cited. Among interviewees taking business courses, there was acknowledgement that continuing with French would have helped with the ‘French in business’ component of their course. Others commented that while they had enjoyed French at school, they had not attained adequate grades to continue post-16 or believed they would not have coped with the level of study. Among the interviewees who would have liked to continue with PE, it was felt that something more ‘fun’ and ‘physical’ might provide relief from the stress of their academic studies. There was a sense that non-examined, ‘enrichment’ type activities had been squeezed out by the intensity of A-level/AVCE courses, and a small number of interviewees spontaneously remarked that they would have appreciated the opportunity to engage in an ‘informal’ manner with subjects such as PE, MFL and the arts.

A DESIRE FOR MORE ‘ENRICHMENT’ COURSES

PE, I liked doing. I didn’t do it for GCSE, but we still done like a period a week and I thought that if we could still do that [during post-16 education], it would be good ... because it helps you relieve stress and that. Just get like to do something different, getting to run about and that (male, AVCE/NDs).

When there were three A-levels, our courses added in enrichment courses, learning another language like Japanese, or doing psychology. I would have loved to have done that, but they [the school] couldn’t fit it into the timetable to do the four. Even teachers have said they were disappointed they had to stop those enrichment courses (female, AS/A2-levels).

Key questions

Whilst the vast majority of A-level/AVCE interviewees expressed a strong preference for fewer examined subjects, largely linked to manageability, there were a number of countering comments suggesting a desire to retain some breadth, were it not for the amount and depth of study required at this level. Might it be that different students want differing degrees of ‘trade-off’ between breadth and depth of study post-16? Is
there a need for a greater variety of provision, where students are able to make choices around the balance of breadth versus depth, as well as between different subject areas?

2.2.2 Enjoyment
Interviewees were asked whether they were enjoying their A-level/AVCE courses, and whether they preferred their post-16 undertakings or their experience in Years 8–12 (Key Stages 3 and 4).

The key findings were as follows.

- Enjoyment was closely related to manageability, with amount and level of work in inverse proportion to enjoyment.

- The specialisation on to subjects of greater personal preference was a key factor in increasing enjoyment.

- There was evidence that enjoyment of courses increased where there was relevance to ‘real life’ or to future study or career plans.

- More ‘freedom’ and a more mature relationship with teaching staff in post-16 education heightened enjoyment.

- For a small number of AS/A2-level interviewees, enjoyment at this level of study was not an ‘expectation’ and enjoyment was secondary to utility. This perspective was not apparent among AVCE/ND interviewees, however.

Factors inhibiting enjoyment in post-16 education
With very few exceptions, A-level/AVCE interviewees identified some aspect of their post-16 education that they were enjoying overall, though around two-fifths of AVCE/ND and almost half of AS/A2-level interviewees tempered this with more negative comments linked to manageability, i.e. the amount and/or level of difficulty of the work. Unsurprisingly, interviewees reported that a heavy workload, pressure from examinations, or a feeling of struggling or falling behind could all be constraints on enjoyment. Thus, there was a relationship of ‘inverse proportion’: as the amount and difficulty of work increased, levels of enjoyment declined.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANAGEABILITY AND ENJOYMENT

I’m not enjoying it so much at this very moment in time because there is so much to do. But overall I am enjoying it. The workload is just very heavy, so it’s not as enjoyable as it might be (female, AVCE/NDs).

[When] A-levels kick in, it’s more serious, somewhere you don’t want to be because you have to work so hard at it and it just gets quite exhausting and things, so you probably don’t enjoy it as much as you did (female, AS/A2-levels).

Because I’m getting a greater understanding of it ... so it is easier and better then to enjoy, because if you understand something obviously it’s easier to enjoy (female, AS/A2-levels).

Contrasting AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees’ enjoyment of their courses

As stated above, for a greater proportion of AS/A2-level interviewees than those taking AVCE/NDs, enjoyment of their courses was tempered by manageability issues. In addition, a small number of AS/A2-level interviewees implied that enjoyment was not something that they ‘expected’ from their courses per se, and seemingly perceived that little pleasure would be derived from their studies during these two years. Enjoyment could also be secondary to utility, with some AS/A2-level interviewees acknowledging that they were prepared to take subjects they did not particularly enjoy because they were an entry requirement to particular university courses (e.g. chemistry for medicine courses). This perspective was not apparent among AVCE/ND interviewees, however.

ENJOYMENT NOT AN EXPECTATION ON AS/A2-LEVEL COURSES

Are you enjoying your courses?
I don’t, like, overly enjoy them, just, like, because they are there and you have to do them. I enjoy them enough to come into school everyday, but yes, I get on OK (female, AS/A2-levels).

[Enjoyment?] Funny word to use in relation to school! Well, as much as, like, I don’t hate it (female, AS/A2-levels).

Could anything be done to make your courses more enjoyable?
I don’t really think, not really. Everyone knows it’s going to be hard work when you do it, so I don’t really think so (male, AS/A2-levels).

I don’t think so. I think it was just generally, you know, you make it as enjoyable as you want it to be, you know, it’s up to you. If you want to make it more enjoyable then just try and enjoy it more, but it’s just a fact of life that school is hard work, so you just learn to deal with it (female, AS/A2-levels).

Overall, almost three-fifths of the A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they were enjoying their post-16 studies more than they had enjoyed Key Stages 3 and 4. However, the figure for AVCE/ND interviewees preferring post-16 education was slightly higher than the proportion of AS/A2-level interviewees. Just under one-quarter of all A-level/AVCE interviewees voiced mixed feelings on the matter, noting pros and cons of each phase, while less than one-fifth of these students had found Years 8–12 more enjoyable. Reasons given for greater enjoyment of Years 8–12 typically included the more relaxed atmosphere at this stage, when education seemed to be more ‘fun’ and less pressured, and also the wider variety of subjects at Key
Stages 3 and 4, with some interviewees preferring the greater breadth and balance at this level, as has been discussed above.

**Factors promoting enjoyment in post-16 education**

Despite the qualifications around manageability noted above, the majority of A-level/AVCE interviewees made some positive comments about their courses. In considering key factors in enhancing these students’ enjoyment of their post-16 education, most commonly noted was the specialisation onto subjects of personal preference. In addition to increasing enjoyment overall, this also heightened students’ interest and motivation, and enjoyment was further gained through a sense of progress and increased confidence in ability. Concentration on a smaller number of subjects of personal choice was also a frequently cited reason for favouring post-16 studies over Key Stages 3 and 4. As noted in the earlier discussion of breadth and balance, comments of this nature were also linked to manageability, in that this more specialised focus allowed for improved grasp of subjects and better retention of knowledge, and thus greater enjoyment overall.

The relevance of their courses, either to future study and career plans or to life more generally, was a further factor in enjoyment for a number of interviewees. Enjoyment was enhanced where they were able to see the contribution of their current studies to their future career plans, and perceived they were taking steps towards these goals. Enjoyment and motivation were also increased where curriculum areas could be related to ‘real life’ scenarios or practical applications, or where there were links to issues of current social concern. Several students of RE, politics or history AS/A2-level noted particular enthusiasm for their courses where they had been able to relate them to current affairs around the time of September 11\textsuperscript{th} and conflict in the Middle East.

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<tr>
<th><strong>RELEVANCE INFLUENCING ENJOYMENT</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevance to future plans</strong></td>
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<td><em>There was plenty of days I sit there with a big face on me, and I just think ‘Oh God what am I at?’</em>. But then I started thinking about it really in the long term, you know, getting a degree and then getting a job, and I was kind of picturing myself, what I would be doing after my degree, what kind of job I would be getting and stuff, and I thought ‘Yes, definitely doing the right thing’*. (female, AVCE/NDs).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Relevance to current affairs</strong></td>
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<td><em>RE, I probably would enjoy most, because we are studying Islam and stuff and because it is so relevant and in the news and stuff at the minute</em> (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
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Because of a perceived lack of relevance to ‘real life’, chemistry AS/A2-level emerged as the subject which was least enjoyed amongst this sample. Seven of the ten individuals who studied chemistry at AS/A2-level made negative comments regarding enjoyment, criticising the ‘dry’ nature of the subject and the emphasis on memorising formulae and equations. Of all the subjects, from interviewees’ comments, it appeared that chemistry syllabi were perceived to offer less scope for linking academic studies to practical applications, which negatively impacted on their enjoyment of the subject.
NEGATIVE VIEWS OF CHEMISTRY AS/A2-LEVEL

It is very dull and it is like ‘Learn this fact, learn that fact, learn these 600 equations which are all incredibly similar’. It doesn’t feel like it’s promoting an enjoyment or enthusiasm for the subject. It’s just kind of ‘Learn this process and learn this process and the conditions for this reaction and that reaction’. It doesn’t really feel enjoyable. It doesn’t make me want to say ‘Yes, I want to go on and do chemistry’. It’s very dull, quite tedious (female, AS/A2-levels).

You have the knowledge but it doesn’t mean anything to you. You would like to know the more exotic areas of chemistry … sort of like modern advances … I think if you learnt such-and-such is happening now and stuff like that, it gets people’s interest up and you think ‘Oh, that’s very interesting, I might consider that as a career’ or ‘I’ll look into that further at home, you’ve got my curiosity going’ (male, AS/A2-levels).

As was found in the Year 7 and Key Stages 3 and 4 phases of this research (Harland et al. 1999a and b, 2002 and 2003), teaching style and personal rapport with teachers remained a factor in enjoyment. For several students who preferred their post-16 education to Years 8–12, the improved and more ‘equal’ relationship they had been able to develop with teachers at this level was a key contributor. Also cited was the greater ‘freedom’ at this level, related to the more independent, self-directed learning style and to a more relaxed approach to rules and restrictions, particularly in FE colleges but also in school sixth forms:

The freedom that you get in Year 13 and 14, compared to what you had in Years 8–12 is so much better, and you are able to do so much more, and the teachers trust you with so many more things, and the respect that you get from the teachers and vice versa. I think that all kind of makes your learning experience a lot easier, a lot better (male, AS/A2-levels).

Key questions

An emerging message might be that, while the ability to focus on subjects of interest is a principal aid to enjoyment, at this level many students are also seeking opportunities to apply their knowledge to ‘real life’ issues, be that current developments in the field, contemporary societal concerns or a practical application of knowledge and skills gained. Might there be a need to highlight more of these opportunities across a wider range of subjects in order to sustain enjoyment and develop further students’ interest in their studies?

2.2.3 Relevance (including views on Key Skills)

A-level/AVCE interviewees were asked how useful or relevant they found their post-16 undertakings, to both current and future life, within education and employment and in wider everyday life (e.g. personal development, health and welfare, practical or domestic issues).
The key findings were as follows.

- Interviewees – both those undertaking AS/A2-levels and AVCE/NDs – principally conceptualised the relevance of their courses in terms of higher education or career aspirations.

- In terms of the relevance of their courses to everyday life beyond education or employment, it was evident that AVCE/ND interviewees were more able to identify relevance in this respect than were their AS/A2-level counterparts.

- Many of those undertaking AS/A2-level courses held a particularly ‘utilitarian’ view of relevance: ‘real-life’ application was a ‘bonus’ and secondary to study or career relevance.

- AS/A2-level chemistry, physics and mathematics were frequently perceived to have no application to ‘real life’, while the humanities (e.g. RE, history, politics and economics) were seen as having more everyday relevance.

- AVCE/ND interviewees were largely positive about the usefulness of Key Skills courses, but uptake among the AS/A2-level students was very low and attitudes more negative overall. Among both groups, there was a prevailing perception that Key Skills’ chief benefit was as a boost to Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) points.

**Differing perceptions of relevance between AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees**

Interviewees – both those undertaking AS/A2-levels and AVCE/NDs – principally conceptualised the relevance of their courses in terms of higher education or career aspirations. They either described relevance of their subjects in relation to the degree course they hoped to pursue, in terms of building background knowledge, or in terms of skills and expertise required in the employment field they were aiming to enter. This links with their rationale for selecting post-16 education which, as Part 1 of this report conveyed, was influenced by their future aspirations. A small number of the interviewees (largely taking humanities, English and ICT) spoke more broadly about transferable skills developed through post-16 courses that would be useful in higher education, such as essay writing, debating, self-expression, communication and computer skills. Beyond this, there were a number of differences between AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees’ perceptions of the relevance of their courses.

**AVCE/ND interviewees’ perceptions of the relevance of their courses**

In terms of the relevance of their courses to everyday life beyond education or employment, AVCE/ND interviewees were more able to identify relevance in this respect than were their AS/A2-level counterparts. It is possible that the subjects undertaken by our AVCE/ND interviewees (e.g. health and social care, ICT) were perceived to have a more obvious ‘real-life’ application, and that the more vocational slant also contributed to this. While both groups saw relevance primarily in terms of education or employment, overall, there were fewer comments from the AVCE/ND students regarding a lack of ‘real-life’ relevance of their courses.
Several of the AVCE/ND interviewees were taking business and/or ICT courses: these were frequently noted as having relevance to everyday life, both currently and in the future. There was a general sense that with computers now omnipresent in all areas of life – education, employment and the home – these skills would have all-round, enduring relevance. Business AVCE was felt to have functional relevance both in terms of useful knowledge (financial, health and safety, consumer rights, world affairs) and in developing transferable skills such as teamwork, communication, prioritising and goal setting.

**AVCE/NDs’ RELEVANCE TO ‘REAL LIFE’**

The science isn’t like the science we did at school … It’s called engineering science. It’s kind of relating it to everyday situations and makes it much more easier to understand and much more interesting to learn. [At school] … I remember thinking like ‘When am I ever going to need to know this?’ but the maths and science I’m doing now, you can relate to it, you can see it everywhere (female, AVCE/NDs).

We are becoming more computerised, and technology is definitely taking over, so I suppose it will come in useful. And being able to teach maybe my kids some of the stuff, some of that there in business, the finance part. You would be able to organise your accounts and what not, more money management type thing … that could help you out later on, being able to see what you have and what you can spend and whatnot (female, AVCE/NDs).

In discussing aspirations and ‘next steps’, AVCE/ND interviewees tended to talk about relevance to careers more often than relevance to further study, though (as was discussed in Part 1) all but one of the 60 A-level/AVCE interviewees planned to go on to higher education. Thus, it seems that, to some extent, the AVCE/ND students were able to see more clearly the longer-term vocational relevance and usefulness of their courses.

**AS/A2-level interviewees’ perceptions of the relevance of their courses**

Among AS/A2-level interviewees, it was noteworthy how readily some dismissed one or more of their subjects as irrelevant, where they did not directly contribute to their longer term study or career plan. This ‘utilitarian’ viewpoint was also evident in some students’ comments on their subject choices, and their decision to continue with or drop subjects after AS-level.
AS/A2-LEVEL INTERVIEWEES’ UTILITARIAN VIEW ON RELEVANCE

Since I plan to be an engineer, the maths and physics should come in useful then really. Well, most of it anyway. So that’s really just theoretical stuff that’s part of the subject. But really, unless you are planning to become a physicist, it’s not going to be much use to you (male, AS/A2-levels).

I would quite like to do a course at university called management, science and information system studies, which pretty much is just maths, computing and economics, which I am doing at the minute, so hopefully if I get into that, that will definitely build upon that, and it will just be a continuation of what I am doing, so I find it useful in those areas (male, AS/A2-levels).

[If I were to choose again] I mightn’t do technology, only because of the amount of work and the fact that I don’t actually need it. It isn’t a required subject you need to get into engineering [degree courses] (male, AS/A2-levels).

I actually originally said, whenever I picked my AS subjects, that I might as well just keep going on [with all four AS-levels at A2], but as lower sixth went on, I just sort of became more and more aware and there was no need in terms of, like, an educational sort of academic purpose, to keep one on really. The only reason I would do it would have been out of interest, because I think with your three subjects, if you are doing four at A-level, I don’t think there’s very much point, in terms of university applications and things like that, it would have to be merely from an interest sake (male, AS/A2-levels).

While the relevance of specific subjects to future study and career aspirations was clearly particular to each individual’s own plans, there was consensus amongst AS/A2-level interviewees in terms of their perceptions of subjects’ current and future relevance to life outside education and employment. A clear distinction emerged between those AS/A2-level subjects which were viewed as having relevance to everyday life, both at present and in the future, and those which would only have relevance if pursued further with a view to future careers. AS/A2-level subjects commonly seen to have relevance to current everyday life included: RE (specifically ethics modules), politics, economics, sociology, history and (human) geography. These subjects were seen to encompass universal human issues and areas of current societal concern, such as ethnic and social diversity, social and political conflict. Through their studies in these areas, students of these subjects felt better able to understand political debate and world events, hold informed discussions and construct reasoned arguments: ‘You get more opinionated and make your own decisions rather than being told things and having to accept them’ (female, AS/A2-levels). Additionally, students of MFL endorsed their application in everyday life, in terms of usefulness for leisure and travel, and as a transferable skill in a variety of careers. Those subjects viewed as having lesser relevance were principally mathematics, physics and chemistry, where there was a perception that there were fewer occasions to apply these subject areas in day-to-day life.
AS/A2-LEVEL SUBJECTS PERCEIVED TO LACK EVERYDAY RELEVANCE

Usefulness for now? Other than passing exams and all that business, not really a lot! I don’t really know when you are meant to talk about the difference between an aldehyde and a ketone in real life other than doing the exam ... I suppose it comes in useful if you want a career in chemistry further on. It’s just preparation for whatever job you want to do later on in life ... Mechanics is supposed to be maths applications to real life, but you don’t really, kind of, sit there while you are eating your dinner and think ‘A man walks down the road at three kilometres an hour...’. It’s sort of application to maths-based careers, like, if you are involved in engineering or those kind of things (female, AS/A2-levels).

Some of the topics in maths, when you are learning them, you are going ‘When am I ever going to use this?’ It is useful for people that are going on to do like maths-related, like accountancy and things, but to some people it’s just ‘When am I ever going to need to differentiate like sin, cos, tan?’ (female, AS/A2-levels).

I would not find a great deal of use for quantum mechanics thus far in my everyday life. My economics actually could be. I mean, it’s nice to know what’s going on in the world. Whenever I picked up a business paper before I did economics, I didn’t understand what they were talking about, but now I have got a fair idea of what’s going on with the economy. It’s been quite useful. Apart from that, the maths and physics is fairly useless at the moment really (male, AS/A2-levels).

Recalling earlier comments on AVCE/NDs’ perceived relevance to everyday life, it was notable that students of science- or mathematics-based AVCEs/NDs did not express the same negative opinions as AS/A2-level interviewees, exemplified above. It may be that the content as well as the ways in which AVCE/ND syllabi were conveyed to interviewees allowed for a greater appreciation of functional relevance or practical application.

It was notable that, particularly among AS/A2-level interviewees, current relevance or ‘real-life’ application seemed to be in some sense a ‘bonus’, rather than an expectation of courses. Despite the perceived lack of relevance of certain subjects, it appeared that most AS/A2-level interviewees were not troubled or hindered by this in practical terms, or, being resigned to the fact, did not question it. While earlier discussion highlighted that relevance to everyday life could heighten enjoyment of a subject, there was none the less a sense that ‘real-life’ relevance was secondary to utility for further study or careers. Even amongst those who appreciated ‘real-life’ relevance in subjects such as RE, history and politics, it was evident through interviewees’ articulation that relevance to future study was still deemed more important and more ‘valid’ than perceived relevance to everyday life or personal interest.
RELEVANCE TO FUTURE STUDY OR CAREER MORE ‘VALID’ THAN RELEVANCE TO EVERYDAY LIFE

[Politics] is relevant sometimes, but not really any real use like, just in my own use for understanding stuff and television and stuff, that would be about it ... but [construction and the build environment] definitely will be, because that’s the kind of work I want to work in (male, A-levels/AVCEs).

Well history, I don’t think it’s actually useful. I don’t think it’s going to benefit me, but it is enjoyable. It obviously gives you the history and what happened during the wars and stuff like that, but for future life, my career, I don’t think that it’s really going to help me that much (female, AS/A2-levels).

[Politics] the whole year you were talking about what was going on in the news and what was happening. Like, it was just really good, I enjoyed it. But it wasn’t really doing anything for me in the sense of getting me into university courses. It was just more of a hobby, so it was (male, AS/A2-levels).

Key Skills

Eighteen of the 21 AVCE/ND interviewees reported taking one or more Key Skills courses. Two-thirds of these interviewees gave largely positive views, perceiving that the courses were useful or relevant to them, while a minority were either mixed or more negative. A number of students who gave positive views were able to identify beneficial links with their AVCE/ND courses. Useful linkages were noted particularly for application of number and ICT, for example where the former related to aspects of business or engineering courses, or where the latter provided additional consolidation of knowledge for ICT-related AVCEs. The communications course was seen to be useful more broadly, in developing skills of public speaking, debating, summarising, interview techniques and interpersonal skills (e.g. for use in the workplace). Other reasons given in support of Key Skills courses included the enhancement of one’s CV and the development of skills transferable to a part-time job (e.g. use of mathematics in a retail post). Most commonly noted, however (by nine students), was the fact that Key Skills were considered by UCAS and so could be useful in boosting university entrance points: ‘Well, in a way they help you get your points up if you want to go to college. I think that’s good, so if you don’t do enough subjects and you nearly miss college by a little bit, then if you do your Key Skills, if you get them, then they help you get in’ (male, AVCE/NDs).

It was notable that most AVCE/ND interviewees who commented did not find that fitting in Key Skills courses alongside their main studies posed any great problems in terms of time-management and workload. It was variously felt that the courses were not particularly time consuming, were not especially difficult, or had some overlap with AVCE/ND courses. Only one student reported that they had dropped Key Skills owing to the demands of their main course.

The few AVCE/ND interviewees who gave negative viewpoints believed that they did not need the additional tutoring in these areas, that the Key Skills were repetitive of GCSEs nor had little current or future relevance.

In contrast to the AVCE/ND interviewees, just nine of the 39 AS/A2-level students stated that they had taken any Key Skills courses during Year 13. Two of these students gave positive opinions on their experience (particularly in relation to ICT), while three interviewees gave mixed views. Four gave negative accounts of their
experience of Key Skills, citing the following reasons: they saw the main use of Key Skills as being a boost to UCAS points, something which they did not feel was necessary personally; the courses covered basic material that they knew already; or that they were taking AS/A2-level courses in corresponding subjects and saw no need for a ‘lesser’ qualification.

That over three-quarters of AS/A2-level interviewees had not taken up Key Skills in combination with their main courses possibly suggests a generally negative view in terms of their perceived relevance and manageability among these interviewees and their schools/FE colleges.

### AS/A2-LEVEL INTERVIEWEES’ VIEW OF KEY SKILLS AS ADDITIONAL UCAS POINTS

*I could have done maths or English [Key Skills]... but I didn’t want the extra points. I didn’t think I needed them, because I am just basically hoping to get the grades and I don’t think I should need them. I have got the extra points as well from my AS subject, so I didn’t think it was going to be necessary for me to do Key Skills* (male, AS/A2-levels).

*All my university courses have been giving me offers on the basis of grades and not points. Points haven’t really come up on the courses I have been applying for, so I didn’t think it was going to be any good anyway, just be extra work, so I decided not to do them [Key Skills] ... If you needed points, they would be great for you, you know, to bag your offer if you hadn’t done as well as you thought you might do, and some of your exams could be helpful if courses were asking for points, but none of the courses that I went for were ever asking for points* (male, AS/A2-levels).

### Key questions

Is it cause for concern that students of certain AS/A2-level subjects did not perceive any relevance in their courses beyond the ‘means to an end’ utility to enter the next level of education? In addition to preparing students for the standards required in higher education, should AS/A2-levels be perceived to have more relevance in their own right? For example, should post-16 education contribute more to students’ personal, social, spiritual and health development than perceived by AS/A2-level interviewees interviewed here?

### 2.2.4 Manageability

A-level/AVCE interviewees were asked to comment on the manageability of their courses, in terms of the amount and level of work required of them, and to compare this with their experience of studying for GCSE/GNVQs in Years 11 and 12.

The key findings were as follows.

- A-level/AVCE interviewees found the amount of work to be more of a challenge to manageability than level of difficulty. However, there was a sense of ‘resignation’ that heavy workload was to be expected of courses at this stage.

- Manageability was assisted to some extent by the reduction in number of subjects and the more concentrated focus this permitted.
• At AS/A2-level, the arts, humanities and English were perceived to present a heavier workload than sciences and mathematics, in terms of time-consuming written assignments and coursework.

• Among AS/A2-level interviewees, there was consensus that to continue with four subjects at A2 was very challenging. Given the depth and workload required, several students felt that more than three subjects in Year 14 would be unmanageable, and possibly to the detriment of overall grades.

**Level of work in post-16 education**

Overall, it was notable that very few A-level/AVCE interviewees stated that they were overwhelmed by the level of work expected of them in their post-16 destinations. The majority of these interviewees reported experiencing an increase in the level of difficulty from Key Stage 4 to Year 13, and from Year 13 to Year 14, but had, in time, adapted to the requirements of study at this level. While a substantial minority commented that they found the work hard, these students none the less felt that it was still manageable with sustained concentration, effort and help from teachers where necessary. Where interviewees commented specifically on the nature of this increased difficulty post-16, they related it to the greater depth of knowledge required and the need to apply knowledge and understanding, rather than simply to state memorised facts.

A range of subjects were noted as either being particularly hard, or as being relatively easy in comparison with others, with a number being mentioned in both capacities by different individuals (e.g. history, RE and biology). Mathematics was the only subject to be recurrently noted as especially difficult.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP UP IN LEVEL OF WORK FROM KEY STAGE 4 TO POST-16 EDUCATION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>It’s a higher level [at AVCE], you can see that easily whenever you do your business studies [GCSE] and then you go on to do ‘Business at Work’. Whenever you’re revising it, you can see how it’s stepped up a level. It was difficult to grasp at the start but you get used to it</em> (female, AVCEs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In biology, an animal cell in GCSE is a bag with a tennis ball in filled with water, that’s it. In A-level biology, you learn actually it’s not. It’s got all these little organelles and dozens and dozens of other structures that are in the cytoplasm and I felt cheated. They lied to me ... It just completely threw me. I was stunned, it really took me a couple of weeks at the very start of the course to get to grips with it ... I thought in biology, the animal cell stuff was set in stone (male, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At GCSE you are sort of expected just to learn this fact, this fact and this fact and then regurgitate it in the exam. At A-level, you are sort of expected to go in and think about it and think about how this would apply to other situations, and it’s kind of more about how you apply knowledge rather than just learning off knowledge ... it’s not just a memory test, it’s a test of understanding more than GCSE (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
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Amount of work in post-16 education

From A-level/AVCE interviewees’ comments, the amount rather than the level of work required in post-16 education had a greater impact on manageability, with a number of students feeling they were under some pressure created by their workload. While two-fifths of those who commented had found the amount of work was generally manageable, a similar proportion reported that there was ‘a lot’ of work to be done. Within this group, the perceived manageability of the workload varied, from those who were feeling the pressure but were coping, to a small number who were rather more ‘stressed’ and felt that the amount of work was in fact ‘too much’. As was noted above, this had a concomitant impact on levels of enjoyment: as the amount of work increased, levels of enjoyment declined. None the less, there appeared to be a certain sense of resignation with regard to the amount of work at this stage: interviewees knew that hard work and pressure were to be expected, and they had to manage.

‘RESIGNATION’ TO AMOUNT OF WORK POST-16

Because of it being A-level (sic), I think with the amount of work, it has to be done, so you have to be prepared to work for it, so the only thing you can do is work as hard as you can to get it done (male, AVCE/NDs).

I think at the minute, the way that the system is, it’s necessary. Because the syllabus is quite large, you do have to get through it, and I think teachers know that they have to work through it at a certain pace, a certain speed, giving you a certain amount of work to get through on time, so there’s nothing they can do (male, AS/A2-levels).

In comparing the amount of work required at Key Stage 4 to that at A-level/AVCE, three-quarters of those who commented had found that their workload had increased post-16. While the number of subjects had decreased, the amount of work had increased, or at least remained comparable overall. As was noted in relation to the breadth and balance of post-16 education, however, this more specialised focus was an aid to manageability for some, counteracting, to an extent, the impact of the increased workload: ‘There’s a lot more work, but on the bright side you have less subjects, like, so you can concentrate your time more on them, rather than spread it over 10 different subjects’ (male, AVCE/NDs). For six students, the workload post-16 was in fact more manageable, for the above reason and also for the fact that, for some, their subject choices had resulted in a reduction in the number of essays and coursework assignments required. One student also noted that because her subjects (art, photography and critical studies) were closely related and ‘flowed’ more, they were thus more manageable as a ‘package’. Therefore, notwithstanding interviewees’ comments on heavy workload at A-level/AVCE, there were some counterbalancing factors: manageability could be positively influenced by increased specialisation, cross-subject coherence, time available and enthusiasm for a subject.

The majority of interviewees also perceived an increase in the amount of work required in the second year of post-16 studies compared with Year 13. This view was somewhat more common among AS/A2-level interviewees than those taking AVCE/NDs. Subjects specifically cited as presenting heavy workloads included drama, art, English and history AS/A2-levels. In terms of time spent on homework and assignments, a student of AS/A2-level English, history and politics noted that she saw a significant discrepancy in the large amount of work required for the more
‘literary’ subjects compared with her peers who were taking more scientific or mathematics-based subjects. To an extent, this claim was supported by further examination of those interviewees who regarded the amount of work as fairly manageable. Among this group, students of mathematics and sciences were indeed predominant, as were those taking ICT and business studies.

**The impact of a fourth subject at AS-level on manageability**

As was noted in the earlier discussion of breadth and balance, several AS/A2-level interviewees made comments relating the number of subjects they were studying to issues of manageability. Among those who had taken four subjects in Year 13 only, the general consensus was that it had been difficult, and to continue with this number, given the depth of learning that A2 required, would have proved unmanageable. It was felt that the additional study periods and specialised focus were necessary in the final year of AS/A2-levels. Indeed, among students who had continued with four subjects at A2, there were comments relating to increased pressure, and the fact that they were not able to benefit from the free periods and recreation time available to peers taking fewer subjects. From three interviewees, a viewpoint emerged that with a fourth subject at A2, overall grades could be jeopardised, and that it was preferable to attain three strong A-levels rather than four ‘mediocre’ ones. Moreover, two students complained about the fact that a fourth subject at AS-level had been compulsory at their schools. As above, these students felt that the fourth subject had had a negative impact on their performance in their other examinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>View that a fourth subject at AS/A2-level could jeopardise overall grades</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would rather have three [AS/A2-levels] and be better at those three than have four and get mediocre results for them (male, AS/A2-levels).</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel like I could have done another A-level this year, but I didn’t want to risk getting low grades that I didn’t need, I suppose (male, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was really annoyed about that fourth one [AS-level]. I wished I hadn’t had to do it ... I was very annoyed about it ... I got three Cs and an E. If I didn’t have to do chemistry and work for that, I could have built those Cs up to something different. I could have put more effort into the other three and got better grades (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
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**Factors aiding manageability in post-16 education**

Figure 2.1 summarises factors contributing to manageability, as reported by A-level/AVCE interviewees, and areas to be noted as suggestions for improvement (each listed in approximate order of frequency).
Figure 2.1 Factors contributing to manageability and suggestions for improvement, as reported by A-level/AVCE interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors contributing to manageability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on subjects of choice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>In comparing GCSE/GNVQ to A-levels/AVCEs, the smaller range of subjects and the focus on subjects of preference was felt to facilitate manageability (in terms of concentration and time management), in spite of the increased level and amount of work required.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Structure of courses</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The modular structure of A-level/AVCE courses and the AS/A2 split of A-levels were reported to aid manageability (for further discussion, see section 2.1.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Study periods</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The introduction of study periods was viewed as beneficial when compared with the intensity of direct teaching time at Key Stage 4. Among AS/A2-level interviewees, dropping one subject in Year 14, and thus having additional study periods was an aid to manageability, in spite of a perceived increase in the level and amount of work at A2-level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers were felt to be supportive, giving help when required. Teacher notes and handouts were appreciated by students, as was a course or syllabus outline, detailing what would be expected of students in assessment.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Coursework</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment through ongoing coursework assignments was felt to reduce the pressure of examination periods. (However, as the following suggestions to increase manageability will show, this was also highlighted as an inhibitor to manageability.)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Suggestions for increased manageability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing of work</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload became unmanageable where assignments from different teachers coincided or where coursework deadlines clashed with examinations. It was also suggested that coursework could be spread more evenly throughout the two years of study.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Order of syllabus coverage</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was suggested in a number of subjects (including RE, ancient history and biology) that a restructuring of the way in which the syllabus was covered, to be more coherent and progressive, might aid students’ grasp of concepts and also consolidate understanding, e.g. in RE, covering the theorists before specific topics such as euthanasia could enhance students’ ability to discuss issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was suggested that a more equal balance of coursework and examinations might improve manageability on AVCE courses, where coursework could become burdensome.</td>
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**Key questions**
From interviewees’ comments, the amount rather than the level of work required in post-16 education had a greater impact on manageability. At this stage in their education, should students feel more tested by the amount of work or should the more significant test be of their level of understanding?
2.2.5 Continuity and progression

Interviewees were asked whether they felt that their studies at AS/A2-level or AVCE/ND had built on what they had done during their GCSE/GNVQ years.

The key findings were as follows.

- The majority of A-level/AVCE interviewees recognised continuity and progression within their subjects from Key Stage 4 to Year 13, in terms of content covered and/or skills applied.

- Few interviewees reported having struggled when embarking on subjects not previously studied (e.g. politics, economics, sociology, ICT, engineering). Indeed, the ‘newness’ of a subject increased students’ interest and motivation in some cases.

- Students also perceived continuity and progression **within** their courses from Year 13 to Year 14. It was notable that for ‘the sciences’, continuity tended to be recognised in terms of development of content, while in ‘the arts’ the development of underlying skills was highlighted more frequently.

**Continuity and progression from Key Stage 4 to post-16 education**

Overall, the majority of A-level/AVCE interviewees remarked that there had been continuity from Key Stage 4 to their post-16 courses. They explained either that content was revisited, but covered in greater detail, for example in mathematics or biology, where ‘… you get the same diagram but with more points on it’, or that while texts and content might be new, similar skills were being employed and developed further, for example in English, RE and history. For many subjects, including mathematics, English and business, there was unanimous agreement around continuity from GCSE to post-16. Several of the students who had taken additional mathematics GCSE commented that this had been very beneficial to them in their AS-level course, explaining that AS-level mathematics covered much of the same content as ‘**add maths**’. There was some difference of opinion regarding the continuity from Key Stage 4 to Year 13 of geography, history, ICT, the sciences, languages and art. In these subjects, some interviewees felt that topics covered were very different from those they had studied previously (e.g. the study of scriptures in AS/A2-level RE), or, linked to manageability, that the level of difficulty had increased to such a degree that progression was not so smooth (e.g. French AS/A2-level).

In considering subjects which had not been studied at Key Stage 4 (including economics, politics, sociology and psychology A-levels, engineering- and ICT-related AVCE/NDs), it was notable that very few interviewees in this situation reported having struggled. Where one or two students stated that having the prior knowledge from Key Stage 4 might have been an advantage (e.g. for leisure and tourism AVCE), it was apparent that initial difficulties were quickly overcome. Indeed, regarding economics, politics and sociology AS/A2-level, there were comments that embarking on these subjects had not been problematic **because** they were new and thus more interesting. It was only in business studies that two students felt themselves to have been at a particular disadvantage with the lack of a GCSE/GNVQ.
Where subjects were new, interviewees were asked whether any of their studies at Key Stage 4 had been useful to them in beginning their post-16 courses. Students of AS/A2-level politics frequently commented on the similarities with history, in terms of the use of sources, referencing of facts and events, and the style of essay writing. Mathematics was felt to be useful to a number of subjects, including engineering-related AVCE/ND courses, accounting and health and social care. Notably, however, for interviewees new to psychology, sociology, business and hospitality and catering, none of their Key Stage 4 or earlier studies was perceived to have been of use in preparing them for their post-16 courses.

**Continuity and progression within post-16 education**

Regarding continuity and progression *within* their A-level/AVCE courses (in terms of the progression from module to module, and from Year 13 to Year 14), interviewees again indicated that, for the most part, they perceived continuity across their course, and that generally the first year of their courses had prepared them for the second year: ‘It gives you a basis or founding in the skills and some of the content that you can build on this year, so you have got a bit of prior knowledge, so that’s useful’ (male, AS/A2-levels). As with progression from Key Stage 4 to Year 13, some students commented specifically on how, within the A-level/AVCE courses, they had explored earlier content in more depth, while others highlighted the continuity in the type of skills which were called upon. It was noteworthy that, among AS/A2-level interviewees, these two types of comments tended to correspond to the ‘school’ in which subjects were located – namely the sciences compared with humanities, languages and the arts. Students of RE, English, French and history more often commented on the continuity of skills, but saw fewer links in terms of specific texts studied or content from module to module. Conversely, students of mathematics and science made few comments regarding underlying skills, but did note more frequently that their modules progressed in terms of advancing themes or applying theories or concepts to more complex problems. ICT and business were two courses where continuity tended to be recognised in terms of both skills and content, particularly for AVCE courses:

> You could be studying a topic with one teacher and you would find their topic would be hitting on the topic that you are studying with the other, so you can sort of interlink the two of them together … which is quite good because you can gain a lot more knowledge and be able to use it in assignments which seem that wee bit more intellectual. You can back up other facts, instead of just sticking to that one topic (female, AVCEs).

Finally, while infrequent, some students commented more broadly on study skills (e.g. research and analytical skills) developed during their first year, which had prepared them for the demands of the second year.

**Key questions**

Considering the relatively small number of students identifying generic study skills, and that students of mathematics and science-based subjects tended to identify progression of content knowledge rather than underlying skills or approaches, is there a need to assist students in recognising these broader abilities? Might there be a place
in the post-16 structure for a dedicated study skills class focussing, for example, on research and analysis techniques?

2.2.6 Assessment
Regarding assessment of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND courses, views were expressed on the structure and timing of assessment, including: the AS/A2 split of A-level courses; modular structures; biannual January and June examination sessions; timetabling of examinations (namely same-subject modules scheduled consecutively); the opportunity to repeat modules; and non-examination elements of assessment (e.g. coursework, practical assessment). Finally, students commented on the extent to which the format of assessment allowed them to demonstrate their ability.

The key findings were as follows.

• In terms of assessment, A-level interviewees were overwhelmingly positive about the AS/A2 structure of their courses, finding the ‘split’ an aid to manageability and a useful indicator of progress and performance. However, there was a feeling from a minority that amassing the knowledge and aptitude of two years’ study for a ‘final’ examination could benefit overall performance.

• The modular structure of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND courses was valued as a contributor to manageability, and around half of these interviewees had taken up the opportunity to re-sit modules in an attempt to improve overall grades.

• There were several spontaneous comments on the consecutive scheduling of AS-level examinations for one subject. The predominant student perspective was that this ‘defeated the point of modules’ and could have a negative effect on performance.

• Coursework was seen to have advantages and disadvantages. While it aided manageability in terms of reducing the weight of ‘examined’ assessment, multiple coursework projects and clashing deadlines could become burdensome.

Structure and timing of assessment

AS/A2 split of A-level courses
In terms of assessment, the majority of viewpoints offered were positive regarding the AS/A2 split of A-level courses, with interviewees appreciating the way the course was broken down into more manageable portions, and the opportunity to accumulate accreditation along the way, rather than one final stretch of examinations upon which the outcome of the entire two years rested. A further positive aspect of the AS/A2 structure was the opportunity to evaluate progress at the mid-point, and gauge the level of effort required to achieve desired targets by the end of the A2 year.

There were, however, a small number of negative views regarding the AS/A2 split: some interviewees would have preferred a break from examinations and assessment after the intensity of their GCSE/GNVQ year; AS-level results may not fully reflect abilities because knowledge and understanding might increase significantly in the
second year of the course; and the enduring perception of lower-sixth as the ‘easy year’ could lead students to treat AS-levels with less gravity than was advisable, with a call for teachers to impress the importance of these examinations more strongly on students:

I think maybe the school needs to make sure that we realise that it’s half an A-level and it’s public exams, so it’s much more important, because there’s some people who would think ‘Oh it doesn’t matter, I can do re-sits,’ and things like that, so they didn’t do as well in their AS-levels. So now they are repeating those which just cuts into their time for this year, so I think we need to realise that they are important (female, AS/A2-levels).

Modular structure of AS/A2-levels and AVCEs
The modular structure of courses and the opportunity to repeat modules was viewed positively by both AS/A2-level and AVCE interviewees. Unsurprisingly, modules were favoured for their delimited focus and thus more predictable assessment content. Among the interviewees, there was a high take-up of the option to repeat modules, in order to ‘pull up’ overall subject grades. Around half (19 of the 39 AS/A2-level interviewees and 11 of the 21 AVCE students) had repeated one or more of their lower-sixth examinations.

Biannual examination sessions
Several A-level/AVCE interviewees spontaneously commented on the fact that (in some cases) there was the option to sit examinations in the January of each year. Interestingly, there was an equal division of opinion – no consensus on whether this was a beneficial element of the course structure or not. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of these biannual sittings are summarised below.

Perceived advantages of a January examination session:
• January examinations were a chance to get a portion of the qualification ‘in the bag’.
• Revision was made easier due to the reduced syllabus coverage.
• Following the examinations, students could progress with an awareness of the foundation on which subsequent assessment would be built.
• The option was left open to resit in the summer term should results be unsatisfactory.
• Where results were satisfactory, this allowed focus to be dedicated to remaining modules.

Perceived disadvantages of a January examination session:
• More than one annual examination session created too many pressure points throughout the year.
• Students felt very rushed in trying to complete and revise modules for January examinations, particularly in Year 13, and would have felt better prepared had they had the full year to build up to the exams.
• Waiting until summer, and amassing the knowledge and understanding developed through a full year’s syllabus would better enable a student to demonstrate his/her abilities.
• January examinations could prove rather disruptive to classes in the spring term, where students were missing various sessions to sit exams.
Timetabling of examinations

While scheduling of subject modules on the same day (often consecutively within one examination sitting) was a deliberate policy of some examination boards when these interviewees took their AS-level examinations, the volume of spontaneous student comments in this area seems noteworthy. One-third of the AS/A2-level students interviewed voiced negative opinions of this arrangement, with the majority of comments being of the nature: ‘It defeated the purpose of modules’; ‘What’s the point in doing modular subjects if you do them within five minutes of each other in the same day?’; ‘It sort of erased the whole idea of having the modular exam’. More specifically, students reported that they became ‘muddled up’ between content areas and felt that the level of concentration demanded in long sittings, covering multiple topics, did not enable them to perform at their best. It should also be noted, however, that a small number of AS/A2-level students commented that they had preferred to get a whole subject’s examinations ‘over and done with’ in one session.

Coursework

Where courses included an element of coursework/portfolio or practical assessment, a number of students again reiterated the message from earlier in the Cohort Study (see Harland et al., 2003) that they were glad to have an element of their assessment ‘out of the way’ earlier on in the course (though in relation to manageability, there were comments that too much coursework or clashing deadlines could become a burden). Also highlighted were the positive views on coursework that: students could ‘do well’ because they had more time to prepare and redraft work; it did not bring with it the same kind of stress as ‘formal’ examinations; and it allowed for more creativity and demonstration of individual interest. Despite coursework being viewed favourably, there were one or two provisos, particularly from AVCE interviewees for whom the bias towards coursework/portfolio assessment meant that the number of assessment pieces and clashing deadlines could generate an unwieldy workload at times.

Demonstration of ability

Interviewees were asked whether the methods used to assess their AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND courses had afforded them the opportunity to demonstrate their ability in their subjects (and, thus, whether results were an accurate reflection of ability). While the majority answered affirmatively, many students’ comments indicated that they saw the ‘locus of control’ as with themselves, rather than assessment methods and the specific format of examinations. Grades were felt to reflect the amount of individual effort made, with unsatisfactory outcomes a result of insufficient revision or loss of focus during the year, and pleasing results an outcome of hard work or a natural affinity for a subject. None the less, a number of interviewees did describe features of the assessment format which assisted or detracted from their ability to perform well. These are summarised in Figure 2.2.
### Factors assisting performance in assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coursework enabled a practical demonstration of skills (for subjects such as IT and sciences) and allowed more flexibility to develop individual areas of interest and demonstrate a wider range of skills.</th>
<th>The combination of exams and coursework lets us show our abilities far better than just having exams. I think it shows more of what we can do and helps to raise our grades, more than it would if it was just exams (female, A-level/AVCEs). I think coursework gives you a chance to kind of show, yes, I can take this further, I can think for myself, I can progress this on my own. I can take this a bit deeper and I can go off on my own and find out information and I can apply this to things that I’m doing in class. So it gives you a chance to demonstrate a lot of those skills which you don’t really get a chance to demonstrate in exams where an answer is either right or wrong (female, AS/A2-levels).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More open, extended questions within ‘formal’ exam papers allowed a greater demonstration of knowledge and understanding.</td>
<td>It gives you more scope to kind of, you know, show the level of your knowledge rather than just ‘Have I or have I not memorised this equation?’ (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students taking AS/A2-levels in subjects such as art, music and theatre studies felt the assessment methods allowed them the flexibility to express themselves and demonstrate their abilities creatively.</td>
<td>We would choose a lot of the time what media we want to work in, so we would choose what we were most confident in (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Factors detracting from performance in assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unfamiliar presentation or wording of questions may add stress to the examination process, negatively affecting performance.</th>
<th>The questions were very strangely worded. I panicked when I looked at them. I thought ‘I don’t know that,’ and then I got going a while afterwards but because I panicked at the start, it wasn’t a reflection of my ability (female, AVCE/NDs).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The lack of a coursework element could restrict students’ ability to perform well.</td>
<td>There are people who prefer coursework over the exams ... You see, like, some people, they get nerves or whatever and they clam up and they can do the test and it can be a bit unclear. Sometimes it doesn’t really reflect the person’s ability. Sometimes, I think coursework can ensure the person’s ability. Tests are very 50-50 (male, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The consecutive scheduling of subject examinations may cause increased stress or confusion of content areas.</td>
<td>It was a lot of pressure at one point. I think it would be easier if you actually did it in modules. You know modules are meant to be easier so that you can do them at different times. There’s really no point in that if you’re doing them all at the same time (female, AS/A2-levels).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key questions
The AS/A2 structure, modular courses and the opportunity to repeat elements as necessary were appreciated by interviewees, and helped in securing good outcomes in terms of final grades. However, with the regularity of assessment through modules, biannual examination sessions and coursework, there was a sense that assessment dominated the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND experience. To what extent might this explain students’ utilitarian perspective on relevance? Students appreciated coursework for the opportunity it afforded to demonstrate a wider range of skills and knowledge, but none the less felt it created a burden of work. Might it be possible to develop ‘overarching’ objectives or criteria to be demonstrated through a smaller number of coursework assignments, spanning more than one subject area?

2.2.7 Overview of interviewees’ perspectives of 16–19 education
This section draws together the above discussions to examine the relationships between breadth, manageability, relevance and enjoyment in A-level/AVCE courses. The purpose of post-16 education and the differing views of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees are also considered.

The relationship between the breadth of curriculum, manageability, relevance and enjoyment in A-level/AVCE courses
In drawing together the themes discussed in this section, one of the most salient findings to emerge was the inter-relationship between the breadth of curriculum, manageability, relevance and enjoyment.

Perhaps most crucial for interviewees was the fact that the specialisation of the curriculum was felt to increase manageability. They commented that, at this level, they could not have managed any more subjects than they were currently undertaking. It was noteworthy, however, that there was little recognition in this respect that a broader curriculum could consequently bring less depth ‘per subject’. Besides assisting manageability, the narrowing of subject range was also perceived to have positive outcomes for relevance and enjoyment. Students saw increased relevance of their courses, as their subject range became more specialised and focussed towards the requirements of future study or career plans. This, in turn, facilitated enjoyment, though enjoyment was more predominately derived through dispensing with subjects that had not been enjoyed in Key Stages 3 and 4, and focussing on those of personal preference and interest. However, manageability had an inverse relationship with enjoyment – heavy workload having a concomitant reductive effect on enjoyment.

While interviewees did cite one or more subjects they ‘missed’ having dropped them after Key Stage 4, it was apparent that, in spite of this, the majority preferred to trade breadth for the advantages noted above. A minority of interviewees called for some form of non-examined ‘enrichment’ component to the post-16 curriculum. However, given the largely utilitarian viewpoint which emerged (from AS/A2-level interviewees in particular) – where subjects not directly contributing to future study or career plans were ‘undervalued’ – the extent to which such a non-examined component would truly be appreciated by students is open to question.
The purpose of post-16 study

Interviewees in post-16 education, particularly the AS/A2-level students, tended towards an instrumental view of relevance, prioritising relevance to future education or employment over relevance to wider everyday life. This was illustrated particularly by the fact that even amongst those who appreciated ‘real-life’ relevance in their subjects, this was considered a ‘bonus’ and the relevance of these subjects to future study was deemed more ‘valid’.

While they identified some aspect of their post-16 education that they were enjoying overall, the impression from many students of AS/A2-level, and to a lesser extent AVCE/ND, was that of resignation to their experience of post-16 education. While there were some suggestions for improving manageability, students were resigned to the heavy workload and lack of ‘real-life’ relevance of certain courses. Part 1 of this report documented that all but one of the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees were planning to proceed to higher education on completion of their courses. If A-levels/AVCEs were regarded primarily as a passport to higher education, this may, in part, account for the utilitarian perception of relevance and students’ sense of resignation with regard to their workload.

Key variations between perspectives of AVCE/ND and AS/A2-level interviewees

- While both groups appreciated the increased specialisation at post-16, AVCE/ND interviewees were more likely to identify variety within their courses. Thus, to some extent, AVCE/ND students appeared to retain a greater sense of breadth and balance post-16.

- AS/A2-level interviewees commented more frequently than the AVCE/ND students on the increase in level and amount of work they perceived from Year 13 to Year 14. They were also somewhat more likely to highlight the negative impact this could have on enjoyment.

- Overall, AVCE/ND interviewees appeared more content with their post-16 undertakings than AS/A2-level interviewees, both in and of themselves, and in comparison with their experience of Years 8–12. By a small margin, AVCE/ND interviewees expressed fewer reservations regarding the narrowed breadth and balance of study, manageability and overall enjoyment.

- AVCE/ND interviewees tended to be less ‘utilitarian’ than AS/A2-level interviewees in their views on the relevance of their courses, though both groups principally conceptualised relevance in terms of future education or employment aspirations. Where the AVCE/ND students were more positive in terms of their courses’ application to everyday life, a number of AS/A2-level interviewees, particularly those taking sciences and mathematics, did not appear to recognise or seek relevance beyond the ‘means to an end’ utility to enter the next stage of education. ‘Real-life’ relevance was seen as a ‘bonus’ by some AS/A2-level interviewees, secondary to study or career relevance.
There was a much lower uptake of Key Skills courses among AS/A2-level interviewees than AVCE/ND interviewees. In terms of relevance and usefulness, the AVCE/ND students tended to be more positive about Key Skills than the AS/A2-level students, though both groups saw their benefit principally in terms of additional UCAS points.
2.3 Leaving formal education at 16: interviewees’ perspectives on work-related training and employment

Section 2.2 considered the perceptions of post-16 education for those students undertaking full-time AS/A2-level or AVCE/ND courses. This section will focus on the views of the interviewees who left formal education after Year 12 and were undertaking work-related training or were in employment. These interviewees were asked about their experiences of post-16 training or work, and were invited to compare these experiences with their time in formal education. This section first sets out the views of those in work-related training, followed by those in employment. The overview, which ends this section, contrasts the experiences of the work-related training and employed interviewees.

2.3.1 The experiences and perceptions of work-related training interviewees

The 26 interviewees undertaking work-related training courses were asked to reflect on their experience of post-16 training to date, under the following themes:

- breadth and balance
- enjoyment
- Key Skills
- manageability
- assessment.

The key findings were as follows.

- The vast majority of the work-related training interviewees preferred the amount and level of work in their work-related course compared with school. This was due to the more practical nature of these courses and the fact that the focus was on one subject of personal interest.

- Without exception, the work-related training interviewees reported that they were enjoying their courses and all but three preferred their post-16 undertakings to their time at school.

- These interviewees unanimously remarked that the amount of work on their work-related course was manageable. Around three-quarters of this group had found that the level of work on their post-16 course was ‘fine’.

- Two-thirds of the work-related training interviewees spoke positively about their Key Skills courses, viewing them as having some relevance either presently or in the future.

- These young people favoured the modular approach to assessment in work-related training courses, and also remarked that multiple choice test papers and the opportunity to repeat tests were beneficial.
**Breadth and balance in work-related training**

Of the 24 work-related training interviewees who offered opinions, all but three asserted that they preferred focusing on the area of their work-related training to the wider range of subjects they had studied at school. Their reasons for this preference reflected those offered by A-level/AVCE interviewees in relation to the increased specialisation in post-16 education.

Thus, among work-related training interviewees, the principle reason for favouring a focus on one area, stated by eight interviewees, was that they were concentrating on an area they had selected and hence their learning was line with their own personal interests and enjoyment. In contrast, at Key Stage 4, they had been obliged to study a range of subjects, several of which often had little appeal to them. Further, it was acknowledged by six interviewees that, by dedicating all their time to one area, this enhanced their knowledge of the particular subject matter in question. A small number of these young people commented that they appreciated this because it would equip them for impending employment opportunities in that field.

**REASONS FOR FAVOURING THE SPECIALISATION OF WORK-RELATED COURSES OVER THE BROADER RANGE OF SUBJECTS STUDIED AT KEY STAGE 4**

*It’s a lot easier when you are doing a narrower amount, because you can concentrate on each thing more, whereas in school, like, you’d think about everything at once* (male, work-related training).

*I’m always doing things. I just like it. It gets the day going and you know what you are going in for and what you want to do, like. And when you come home, sometimes you go ‘Get them blocks up that wall tomorrow ...’ and you’re always thinking about what you are going to do tomorrow and I like that routine* (male, work-related training).

*One subject is good now. You can go into more detail in it* (male, work-related training).

Akin to the perceptions of AVCE/ND interviewees highlighted in section 2.2.1, over one-third of interviewees in work-related training explained that, although they were officially studying in one field, owing to the modular structure of their course, ‘... it’s more like lots of subjects’. A small number of interviewees also suggested, because their week was split between FE college and their work placement, and their college/training centre days between theory work, Key Skills and practical classes, that they had sufficient variety in their post-16 undertakings: ‘There’s a lot of variety ... being out on your work placement ... it sort of makes it more enjoyable coming here [college], because, you know, it’s like a break and then you’re back again. Whereas, in school, it was just, you know, you had your timetable, it was just the same thing every week’ (female, work-related training).

The three interviewees, who preferred the variety that came with studying a range of subjects at school, reported that they found their work-related training courses somewhat monotonous. These young people were enrolled on bricklaying, mechanical engineering and electrician-related NVQs. One of these young people commented that at school, however bad a lesson was, it would only last one hour: ‘It was always something different everyday like you could have five subjects on one day’ (male, work-related training).
A small number of interviewees took a longer term view on specialising in one field for their work-related training, and, as the following quotations exemplify, opinions differed starkly:

_When I have my electrician qualification, I will always have it. It’s not like if I start doing it, that’s me stuck for the rest of my life. The way I look at it is, it’s four years done and that’s me a qualified electrician. I can do what I want and I will always be a qualified electrician_ (male, work-related training).

_I wish I had stayed on [at school] for the fact that I really didn’t have a clue what I was wanting to do, but now I’m engineering I know I don’t want to do it . . . if you’re in school all the doors are still open . . . whereas I have just narrowed it down now to one subject for the next 30 years_ (male, work-related training).

Overall, the vast majority of those undertaking work-related training favoured the specialisation of their post-16 undertakings to the broader range of subjects they had studied at Key Stage 4. The main reason interviewees cited for this preference was that their work-related courses enabled them to focus on, and learn more about, a specific field that interested them.

**Enjoyment in work-related training**

Without exception, these work-related training interviewees reported that they were enjoying their work-related courses and all but three asserted that they preferred these to their time at school (the three exceptions favoured the social side of school). The reasons these young people cited for their enhanced satisfaction with their post-16 undertakings related to: their work placement; the practical learning methods employed; the more relaxed atmosphere in FE college/training centre; the fact that they were earning a wage; better relationships with tutors; and, most typically, because they were now concentrating on an area that related to their interests.

In total, only two of the work-related training interviewees were able to highlight specific elements of their course that they did not enjoy. In contrast, when at school, half of the work-related training interviewees had been categorised as having low levels of engagement. Of the two young people who mentioned negative aspects of their work-related training, one of these interviewees was frustrated by the lack of work supplied to her by her college tutors: _‘If you’re not getting the work you’re sort of thinking “Why am I doing this course?”’_, while the other interviewee was not enjoying his current work placement owing to staff relations and the monotonous nature of the work he was given there.
REASONS WHY WORK-RELATED COURSES WERE PREFERRED TO SCHOOL

Studying a field that related to individual interests
*I enjoy it a lot better because, you know, I’m more interested in the work, which means you’re more motivated to do well. Whereas in school I wasn’t really interested in the subjects I was doing and I wasn’t that motivated to do that well in them ’cos I just wasn’t enjoying it* (female, work-related training).

Work placement
*[I prefer] getting out and getting stuff done* (male, work-related training).

Practical learning
*I’ve been amused by them [engines] for years and I just love working with them and seeing what the problems are* (male, work-related training).

Relaxed college ethos
*You’re not just sort of instructed to do everything, whereas when you were at school you were kind of instructed more or less to do everything. Here [at FE college], like, it’s up to yourself, you know, whether to work or not, like* (male, work-related training).

Earning a wage
*It was just the money made me leave [school] in the end, like, wanting the money over school, you know* (male, work-related training).

Better relationship with tutors
*The relationship you have with the teachers and, you know, everybody sort of enjoys the course and gets on well . . . everybody just seems to be interested in the course and everybody seems to want to do well* (female, work-related training).

Key Skills in work-related training
The majority of these work-related training interviewees were studying Key Skills in application of number, communication and ICT as part of their courses.

Two-thirds of the work-related training interviewees spoke positively about their Key Skills courses, viewing them as having some relevance or use either currently or in the future. The remaining interviewees offered mixed opinions, identifying both advantages and disadvantages of these courses. Where interviewees were supportive of Key Skills, they identified the benefits, as follows.

- Links between their Key Skills courses and work-related training helped them to carry out their practical work more efficiently. For instance, one student undertaking an NVQ in bricklaying was able to apply the skills he learnt in his application of number classes to the work he carried out on the building site.

- Transferable skills that the interviewees were developing from their Key Skills classes would be of use to them in the future. In particular, interviewees appeared to value their ICT course, commenting that ‘computers are everywhere these days’ (male, work-related training).

- Key Skills qualifications would enhance interviewees’ future employment prospects. In particular, this appeared to be appreciated by the young people who had not passed these subjects at GCSE level.
Where interviewees offered negative accounts of Key Skills, these typically related to the fact that the courses covered basic material that they already knew, or alternatively that they were unable to associate the Key Skills with their work-related training – they did not recognise any of the skills taught as being transferable and thus were unable to ascertain their future benefits. For example, one individual studying for an NVQ in bricklaying, remarked that he did not think the Key Skills courses were useful to him personally, or would be so in the future, because they ‘… didn’t make you build bricks any better’. A minimal number of interviewees reported that their Key Skills courses had required them to undertake a considerable amount of work.

**Manageability of work-related training**

Without exception, the interviewees felt that the amount of work on their post-16 course was manageable: ‘There’s not loads because they [FE college tutors] know you are working the rest of the week. You can handle the amount of work you get. Often I do it all in here and don’t have any to do at home’ (female, work-related training). In comparison, almost two thirds of these interviewees stated that they had found the amount of work at school to be ‘a lot’ or ‘too much’. Around three-quarters of these work-related training interviewees also regarded the level of work on their course as ‘fine’, while the remainder of comments implied that work was challenging, but ‘doable’. Accordingly, the vast majority of those who commented preferred the amount and level of work in their post-16 course as compared with school, while a small number simply felt there was no discernable difference. Where interviewees gave reasons for this preference, the two most common were the more practical, hands-on nature of the work-related courses, and (as was also noted among A-level/AVCE students) that the focus on one subject of personal interest increased manageability.

Eleven work-related training interviewees spontaneously commented on the help and support they received from supervisors and colleagues in the workplace and/or from tutors at FE college: ‘It’s about right, because there is someone you can ask for help. You say, “Can you give us help with this?” and he says, “Aye, no problem.” I pick things up easier when I’m shown, rather than just taught’ (male, work-related training). Two interviewees did comment, however, that they felt there was less support in FE college than there had been at school in terms of one-to-one help ‘if you get stuck on something’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REASONS WHY WORK-RELATED COURSES WERE PERCEIVED AS MORE MANAGEABLE THAN SCHOOL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practical nature of course</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I prefer working with my hands instead of my head</em> (male, work-related training).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus on one subject of personal interest</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>I think because it’s one subject that you like doing, one subject you enjoy doing, so to me it’s kind of, ‘Oh I have to do work today,’ but once you get into it … you are actually smiling while you are doing your work</em> (female, work-related training).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I prefer it now you can concentrate on one thing. At school you would have an English homework, a maths homework and then a science homework. By the time you got to the last one, you probably weren’t in the mood. Doing the beauty you can just concentrate on the one thing. You can go home and do one thing</em> (female, work-related training).</td>
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</table>
**Assessment of work-related training**

The work-related training interviewees provided detailed responses concerning the specifics of the structure and timing of their course’s assessment. However, minimal numbers actually expressed their opinions on this.

All the interviewees reported that they were enrolled on courses where assessment was modular, that is, it took place throughout the year and not through a final examination at the end of the course. Akin to the A-level/AVCE interviewees, the young people in work-related training favoured this form of assessment over a final examination: ‘*I think the end of topic tests is a better way of doing it. The whole big test at the end of everything, it’s just too nerve wracking. So if you do it at the end of each topic, then it’s still fresh in your head*’ (female, work-related training). In addition, interviewees commented that they preferred multiple choice papers to tests requiring longer answers, and that it was ‘*dead on*’ (highly acceptable) to be given the opportunity to repeat a test if they were dissatisfied with their initial grade.

In some instances, in addition to end of module tests, interviewees were required to produce a piece of coursework. The coursework either took the form of a worksheet, which would count towards a portfolio (assessed at the end of their course), or a longer assignment. A minimal number of interviewees remarked that they spent time out of college working on these assignments.

**2.3.2 The experiences and perceptions of employed interviewees**

The ten young people in employment at the time of their interviews were asked to reflect on their experiences since finishing compulsory schooling under the following themes:

- variety
- enjoyment
- manageability
- training and qualifications.

The key findings were as follows.

- All employed interviewees acknowledged that their days at school consisted of more variety than their current working days.

- The employed individuals offered mixed views with regard to their satisfaction with their occupations. Where these interviewees appeared content, this was frequently associated with the social side of their job, the money they were earning and the fact that they no longer had to spend evenings and weekends studying, rather than the actual nature of the work.

- The employed interviewees’ preferences for school or work, in terms of the manageability and challenge of these undertakings, appeared dependent on the particular occupation in which they were engaged. Those in routine jobs, with little prospect of promotion and no opportunity to study for qualifications,
generally favoured school, while those individuals who had the opportunity to undertake further qualifications or training and/or were working for companies with careers structures, preferred working.

- Half of the employed individuals were undertaking some form of qualification/training as part of their current position.

Variety in employment

All the employed interviewees acknowledged that their days at school consisted of more variety than their current working days. One male asserted that he had preferred the variety of school because ‘You were going from class to class and that would help the day go by quicker’ (male, factory operative). Despite the greater variety at school, four of these young people still felt that there was adequate variation in their occupations: ‘It’s not too bad, ‘cos you’re there working with the computer and then you’re counting up money and things’ (female, shop assistant). Further, a number of interviewees did not appear concerned by the lack of diversity in their working lives because ‘… at the end of the day, it gets you some money, like’. In fact, a few interviewees favoured the focus they had at work over the range of subjects they had taken at school.

Enjoyment of employment

Without exception, the employed interviewees responded that they were enjoying their current occupations: ‘I enjoy it, it’s fun’; ‘I love it’. Their justification for this enjoyment related to the social side of their job, the money they were earning and the fact that they no longer had to spend evenings and weekends studying, rather than the actual nature of the work.

When interviewees were asked which they preferred – their current employment or their time at school – responses differed depending on the type of work in which these individuals were engaged. Four of the ten employed interviewees, variously employed as a classroom assistant, nursery nurse and in the Civil Service, stated that they were enjoying working more than they had enjoyed their time at school. Three of the young people, employed in more routine jobs (i.e. factory operative, telephonist for taxi firm), stated the contrary. Whether the interviewees favoured school or work, the reasons for their preference related to the fact that they had ‘more craic’ at this location and, to a lesser extent, that their days were ‘more interesting’ there.

Manageability of employment

All but one of the interviewees commented that the level of the work in their current occupation was ‘easy’: ‘There’s not really that much to it, you just answer the phones [laughs]’. As a result of this, one of these interviewees was keen to take on extra responsibility: ‘I’ve been trying to get a bit more work on … at the minute they don’t let me do any accounts ‘cos they’re afraid of me messing them up, but I’m slowly but surely getting them, it’s something else to do’ (female, taxi firm telephonist).
When questioned regarding how they found the amount of work they were given by their employers, eight of the interviewees responded that it was ‘OK’. The two remaining interviewees commented that, on occasions, they had felt over-burdened by the amount of work they had to complete.

When comparing the manageability and challenge of their jobs with that of their school studies, the ten employed young people were more divided over which destination they favoured than was the case among the work-related training interviewees. Half of the employed young people reported that they preferred the level and amount of work they received in their current occupations, while the remaining half favoured the level and amount of work they had been given at school. Those interviewees who preferred school were employed in routine jobs. For example, one of these employed young people relayed how she did not feel sufficiently challenged at work: ‘School did tax my brain a bit more, you know. I find myself getting real lazy upstairs ... probably work would be a time to switch off, you know, because I don’t have to think about too many things’ (female, shop assistant).

**Training and qualifications**

Five of the ten employed interviewees reported that they were not undertaking any form of qualification or training in conjunction with their current job: ‘It’s not really that craic there, it’s just a job’. Four interviewees had recently passed NVQ level 2 qualifications in subjects that related to their occupation (i.e. retail and childcare) and had now progressed onto the subsequent NVQ level 3 qualification. In order to complete these qualifications, two of these young people attended evening classes at college while the remaining interviewees’ employers permitted them one day a week off work to attend their course. One individual employed in the Civil Service had recently received promotion after successfully completing an internal qualification.

2.3.3 **Overview of interviewees’ perspectives of work-related training and employment**

Of those who left compulsory education after Year 12, overall, the work-related training interviewees offered more positive views of their post-16 undertakings than their employed counterparts. In stark contrast to school where half of these work-related training interviewees were categorised as having low levels of engagement, at the time of the interview these individuals were unanimously of the opinion that they were enjoying their work-related courses. In addition, they remarked that they found these post-16 undertakings more manageable than they had previously found their schoolwork. This enhanced satisfaction and manageability was principally related to:

- the fact that they were focusing on one area of personal interest
- the practical hands-on nature of the work-related training course
- the relaxed ethos of FE college/training centre and relations with their college tutors
- the work placement element of their course.

In comparison, the employed individuals offered mixed views with regard to their satisfaction in their current occupations. Where these interviewees appeared content with their current undertakings, this was frequently associated with the social side of
their job and the wage they were earning rather than the actual nature of the work. These rationales can be contrasted with the reasons cited by the work-related training individuals, namely their enthusiasm for the content of their course (as highlighted above). In addition, the employed interviewees’ preference for school or work, in terms of the manageability and challenge of these undertakings, appeared dependent on the particular occupation they were engaged in. Those in routine jobs, with little prospect of promotion and no opportunity to study for qualifications, generally favoured school, while those individuals who had the opportunity to undertake further qualifications or training and/or were working for companies with career structures, preferred working.
2.4 Part 2 summary
This chapter has considered the 100 young people’s perspectives on 16–19 education, training and employment.

2.4.1 Perspectives on post-16 education
The majority of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees favoured the specialisation of post-16 education to the wider coverage in Key Stage 4. Taking fewer examined subjects tended to make studies more manageable overall and the majority of interviewees preferred to trade breadth for this increased manageability. Students appreciated the opportunity to dispense with subjects they had not enjoyed at Key Stages 3 and 4 and instead to focus on those of greatest personal interest and relevance to future plans. However, despite the prevailing preference for a more specialised and thus more manageable curriculum, over half of these interviewees reported that they missed certain subjects, particularly PE and languages. To this end, a minority expressed the view that a non-examined ‘enrichment’ element to the post-16 curriculum would be beneficial.

Enjoyment of post-16 education was closely related to manageability, with amount and level of work in inverse proportion to enjoyment. For a small number of AS/A2-level interviewees, enjoyment at this level of study was not an ‘expectation’, and enjoyment was secondary to utility. The focus on subjects of greater personal preference was a factor in increased enjoyment and there was evidence that enjoyment of courses increased where there was relevance to ‘real life’ or to future study or career plans.

The relevance of post-16 education was principally measured in terms of usefulness to future study or career plans. Several of those undertaking AS/A2-level courses held a ‘utilitarian’ view of relevance: ‘real-life’ application was a ‘bonus’ and secondary to utility. Among both AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees, there was a prevailing perception that Key Skills’ chief benefit was as a boost to UCAS points.

Interviewees found the amount of work involved in post-16 education to be more of a challenge to manageability than level of difficulty. However, there was a sense of ‘resignation’ that heavy workload was to be expected of courses at this stage. Manageability was assisted to some extent by the reduction in number of subjects and the more concentrated focus this permitted.

The A-level students interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the AS/A2 structure of their courses, finding the ‘split’ an aid to manageability, and a useful indicator of performance and progress. Notwithstanding, there was a feeling from a minority that amassing the knowledge and aptitude of two years’ study for a ‘final’ examination could benefit overall performance. With the regularity of assessment in AS/A2-levels and AVCEs – through modules, biannual examination sessions and coursework – there was a sense that assessment dominated post-16 education. This could, in part, explain interviewees’ utilitarian perception of relevance.
The differing perceptions of AVCE/ND and AS/A2-level interviewees

While both the AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND groups appreciated the smaller number of subjects covered post-16, AVCE interviewees were more likely to identify variety within their courses. Thus, to some extent, AVCE students appeared to retain a greater sense of breadth and balance post-16. AS/A2-level interviewees commented somewhat more frequently than the AVCE/ND interviewees on the increase in the level and amount of work they perceived from Year 13 to Year 14. They were also more likely to note the negative impact a heavy or difficult workload could have on enjoyment. Overall, AVCE/ND students appeared to be somewhat more content with their post-16 undertakings than AS/A2-level students. By a small margin, AVCE/ND students expressed fewer reservations regarding the narrowed breadth and balance of study, manageability and overall enjoyment.

AVCE/ND interviewees tended to be less ‘utilitarian’ than the AS/A2-level interviewees in terms of their views on relevance of their courses, though both groups principally saw relevance as linked to future education or employment aspirations. Whereas the AVCE/ND students tended to be more positive in terms of their courses’ application to everyday life, AS/A2-level interviewees, particularly those taking sciences and mathematics, did not appear to recognise or seek relevance beyond the ‘means to an end’ utility to enter the next stage of education. ‘Real-life’ relevance was seen as a ‘bonus’ by some AS/A2-level interviewees, rather than an expectation.

2.4.2 Perspectives on work-related training

Without exception, the work-related training interviewees reported that they were enjoying their courses and all but three preferred these post-16 undertakings to school. The interviewees unanimously felt that the amount of work on their work-related course was manageable and three-quarters of this group remarked that the level of work on their course was ‘fine’. The enhanced satisfaction and manageability that interviewees associated with these courses, compared with school, was related to the more practical nature of these courses and the fact that the focus was now on one subject of personal interest. Finally, two-thirds of the work-related training interviewees spoke positively about their Key Skills courses, viewing them as having some relevance either currently or in the future.

2.4.3 Perspectives on employment

The employed individuals offered mixed views with regard to their satisfaction with their current occupations. Where these interviewees appeared content with these undertakings, this was frequently associated with the social side of their job, the money they were earning and the fact that they no longer had to spend evenings and weekends studying, rather than the actual nature of the work.

When asked to compare their employment with their time at school, the employed interviewees’ preferences for work or school, in terms of the manageability and challenge of these undertakings, appeared dependent on the particular occupation in which they were engaged. Those in routine jobs, with little prospect of promotion and no opportunity to study for qualifications, generally favoured school, while those individuals who had the opportunity to undertake further qualifications or training and/or were working for companies with careers structures, preferred working.
2.4.4 Comparison of the different post-16 destinations

Those in work-related training courses were most likely to state an unreserved preference for post-16 undertakings, followed by AVCE/ND and then AS/A2-level interviewees; for all three groups, this preference was closely linked to the specialisation onto subjects of personal interest. However, employed interviewees expressed more mixed views: for this group, enjoyment was more frequently attributed to social factors rather than the nature of the actual work.

Interviewees in work-related training or employment expressed fewer reservations in terms of manageability (amount and level of work required of them) than students of A-levels or AVCE/NDs. None the less, both those in post-16 education and work-related training expressed the view that manageability was aided by the narrower focus at post-16 compared with Key Stage 4. These groups were also united in their appreciation of modular assessment and the opportunity to repeat examinations or revise pieces of work as necessary. Compared with AVCE/ND and AS/A2-level interviewees, those in work-related training offered the most positive views about Key Skills.

Interviewees in work-related training offered more positive views of their current undertakings than their employed counterparts, and to an extent, those taking AVCE/NDs were more satisfied than those on AS/A2-level courses. However, the tempering comments from those studying for AS/A2-levels differed from those in employment: the former felt particularly challenged by the amount of work required of them, while the latter could find the loss of social interaction with their peers and the monotony of their day to be hindrances to enjoyment.
Questions raised by the research

- Whilst the vast majority of AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND interviewees preferred the specialisation of post-16 education, there were countering comments suggesting a desire to retain some breadth, were it not for the amount and depth of study required at this level. Is there a need for greater variety in post-16 education, where students are able to make choices around breadth versus depth, as well as between different subject areas?

- Is it cause for concern that interviewees of certain AS/A2-level subjects perceived little relevance in their courses other than as the means of securing access to the next level of education? In addition to preparing students intellectually for the standards required in higher education, should post-16 education contribute more to personal, social, spiritual and health development than was perceived by AS/A2-level students interviewed here?

- In post-16 education, should students feel more tested by the level of work rather than by the amount of work as they do at present?

- Of the young people who were employed at the time of their interviews, several of those in more routine occupations (e.g. factory operative, shop assistant) had started these jobs after having abandoned work-related training. How might such individuals be supported in continuing in their work-related training or helped to move on to other courses so as to avoid entering routine employment which they subsequently found lacking in challenge and prospects?
Part 3

Retrospective opinions on the post-primary curriculum: the views of 100 interviewees

3.1 Introduction
Part 3 of this report addresses the third aim of this study, namely to explore young people’s perceptions of the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the light of their post-16 experiences. The chapter draws on the interviews conducted with the 100 young people for this research. It begins by contrasting the perspectives of those following different post-16 routes to establish whether young people pursuing a particular path felt better or worse prepared by their post-primary education for this destination. Following this, interviewees’ reflections on their studies at Key Stages 3 and 4 are discussed in order to gauge whether, with their greater maturity, their opinions on the curriculum at 17/18 years of age differ from those they expressed as part of this study from Years 8–12 (Key Stages 3 and 4).

The structure of Part 3 is outlined below.

Section 3.2 Interviewees’ perceptions on preparation for post-16
• Interviewees’ perceptions on the extent to which Years 8–12 prepared them for their post-16 destination (3.2.1)
• Interviewees’ perceptions on the extent to which Years 8–12 prepared them for post-16 everyday life (3.2.2)

Section 3.3 Interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum
• Interviewees’ reflections on the value of the post-primary curriculum (3.3.1)
• Interviewees’ suggestions for amendments to the post-primary curriculum (3.3.2)
• Overview of interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum: the value of variety and choice (3.3.3)
3.2 Interviewees’ perceptions on preparation for post-16

This section considers the extent to which the 100 interviewees perceived that their learning from Years 8–12 had prepared them for their lives post-16. Their opinions on their degree of preparation for their post-16 destination are presented first followed by their sense of preparation for everyday life.

3.2.1 Interviewees’ perceptions on the extent to which Years 8–12 prepared them for their post-16 destination

All interviewees were asked how far they felt that the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 4 had prepared them for their post-16 destinations (AS/A2-levels, AVCEs, NDs, work-related training, employment, jobseeking).

A much greater proportion of those interviewees who had proceeded to post-16 education felt prepared for these undertakings by Years 8–12 compared with their peers who left formal education at 16. All but five of the 60 A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they had been well prepared for their post-16 destinations, compared with 15 of the 26 interviewees in work-related training and seven of the ten employed interviewees.

Preparedness for post-16 education

In explaining why they felt prepared for post-16 education, A-level/AVCE interviewees were almost unanimous that their studies at Key Stages 3 and 4 had provided a ‘good foundation’, ‘a broad base’, ‘the basis of knowledge and skills … without you really noticing it at the time’ for AS/A2-level and AVCE/ND study. In particular, the following were cited (in order of frequency).

- **The continuity in subject content**
  The content of GCSE/GNVQ studies was perceived to have ‘carried through’ to A-level/AVCE work ‘very well’.

  *There would be things that we learnt that we are still learning, just in really big detail now … general topics that do give us a general basis in Years 8 to 12, now they are just in greater detail, so it definitely helped learning about them beforehand* (female, AS/A2-levels).

- **The gradual rise in the level and amount of work through Key Stages 3 and 4**
  Having become accustomed to progression in the difficulty and amount of work as they moved through Years 8–12, A-level/AVCE interviewees felt able to take on these courses without ‘a massive shock’.

  *Each year is like a little step up … it’s definitely helped A-level because otherwise if we hadn’t done that, there would be no basis to start learning anything from … so each step up was definitely a help … each step up we were learning more and more* (female, AS/A2-level).

- **The acquisition of study skills**
  These skills developed earlier on in school meant that it was now ‘second nature’ to analyse, write essays, complete coursework, revise and take examinations.

  *The skills that you build up in terms of looking at evidence or essay writing or just basic things like reading through things properly, reading the questions, all that sort of thing, that was sort of ground into you in those years [Years 8–12] (male, AS/A2-level).*
Of the small number of A-level/AVCE interviewees who did not feel prepared for their post-16 education, all were taking AS/A2-levels and had some of the lowest GCSE/GNVQ grades of those who had proceeded to AS/A2-level study amongst the interviewee sample. In addition, all but one had transferred from a secondary school to a grammar school sixth form or FE college for AS/A2-levels. They reported a sharp increase in the amount and level of work from Key Stage 4 to AS-level, and a change in the style of studying from teacher-directed to independent research. In this regard, it should be noted that even amongst A-level/AVCE interviewees who reported feeling prepared for their current studies, there were references to their lack of experience in independent learning, researching and working to the degree of detail required after the ‘broad skim’ of Key Stage 4.

### LACK OF PREPARATION FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY IN POST-16 EDUCATION

In GCSE, you were supposed to research but you were just given it and you just had to sort of highlight bits, but in Key Skills we had to actually find it yourself (female, AVCE/NDs).

Up until GCSE, the teacher is usually there to give you the notes and help you out and things so it’s more demanding at A-level because you have to write your own notes and you have to depend on your own reliability to write down the notes and not leave it until later and then never get round to it. So I don’t know, maybe they should be introducing it earlier on maybe, to make it easier (female, AS/A2-levels).

You have no experience of investigating something at a deeper level or how you are meant to go about it … it’s very hard to get used to the level of detail – you are used to not paying any real attention to detail at all (female, AS/A2-levels).

### Preparedness for post-16 work-related training and employment

There was less certainty amongst those interviewees who left compulsory schooling after Year 12 that they had been prepared by the Key Stage 3 and 4 curricula for their post-16 pursuits. In total, 11 of the 26 interviewees in work-related training (over two-fifths) remarked that they did not feel that their studies in Years 8–12 had been good preparation for this post-16 destination; a view also expressed by three of the ten employed interviewees.

### Aspects of the curriculum as preparation for work-related training and employment

Where interviewees in work-related training and employment did feel prepared for their post-16 destination by Key Stages 3 and 4, they cited a small number of subjects that they made direct use of in their current pursuit. Both groups principally highlighted English (reading, writing) and mathematics (measuring, counting) as subjects that had prepared them for their post-16 undertakings, though a small number of the work-related interviewees actually related any usefulness to their need to pass Key Skills as part of their training.

Beyond English and mathematics, the following subjects were cited by work-related training interviewees as useful preparation for their destination (in order of frequency):
• technology by those undertaking joinery, plumbing, bricklaying, engineering and electrician courses
• science by those on the above courses and also on hair and beauty courses
• careers education and work experience for relaying the expectations of training courses and working life
• ICT
• there were individual mentions of business studies, art and drama.

For employed interviewees, following English and mathematics, ICT was cited as useful preparation for working life – referenced by half of the interviewees who had entered employment at 16. Mentioned as often as ICT were the social and teamwork skills developed through Years 8–12 and also the routine (awaking early) and discipline of school ‘… when you learn to discipline yourself and keep yourself working away and not stop or whatever’ (female, employment). Beyond these, depending on the focus of interviewees’ occupations, business studies (shop and office work) and child development (nursery nurse) were acknowledged.

Lack of preparedness for work-related training and employment
Amongst those work-related training and employed interviewees who did not feel adequately prepared for these pursuits by Key Stages 3 and 4, they too would cite a small number of subjects which they had used, but from this they drew the opposite conclusion – that this was not sufficient preparation because, for example, they had ‘only’ made use of their mathematics and technology. In addition, the following reasons were given to explain why they felt ill-prepared for training or employment by Key Stages 3 and 4.

• Post-primary education was perceived to be geared towards those undertaking further study at post-16 and did not teach a trade: ‘It would be different if I was to go on to university. It might have done more there, but for the likes of doing a trade or nothing, school doesn’t even prepare you for that there’ (male, employment).

• There were no subjects in the post-primary curriculum which were perceived to have formed a knowledge basis for this post-16 destination or had offered an insight into the type of work involved: ‘There wasn’t much that the school could do, like, for bricklaying, like … It is just really a physical job, it takes a lot of effort. So it is totally different from school, like. There are not many subjects that could prepare you for it, like’ (male, work-related training).

• The application of subjects in work-related training or employment was felt to be different from the approach taken in school: ‘You still had to have maths, like, [in work-related training] but it was done in a different way. It was about the price of things. It was showing how to use your own initiative, like, you had to go and find prices for tiles, find tiles and measure up’ (male, work-related training).
3.2.2 Interviewees’ perceptions on the extent to which Years 8–12 prepared them for post-16 everyday life

When asked whether the curriculum from Years 8–12 had prepared them for their everyday lives (e.g. personal development, health and welfare, practical or domestic issues), the immediate response of two-thirds of interviewees was positive. The remaining third, however, were unsure and, when probed further, had difficulty identifying anything which they had covered in the school curriculum which they now used in their everyday lives. These interviewees spanned all post-16 destination types and attainment levels. Clearly, these interviewees would have been applying their learning (literacy and numeracy skills at the very least), yet there was a lack of recognition that they were doing so. Indeed, amongst those who felt prepared for everyday life by Years 8–12, there was acknowledgement of this.

*You don’t think of it, but generally in life you use things you learn at school. You just don’t realise that you learnt it in school. You just think it’s general knowledge, but you don’t realise that you learnt it* (female, AS/A2-levels).

None the less, that such a proportion perceived that they had not so far used any of their studies in everyday life is perhaps a cause for concern: ‘I never really felt prepared for the type of stuff you have to do outside school’ (male, employment).

The two-thirds of interviewees who did feel prepared for everyday life referred to their use of the following (in order of frequency):

- literacy and numeracy skills
- social skills
- personal, social and health education (PSHE)
- PE
- home economics – cited only by girls
- technology – cited only by boys
- then business studies, IT, French, RE, child development and single mentions for history and geography.

As earlier phases of the research have shown (Harland *et al.*, 2002 and 2003), when describing their use of their learning, interviewees continued to make reference to knowledge over skills. For instance, those interviewees who felt they had made use of home economics referred more to the theoretical elements of the subject – ‘allergies and really weird facts’ – than the practical cooking aspects.

For the most part, interviewees remained very subject specific in their accounts of their use of their learning in everyday life. For example, PE was cited by those who were pursuing sport or who undertook physical activities as hobbies: ‘[I’ve made use of] PE because I play football every Saturday morning’. In contrast, however, one-tenth of the individuals (primarily AS/A2-level interviewees) drew all aspects of their curriculum experience together to convey their preparedness for everyday life. Although a small number, this was the first time in the course of the Cohort Study that interviewees relayed with such clarity how the whole curriculum had a significant impact on their personal development, and it is possible that this perception may widen as young people move further away from their time in compulsory education and reflect upon it from increased distance.
For everyday life, I’ve just come out as a much stronger person ... I’m going to be moving to England to study, and I feel more prepared for it now, you know, to move on and to make friends with people and just to study by myself ... it’s just made me feel less insecure, school, I think (female, AS/A2-levels).

Because you’ve just come out of primary school and you’re not very smart so it’s important to build up your knowledge in those years. It’s developing you and your mind (female, AS/A2-levels).
3.3 Interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum

In order to chart any development in their perspectives on the school curriculum two years on from finishing compulsory education, all 100 interviewees were asked whether, in the light of their experiences since finishing Year 12, they would make any changes to the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4. This section conveys their responses to this enquiry. Firstly, interviewees’ reflections on the value of the curriculum are relayed, followed by a discussion of the areas for improvement that were suggested.

3.3.1 Interviewees’ reflections on the value of the post-primary curriculum

All but one of the 100 interviewees made comments expressing some basic support for aspects of the curriculum as they had experienced it. The one exception was a former grammar-school girl, now undertaking an AVCE at FE college. Whilst at post-primary school, she had been categorised as ‘low-engaged’ through her responses to the questionnaires completed for the study. In her post-16 interview, recalling how ‘I just hated school’, she acknowledged that ‘I didn’t really learn anything’, and was one of very few interviewees to dismiss the need for English and mathematics as compulsory subjects past Year 10.

Of the remaining 99 interviewees, one-sixth – the majority of whom had been classed as ‘highly engaged’ in Year 12 – stated that they would make no changes at all to the curriculum. The remainder, whilst suggesting areas for improvement (see section 3.3.2), did still register some basic support for subjects which constituted the curriculum. These young people – the vast majority of those interviewed – had been engaged to differing degrees in Year 12: around half had been low engaged, almost one-third were mid-engaged and nearly one-fifth, highly engaged. And, with the exception of the former grammar school girl above, they also included those who felt that Years 8–12 had not prepared them for their post-16 destination or for everyday life (see section 3.2.2).

Why then did these interviewees – half of whom had a low level of engagement in Year 12 – now acknowledge some support for the curriculum? For a small number, this view was the product of an automatic assumption that ‘it has to be that way … how else could it be?’ (female, work-related training). The remainder offered four explanations for why, with hindsight, they had come to this point of view. These are set out below with a number of illustrative extracts from the interviews (when attributing these quotations to the particular interviewee, the individual’s level of engagement in Year 12 is also given).

- Amount of learning
  The curriculum was perceived to have enabled an extensive amount of learning to take place. With its coverage of a wide range of themes, young people were ‘going out knowing bits about everything, like’ (male, employment, low engagement in Year 12).

\[28\] Degree of engagement was determined through items in the Year 12 pupil questionnaire designed to gauge level of commitment with learning.
There’s plenty of stuff covered when you’re at school. It wasn’t like you were learning wee bits and pieces. You covered, like, most of it (male, work-related training, high engagement in Year 12).

- **Preparation for long-term pursuits**
  The curriculum with its breadth of coverage was felt to be beneficial for young people’s long-term development and future pursuits: ‘Most of them, you will use them at some stage’ (female work-related training, mid engagement in Year 12). As Part 1 of this report conveyed, 17 of the 100 interviewees had already changed direction from their original post-16 destination. From a number of these young people, there was recognition that the curriculum had to include a variety of areas in order to prepare young people for a changing future.

  *It gave you a good variety for your future … I mean, I thought I was going to stay on the farm, but I didn’t. I’ve changed [post-16 destination] twice* (male, employment, low engagement in Year 12).

- **Choice**
  The curriculum had allowed young people access to a wide range of areas, affording them the opportunity to discover their preferences and talents, thus enabling them to make decisions regarding their future.

  *There’s a good variety of things [subjects] you could have done. And if you couldn’t do them [had no aptitude], you couldn’t, but you’d a chance to do them* (male, employment, low engagement in Year 12).

  *Personally, I didn’t enjoy certain subjects like art and music, but I might not have known that I didn’t enjoy them without doing them. I would probably have complained if I hadn’t got to do them, so I think it works out all right in the end* (male, AS/A2-level, high engagement in Year 12).

- **Fulfilling a variety of individual needs**
  The curriculum had to suit a spectrum of people who had a variety of interests at school and who, between them, would eventually pursue a wide range of careers. Therefore, there was regular acknowledgement that whilst a subject might be seemingly irrelevant to one’s own interests and aspirations, it could fit the enthusiasms and goals of others.

  *The school has to do quite a lot of things to suit everybody. So there’s nothing more they can really do and there is nothing that they can’t do or they shouldn’t be doing* (male, work-related training, mid engagement in Year 12).

  *What you want to do might not be what the next person wants, and I think that a lot of people just have to sit back and realise that* (female, work-related training, mid engagement in Year 12).

In addition to the above retrospective reflection which had heightened young people’s estimation of the value of the curriculum, more than one-third of interviewees – spread across all post-16 destination types – explicitly stated that they were now at odds with their younger selves, and latterly appreciated ‘the point’ of the curriculum or at least of a particular subject which they had dismissed at the time. They offered three principal reasons to explain their change in perspective. Firstly, these interviewees, either through their post-16 destinations or generally through their broadening horizons, had become more aware of the relevance and the application of
the knowledge they had acquired at school. Secondly, there had been recognition that exposure to a range of learning areas ‘makes you more well-rounded’. And, in a similar vein, for work-related training interviewees primarily, there had been a realisation that, after finishing Year 12 ‘that was your chance gone’, an awareness that had prompted some to wish they had concentrated better whilst at school. Thirdly, the criteria (enjoyment, manageability) upon which appraisals of the curriculum had been made during Years 8–10 in particular, were discounted as ‘immature’.

A key area where there was an acknowledged change of opinion was in the timetable allocation for English, mathematics and science. More than one-third of interviewees explicitly stated that, with hindsight, they appreciated why English, mathematics and to a lesser extent science should have a greater share of available time than other curriculum areas. Indeed, more than one-quarter of the interviewees who had proceeded to work-related training called for even more time to be dedicated to mathematics.

### Changes in Perspective with Hindsight

The things you get taught, you do use everyday. I thought I was just getting taught rubbish, but I wasn’t (male, work-related training, low engagement in Year 12).

It all comes into place when you leave school. You think about it all, everything you have done and, you know, you’ve done it for a purpose ... Whenever you get out of school, it’s like no more school and that’s you ... I was like ‘I should have actually done more there’, you know, concentrated better (male, work-related training, low engagement in Year 12).

I remember years ago ... damning music, damning art and damning them all to hell and never wanting to do them again, but in hindsight, it was enrichment. Home economics, I know how to cook now, definitely extremely useful. I definitely underestimated things at the time (male, AS/A2-levels, low engagement in Year 12).

At school, we were doing like music and stuff and you were saying like ‘I’m not going to be a musician. What do we want to know about music? I don’t even like music’. And then now whenever I see people playing, I think ‘I would love to play music’ ... and then you think back and say ‘Then I said, “Oh I hate it” and now you say “I would love to do it”’ (female, unemployed, low engagement in Year 12).

You learn to appreciate things more when you are a bit older, whereas when you are younger, you just think ‘That’s just stupid’ ... I just basically based it on what I liked and what I didn’t like and if I didn’t like a subject, I didn’t think it should be there. That’s not the way, but when you are that age, you don’t realise that it’s for your own good (female, AS/A2-levels, low engagement in Year 12).

#### 3.3.2 Interviewees’ suggestions for amendments to the post-primary curriculum

The above section has conveyed how, upon reflection, the majority of interviewees recognised the value of the curriculum, or at least particular subjects, and what it had offered them, with more than one-third of interviewees explicitly acknowledging that this was a turnaround from the views they held at the time. Notwithstanding this heightened appreciation, interviewees still highlighted avenues for improvement, and in this regard, their suggestions mirrored several of those made earlier in the NI Curriculum Cohort Study during their years in post-primary education (Harland et al., 2002 and 2003). The following areas were raised:
increased emphasis on skills and aspects of personal and social development
changes to the content and mediation of curriculum areas
the opportunity for vocational learning and work experience.

Each of these will now be discussed in greater detail.

**Increased emphasis on skills and aspects of personal and social development**

As was the case in both the Key Stages 3 and 4 phases of the research, post-16 interviewees called for increased coverage of the following curriculum areas and skills (in order of frequency).

- **ICT** – the need for both separate ICT lessons and cross-curricular application was highlighted.

- **Life and independence skills** – suggested areas included money management and taxes, cookery (that is ‘how to make an actual dinner ... not cakes!’), first aid, ‘the basics of living, like ironing and washing and sewing’ and driving theory and safety. The inclusion of life and independence skills was cited in particular by A-level/AVCE interviewees for whom the reality of leaving home for higher education dawned.

- **Careers education** – it was suggested that careers education should begin earlier than Year 10.

- **Personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE)** – especially citizenship, sex and drugs education, though it was stressed that this should involve ‘proper work’ and not just be a ‘dossy class’.

- **PE** – this was seen to be beneficial for pupils’ fitness whilst at school and also to establish healthy attitudes for the future. Further, it provided opportunities to ‘get rid of all your energy’ and was ‘something to look forward to – to get out and play’.

- **Study skills** – including time management, essay writing, research, revision and examination skills, making presentations. These were highlighted by A-level/AVCE students primarily but also by work-related training interviewees because of the portfolio element of their courses.

- **Social skills** – employed interviewees especially highlighted the need for input on how to communicate with the public.

Whilst there was recognition from the highest attainers of the complexity of teaching skills, none the less, there was encouragement for this because of how ‘de-skilled’ they felt: ‘I just think that people need more than academics. You know, they can’t just be stuck in a book or whatever, you know. We need those things. They’re skills we’re going to need’ (female, AS/A2-levels).
Changes to the content and mediation of curriculum areas

In addition to the calls for increased coverage of the above curriculum areas and skills, the following amendments were also suggested to the content and mediation of subjects (in order of frequency).

- **More practical work** – ‘The more practical it is, the more you want to do it. Everyone enjoys practical work’ (male, work-related training).

- **Personal choice within subjects** – ‘Ask a particular group what they would like to do. Every group is different. There might be a class who loved to go and play football for the full year and another class who loved to go and play netball, but you can’t expect every year and every class to be the same’ (female, AVCE/ND).

- **Greater application of knowledge and coverage of current affairs** – This young man had studied IT at GCSE and AS/A2-level: ‘I know a lot of theory … but say if I had a new computer, I don’t think I could set it up. I mean that’s astonishing isn’t it?’ (male, AS/A2-levels).

  You do need some kind of basic level of knowledge that makes you look at the world around you and think about it … to prepare you for being part of it … There is really no emphasis on that in school, and current affairs are mentioned rarely to never (female, AS/A2-levels).

- **Less focus on assessment and examinations** – ‘It’s never been a case of learning it because that’s interesting, I would like to know it. It’s always a case of you have to learn it for the exams and if you don’t do well, you are going to suffer’ (male, AS/A2-levels).

- **Opportunities for personal investment** – ‘If they [teachers] gave them [pupils] something that they could think up for themselves, to kind of show their own ability that’s maybe not expressed in class or whatever, it would be far better … then whenever you get your grade in, you’d think ‘Yes, I really deserved it’ (male, ND).

- **Discussions** – ‘… getting more involved instead of writing things down’ (female, work-related training).

- **Field trips** – ‘… but not the writing up afterwards’ (female, work-related training).

The opportunity for vocational learning and work experience

One-fifth of interviewees advocated the inclusion of vocational skills in the curriculum. This was primarily cited by work-related training and employed interviewees who would have welcomed the opportunity to acquire the practical skills and attend taster courses to enable them to make more informed decisions about the post-16 work-related training or employment they wished to pursue. In addition, the need for greater provision of vocational subjects was advanced by seven A-
level/AVCE interviewees (interestingly perhaps, all but one of whom attended mixed ability post-primary schools; the exception being a grammar student towards the lower end of the ability range in the school). They put forward the view that learning such skills would be useful for all young people for the future, would provide a break from academia, and most importantly would have given their peers whose talents lay in vocational fields the opportunity to excel and to prepare themselves for their post-16 courses. One AS/A2-level student believed that if schools offered ‘academic’ (GCSEs) and ‘vocational’ (NVQ) qualifications, then this would create a ‘universal school’ which would combat the ‘hierarchy’ of subjects.

Amongst the very small number of interviewees who had had opportunities to undertake vocational courses or extended periods of work experience themselves during Years 11 to 12, there was appreciation of the facility to sample different career options and also of the variety this had afforded their education.

THE VALUE OF VOCATIONAL COURSES

It would be good if you could do plumbing for a couple of weeks and then do joinery and then do electrician, all different ones and see which one you think you like and which one you can pick [for post-16] (male, work-related training).

I think there should be more room for people who aren’t as academic and would be very skilled. I think there should be more opportunity for them to learn, like there’s a lot of people from my school went to do hairdressing and if they could have, you know, whenever they were at school, applied more of that … apart from saving them a lot of time, it would help them to become better hairdressers faster, so it would, and just sort of provide that extra option for people who want to, rather than go into the academic work, go into a skilled profession (female, AS/A2-levels).

Possible reductions in the curriculum

Proposals for extending the curriculum (as outlined above) were far more commonly offered by interviewees than suggestions for reducing its range of learning areas. When reductions were put forward, these were driven by an individual’s own personal dislike of the subject, their difficulties with the manageability of the work required or their perception of its irrelevance. History, science and geography were all cited in this regard (each by fewer than ten interviewees); however, the justifications offered by these young people perhaps raise more questions about the content and ways in which these subjects had been presented in class than they do about their position in the curriculum. For example, an AS/A2-level student wished to banish history because ‘Who wants to know about things that happened 120 years ago? What relevance does that have today?’ (male, AS/A2-level).

Languages and RE received the greatest number of nominations as areas of the curriculum that should be limited, indicated by nearly one-fifth and one-sixth of interviewees respectively. Their principal criticism was that these subjects were compulsory throughout post-primary education when these young people preferred them to be optional, especially at Key Stage 4. RE, in addition, was perceived as ‘forcing you into religion’, beliefs they did not always share. A less strong focus on Christianity was posited as a solution here. Notwithstanding these suggested changes, languages and RE also generated support. One-tenth of interviewees called for a greater range of languages to be made available, and both languages and RE elicited the following ardent endorsements, amongst others.
Religious studies ... it is good that you can see some viewpoints of different religions ... the whole wide perspective of everything and where people are coming from, so you don’t judge people as well and why they think that (female, AS/A2-level).

I was a bit iffy about languages. I didn’t see the point in them, but now basically the way I see them, if you done languages, it proved that you could learn a wee bit more quick ... Aye it’s not just that, but also that when you are going to this country, you would be able to speak it [the language], that will be brilliant (male, work-related training).

3.3.3 Overview of interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum: the value of variety and choice

This section has outlined interviewees’ reflections on the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the light of their post-16 experiences. In combining the responses of the 100-strong sample, the overarching message to emerge was the priority that should be given to variety and choice within the curriculum for these young people.

In terms of variety, as discussed above, the variety within the curriculum was applauded for: the range and extent of learning which could be derived; the preparation of pupils for a wide range of career paths; the opportunity to discover individual preferences and talents; and to fulfil the disparate interests of a wide range of young people. Broadly, there was consensus that pupils should continue to sample a range of subjects until the end of Year 10 then select options for Key Stage 4, though a number of AS/A2 interviewees believed that two years was ample time to discover one’s strengths and preferences, and therefore pupils should begin to specialise in Year 10.

In terms of choice, as stated in section 3.3.2, there were calls for more individual choice within subject areas throughout post-primary school e.g. the ability to choose sports in PE or select the texts and the foci of essays in English. Then, when selecting options for Key Stage 4, interviewees advocated a greater range of subjects to be made available (e.g. psychology, sociology, vocational skills) and for fewer stipulations governing the choices which could be made. As highlighted above, a significant minority disputed whether languages and RE should be compulsory at Key Stage 4. Further, even four years after these 17/18-year-old interviewees had made their choices for Key Stage 4, there was regular criticism that the option structure had restricted their choice because desirable subjects had appeared ‘in the same box’ on options forms. The importance of choice for these young people was summed up by the following interviewee who, whilst mindful of the economics of the situation, conveyed how choice made pupils feel they had control over their education and destinies:

If they had more choice for the pupil, then I think it would make it [the curriculum] a little more enjoyable, but it’s hard to have more choice because then you have got to have more teachers and more money and stuff like that, so it makes it a little harder for the education system, but I think, you know, just giving the average pupil a choice in what they want to be and what they want to do in life and make their own decisions, you know, it sort of gives them that feel of freedom ‘I have control of my life and not these teachers’ you know, ‘I am going in the direction I want. They are here helping me’ (male, AVCEs then overseas scholarship).
3.4 Part 3 summary
Part 3 has discussed the 100 interviewees’ retrospective views on the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4, and has set out the extent to which young people in different post-16 destinations felt prepared for these undertakings by Years 8–12. Further, interviewees’ reflections on their post-primary studies have been explored in order to gauge whether, with their greater maturity, their opinions on the curriculum at 17/18 years of age differ from those they expressed when they were in Years 8–12.

3.4.1 Interviewees’ perceptions on the extent to which the curriculum at Years 8–12 prepared them for their post-16 destination
On the basis of the perspectives of the 100 interviewees in this study, the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 appears proficient in equipping young people for the next phase in education, but is less adept at preparing them if they leave formal education at 16 to pursue work-related training or employment options. All but five of the 60 A-level/AVCE interviewees reported that they had been well prepared for this post-destination, compared with 15 of the 26 interviewees in work-related training and seven of the ten employed interviewees.

In explaining why they felt prepared for post-16 studies, A-level/AVCE interviewees cited the following (in order of frequency).

- The content of their GCSE/GNVQ studies had ‘carried through’ to their A-level/AVCE work ‘very well’.
- Having become accustomed to progression in the level and amount of work as they moved through Years 8–12, they were able to take on A-level/AVCEs without ‘a massive shock’.
- The study skills developed earlier on in school meant that it was now ‘second nature’ to write essays, complete coursework, revise and take examinations. However, there were also references to their lack of experience in independent learning, research and working to the degree of detail required at A-level/AVCE after the ‘broad skim’ of Key Stage 4.

Of the small number of A-level/AVCE interviewees who did not feel prepared for their post-16 education, all were taking AS/A2-levels and had some of the lowest GCSE/GNVQ grades of those who had proceeded to AS/A2-level study amongst the interviewee sample. In addition, all but one had transferred from a secondary school to a grammar school sixth form or FE college for AS/A2-levels.

Those interviewees in work-related training and employment who felt that Years 8–12 had prepared them for their post-16 destination, would cite a small number of subjects that they made direct use of in their current pursuit. Primarily these were English (reading, writing) and mathematics (measuring, counting), and also science and technology for those on joinery, plumbing and engineering courses, and science for those on hair and beauty courses. Careers education and work experience placements were regarded as preparation in acquainting interviewees with the expectations of training courses and working life. Further, half of the employed interviewees identified the social and teamwork skills developed through Years 8–12, and also the
routine (awaking early) and discipline of school, as useful preparation for employment.

Amongst those work-related training and employed interviewees who did not feel adequately prepared for these pursuits by the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4, they, too, would cite a small number of subjects that they had used, but from this they drew the opposite conclusion – that this was not sufficient preparation because, for example, they had ‘only’ made use of, say, their mathematics and technology. In addition, they gave the following reasons to explain why they felt ill-prepared for training or employment by Key Stages 3 and 4.

- Post-primary education was geared towards those undertaking further study at post-16 and did not teach ‘a trade’.
- Few subjects had formed a knowledge base for their post-16 destination or had given them an insight into the type of work (often physical labour) involved.
- The more applied use of subjects in work-related training or employment was perceived to be different from the approach taken in school.

3.4.2 Interviewees’ retrospective views on the post-primary curriculum

Interviewees were asked whether, in the light of their experiences since finishing Year 12, there were any changes that they would make to the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4. All but one of the 100 interviewees made comments expressing some basic support for aspects of the curriculum as they had experienced it. One sixth of the interviewees – the majority of whom had been classed as ‘highly engaged’ in Year 12 – stated that they would make no changes at all to the curriculum. The remaining five-sixths, whilst suggesting areas for improvement, did still register support for subjects which constituted the curriculum. Half of these young people had been categorised as having a low level of engagement in Year 12.

In explaining their heightening appreciation of the curriculum, there was regular recognition of the fact that it was beneficial to try a range of subjects so that ‘you can make choices’, and also acknowledgement that whilst a subject might be seemingly irrelevant to one’s own interests and aspirations, it could fit the enthusiasms and goals of others. In addition, for the 17 interviewees in particular who had already changed direction from their original post-16 destination, there was a realisation that the curriculum needed to include a variety of areas in order to prepare young people for a changing future.

Further, more than one-third of interviewees – spread across all destination types – explicitly stated that they were now at odds with their younger selves, and latterly appreciated ‘the point’ of the curriculum or at least of a particular subject which they had dismissed at the time: ‘I thought I was just getting taught rubbish, but I wasn’t’ (male, work-related training).

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29The one exception was a former grammar-school girl, now undertaking an AVCE at FE college.
A key area where there had been an acknowledged change of opinion was the timetable allocation for English and mathematics. Earlier findings from the NI Curriculum Cohort Study (Harland et al., 2002 and 2003) have indicated that during Years 8–12, pupils believed that too much time was devoted to these subjects. With hindsight, one-third of interviewees explicitly stated that these subjects should be afforded this time. Interviewees in work-related training particularly stressed the need for mathematics.

Notwithstanding the heightened support for the curriculum, interviewees still highlighted avenues for improvement and, in this regard, their suggestions mirrored those made earlier in the Cohort Study during their years in post-primary education (Harland et al., 2002 and 2003). The following areas were cited.

- Increased emphasis on skills (ICT, life/independence skills, study skills, social skills) and aspects of personal and social development (careers education, PSHCE, PE).

- Changes to the content and mediation of curriculum areas, to include more practical work, more personal choice within subject areas, increased opportunities for application of knowledge and coverage of current affairs, and less focus on examinations.

- The inclusion of vocational learning in the curriculum, cited by work-related training and employed interviewees and also by AS/A2-level students.

### 3.4.3 Conclusion

When reflecting on their post-primary education almost two years on from the end of compulsory schooling, all but one of the 100 interviewees made comments expressing some basic support for aspects of the curriculum as they had experienced it, though five-sixths went on to suggest areas for improvement, too. When these young people had been in Year 12, a substantial proportion had been categorised as having a low level of engagement with their studies. Whilst their retrospective warming towards the curriculum is undoubtedly welcome, it is possibly too belated. Statistical analysis to identify the factors that increase the probability of pursing post-16 education showed that a young person’s engagement with learning in Year 12 had an influence over and above performance at GCSE/GNVQ. Thus, as engagement with learning increased, the probability of a young person entering post-16 education after Year 12 increased. Therefore, in order to enhance their appreciation of the curriculum whilst young people are still in compulsory education rather than two years hence, it may be worth considering the suggestions for improvement offered by the young people interviewed for this research: increased emphasis on skills and personal and social development; changes to the content and mediation of subjects; and opportunities for vocational learning.

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30When interpreting these findings, the smaller scale of the interviewing strand in this post-16 phase of the research ought to be borne in mind. For example, here the views of the 100 post-16 interviewees are being compared with the opinions of 3,000 youngsters who completed annual surveys from Years 8 to 12 for the Key Stages 3 and 4 phases of the study.
Appendix A

The tables below present details of the destinations of the 3,423 NI Curriculum Cohort Study young people according to the characteristics of the post-primary schools, which the sample attended from Years 8–12 (Key Stages 3 and 4), and their own personal characteristics. A full discussion of these data can be found in Part 1 of this report.

Post-16 destinations analysed by post-primary school characteristics

Table 1  Young people’s post-16 destinations by the type of post-primary school they attended from Years 8–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Secondary school</th>
<th>Grammar school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college (courses up to A-level)</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployed</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2188</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study: post-16 destinations data collection
Table 2  Young people’s post-16 destinations by their post-primary schools’ level of eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>815 74</td>
<td>262 17</td>
<td>14 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>18 2</td>
<td>275 18</td>
<td>308 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college (courses up to A-level)</td>
<td>148 14</td>
<td>426 28</td>
<td>73 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE</td>
<td>30 3</td>
<td>119 8</td>
<td>71 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>43 4</td>
<td>129 8</td>
<td>72 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>17 2</td>
<td>146 10</td>
<td>95 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/ unemployed</td>
<td>5 1</td>
<td>37 2</td>
<td>26 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6 1</td>
<td>70 5</td>
<td>10 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>17 2</td>
<td>64 4</td>
<td>67 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1099 100</td>
<td>1528 100</td>
<td>736 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study: post-16 destinations data collection

Table 3  Young people’s post-16 destinations by the religious orientation of the post-primary school they attended from Years 8–12*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Catholic managed</th>
<th>Protestant managed</th>
<th>Integrated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
<td>(N) (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>605 33</td>
<td>528 37</td>
<td>3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>401 22</td>
<td>158 11</td>
<td>42 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college (courses up to A-level)</td>
<td>324 18</td>
<td>277 19</td>
<td>60 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE</td>
<td>103 6</td>
<td>112 8</td>
<td>5 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>157 9</td>
<td>86 6</td>
<td>1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>101 6</td>
<td>137 10</td>
<td>20 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/ unemployed</td>
<td>36 2</td>
<td>27 2</td>
<td>5 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>54 3</td>
<td>33 2</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>66 4</td>
<td>81 6</td>
<td>1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1847 100</td>
<td>1439 100</td>
<td>137 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100
Source: NI Curriculum Cohort Study: post-16 destinations data collection

*When considering the above table, it is important to note that only four per cent of our sample had attended integrated schools from Years 8–12, compared with 54 per cent of the young people who had been educated in Catholic-managed schools and 42 per cent who attended Protestant-managed schools. Consequently, comparisons can only be drawn with any reliability between Catholic- and Protestant-managed schools.
Post-16 destinations analysed by young people’s characteristics

Table 4  Young people’s post-16 destinations by their gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Boy</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Girl</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college (courses up to A-level)</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployed</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1576</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>1847</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Source:  NI Curriculum Cohort Study: post-16 destinations data collection

Table 5  Young people’s post-16 destinations by their social class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
<th>(%)</th>
<th>Working class</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at grammar school</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at secondary school</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-16 education at FE college (courses up to A-level)</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills at FE</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobskills/training/apprenticeship</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job seeking/unemployed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1033</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>1335</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100*

Source:  NI Curriculum Cohort Study: post-16 destinations data collection

*Social class was determined on the basis of parents’ occupations. It was not possible to ascertain the social class of 1,055 young people, therefore these young people are not included in Table 1.4.*
References


