DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 342 CE 067 773

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TITLE	Time to Leave? Progression and Drop Out in Basic Skills Programmes.
INSTITUTION	Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, London (England).
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-870741-99-4
PUB DATE	Mar 94
NOTE	89p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, 7th Floor, Commonwealth House, 1-19 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1NU, England, United Kingdom (6 British pounds).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Statistical Data (110) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Persistence; Adult Basic Education; Adu' Literacy; *Adult Programs; *Basic Skills; Comparative Analysis; Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Rate; Dropout Research; Foreign Countries; *Literacy Education; National Surveys; Numeracy; Participant Characteristics; Participant Satisfaction; Questionnaires; Student Attitudes; *Student Promotion; Teacher Attitudes; Tutors
IDENTIFIERS	*England; *Wales

ABSTRACT

A two-phase study examined the incidence and nature of dropout and progression from basic skills programs in England and Wales. During the first (retrospective) phase, data about 1,920 students' attendance/dropout patterns and reasons' for finishing/leaving their basic skills programs were obtained from 82 tutors (of more than 300 contacted) in 8 local education authorities (LEAs). Also in phase 1, 176 of approximately 636 former students originally contacted by their tutors and 1 LEA completed surveys. In the second (concurrent) phase, 4 sets of data about 800-1,200 students were collected from 59 to 35 tutors in each of 7 LEAs. Of the program leavers, 10% progressed to further education or training schemes, 17% moved/advanced to other classes, and 10% found/changed employment. According to the tutors, 5% of leavers attained their desired level of skills/training and only 1% were dissatisfied with their programs. According to the leavers, however, 10% had achieved the skills/training levels they desired and 7% were dissatisfied with their programs. More than one-third of students left basic skills tuition for reasons unknown to their tutor. (Contains 18 references, a glossary, and tutor questionnaires.) (MN)

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Maria Kambouri and Hazel Francis

TIME TO LEAVE?

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PROGRESSION AND DROP OUT IN BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMMES

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The Basic Skills Unit

MARIA KAMBOURI AND HAZEL FRANCIS

TIME TO LEAVE

PROGRESSION AND DROP OUT IN BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMMES

BSU
Registered Charity No. 803969
The Basic Skills Unit

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all tutors who contributed to this research by providing invaluable information and expertise.

We would also like to thank the ABE oganisers who agreed to participate in this project. Our special thanks go to Maureen Beckwith and the tutors in her group for their help with the piloting of questionnaires and other valuable advice, and to Elizabeth Best for assisting with the recording and processing of the data.

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Published March 1994

ISBN 1 870741 99 4

Design: Studio 21

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This project was sponsored by ALBSU – the national agency for adult literacy, numeracy and related basic skills in England and Wales – through a specific grant from the Department for Education (DFE). The research was commissioned in recognition of the need to obtain better information about the drop-out and progression of students leaving basic skills tuition in order to improve practice and provision. Research began in May 1992 and ended in June 1993.

The project focused on all levels of **basic literacy and numeracy** provision with voluntary attendance, including individual tuition and group tuition in a class. Students in basic skills provision have often found it difficult to make the decision to enrol and therefore may be easily discouraged by any difficulties they encounter, especially in initial contact and the first few weeks of attendance. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and open learning or 'drop-in' classes, which have recently been researched separately, were excluded from this study (funding and timing limitations constrained further extension of this project into these basic skills areas).

The introduction of the Further & Higher Education Act 1992 will lead to some change in the pattern of basic skills provision. In certain areas, planned local government reorganisation will also have an impact on the organisation and management of basic skills provision (see *'Challenges and Choices: Basic Skills Provision after the Act'*, ALBSU 1992). The timing of this study, which coincided with the coming into effect of the Act and therefore the beginning of a series of changes in basic skills provision should be taken into consideration when examining the responses from Local Education Authority (LEA) organisers and tutors.

Indeed, from the eight LEAs who agreed to participate in this project, only seven were able to provide contacts with local tutors; one LEA was obliged to withdraw due to administrative reorganisation. Changes which occurred throughout the period of the research, such as the transferring of provision to FE colleges and alterations in funding arrangements, often caused delays or led tutors to withdraw.

Yet, despite the organisational changes and current economic pressure which may have affected basic skills provision during the research period, the final overall response to this survey was remarkably encouraging. Staff were extremely helpful and in many cases worked beyond the allocated time to assist in gathering high quality information for this research, showing genuine interest in the topic.

CHAPTER 2

Aims and objectives

The **research aim** was to examine the incidence and nature of drop-out and progression from basic skills provision in England and Wales.

The **research objectives** were to:

- survey a large sample of people who left basic skills provision in recent years, the sample being selected in such a way as to yield a useful national picture
- report patterns of attending and leaving provision
- seek reasons given for ceasing tuition, with particular attention to changes of circumstances, dissatisfaction, progression and successful achievement of personal aims
- identify variables influencing the incidence and timing of, and reasons given for, drop-out and progression.

CHAPTER 3

Summary of main findings

Patterns of attendance and leaving class

- Good records of attendance and leaving were not always available.
- Over half of the students who enrolled during the year joined in the first two weeks of the autumn term, the remainder joining in small numbers throughout the year.
- Almost half of the students who enrolled at the beginning of the year were continuing in the same class from the previous year.
- Average rate of attendance based on enrolment was between 40% – 60%, but when based on enrolment minus students who were later discovered to have left it was 79%.
- Attendance was only slightly better for persisters than for leavers whilst they were still attending.
- Half of the students enrolled during 1991-2 were reported to have left classes at some time during the year. This figure includes drop-out and progression.
- Most leavers stayed only 2-3 weeks in class. Very few continued to attend for more than a year.
- Patterns of attendance were similar between the two years, 1991-2 and 1992-3.

Reasons for leaving

- Over a third of leavers progressed in some way or other.
- Both tutors and leavers reported that about 10% progressed to FE or training schemes. Tutors reported about 17% had moved (or advanced) to other basic skills classes, but leavers reported only 12%.
- According to tutors, about 10% of leavers went because they found or changed employment. More than 16% of leavers reported this reason.

- Tutors reported only 5% of leavers reached their desired level of attainment, but 10% of leavers said they had achieved all they wanted.
- For other leavers the most common reasons for leaving classes were personal or domestic. Tutors estimated 20% left for these reasons while 26% of students who left gave these reasons.
- A third of the students who left in the Autumn term either found the class unsuitable or were put on a waiting list. Most attended for one week.
- About 7% of leavers were dissatisfied with provision while tutors estimated only 1%. More than 16% of students who left were dissatisfied with their progress while tutors' estimate was only 0.3%.
- It is worth noting that more than a third of students left basic skills tuition for reasons unknown to the tutor.

Aspects of provision

Centre organisation:

Termly meetings with other staff were considered insufficient by tutors. More frequent meetings were wanted to discuss teaching issues and develop work schemes. Class accommodation was often thought by tutors to be poor or inadequate. When asked what changes they felt to be important, they listed better class accommodation and access to more basic resources.

Tutors:

Most tutors had long experience in basic skills although their employment status was part-time; they held a teaching or some academic qualification but very few (less than 20%) had taken the new basic skills certificates.

Teaching:

Individual teaching was preferred by most tutors, although lesson planning was carried out for both individuals and groups. Volunteer helpers were widely available though not often trained.

However, tutors felt they could provide better for student's needs with fewer students in class and more frequent classes. They also asked for more time for class preparation.

Assessment:

Wordpower and Numberpower were widely used for accreditation purposes but not for ongoing assessment where discussion with the student prevailed.

Only in 60% of the cases was initial assessment a formal procedure. The rest were informal discussions with the student.

Follow-up:

Most tutors reported follow-up practices for poor attendance and leavers. There were some examples of very good practice. However, some leavers reported experience of no follow-up.

CHAPTER 4

A note on terminology

(a) Basic skills

Different terms are commonly used to describe what are effectively the same educational activities. By *basic skills*, the term adopted by ALBSU and used for this research, is meant:

'the ability to read, write and speak in English (and Welsh in Wales) and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.'

Another commonly used term to describe provision for promoting basic skills is *'adult basic education'* (ABE). Some providers may also use the more specific terms such as *'adult literacy'*, *'numeracy'* or *'basic maths*. This study was confined to provision for basic literacy and numeracy. However, the term basic skills is used throughout this report.

(b) Drop-out and progression

Non-persistence, drop-out, attrition, etc., are terms used to describe the interruption of the learning process of those adult students who do not continue their studies to reach the set goal (for example a degree, certificate, other non-formal qualifications, a particular skill, or simply gaining confidence in themselves).

Irregular attendance is another way of looking at drop-out and is a problem often encountered in basic skills. Research in the field of basic skills, published by ALBSU, indicated that factors which particularly influenced the progress of adult literacy students included regular attendance and commitment, courses with fixed time scales and specified objectives, and the opportunity to work individually or in very small groups (Abell, ALBSU 1990).

Poor attendance has been condemned both by tutors and by providers. The first emphasise the importance of continuity in the learning process, while the second believe that people taking part in basic skills should be expected to show commitment by attending regularly. Wasting instructors' efforts and providers' resources, from which others could have benefited, are consequences which come second only to the student's own loss in terms of progress.

Progression is also a term that requires clarification. In the context of this research progression was used as a synonym for 'positive leaving' from a course (either during or on finishing it) in order to move on to further provision or training or upon finding or changing employment. Moreover, participants who had reached their desired level of attainment or goal, and gained self-confidence, were included in this category. Few studies on patterns of progression are available and the need for a better understanding of the objective and subjective factors influencing adult progression has been stressed (Mager, 1993).

Research on the issue of persisters and non-persisters in post school education (graduate, undergraduate, continuing, non-traditional, etc.) has increased in the last two decades. Most of the work points to a list of differences between the groups. For instance Long (1983), after reviewing several major attrition studies, reported that non-persisters 'appear to have usually been less successful in previous schooling activities, may have academic weaknesses such as reading problems, and may be less successful occupationally' (Long, 1983, p.148).

Martin (1990) differentiated three groups instead of two in his analysis of an adult secondary and pre-vocational programme. In addition to 'Drop-outs' and 'Persisters', 'Completers' was added as a distinct group whose success was found to depend mainly on academic integration and the setting of short-term goals. 'Students at risk of dropping-out', the study concludes, 'appear to require a more concerted programmatic effort to increase their academic and social integration, clarify targeted goals and increase commitment to the programme' (Martin, 1990, p.172).

Social integration has also been shown as an important discriminating factor between drop-outs and persisters (see Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Garison, 1985). Although persisters seemed to prefer a classroom social environment with great emphasis on establishing and following a clear set of rules or expectations for student behaviour, drop-outs expected a classroom in which social involvement or friendship with other students was less important.

In uncovering the mystery of persistence however, researchers suggested that most adults have multiple, complex and highly personal reasons for participation and persistence (for examples see Darkenwald, G.G. & Merriam 1982, and Langenbach & Korhonen, 1988). These reasons often do not match the expectations that basic skills teachers have of learners. Functional and cognitive achievements are not always (or only) emphasized by basic skills students, who often attend classes in order to attain personal and social goals,

such as developing better family and work relationships and participating in civic duties (see Charnley and Jones, 1980).

The field of adult education would grow measurably, suggested Langenbach and Korhonen (1988), if researchers had sufficient control over adult education participants or some systematic collection of pre- and post-demographic and psychological data were available for analysis. Given the complexity of the adult learner's intentions and goals, and the restricted access to such data, it was considered unnecessarily wasteful to analyse those aspects in the present research. For practical purposes, dictated by the immediate needs in basic skills provision, this research has concentrated on providing a useful national picture of the incidence and nature of non-persistence, or drop-out, and of progression by obtaining information on a large number of people who left basic skills provision recently.

The actual research led to further examination of the meanings and uses of the terms *drop-out* and *progression*, as reported in a later section.

CHAPTER 5

Design and development of the project

General design considerations

In view of the timing of the funding an early decision was made to conduct the data collection in two phases – retrospective for 1991-2 and concurrent for 1992-93. Such a strategy was expected to maximise the information gained with the available resources within the research period by drawing samples from two academic years.

A major concern in designing the research was the question of wider applicability of any findings. Adequate and unbiased sampling was therefore a major consideration. Approaches were made through ALBSU to a range of types of LEA, the number and nature being such as to give a reasonable expectation of a large enough and sufficiently varied sample of students.

Other design features were expected to add to confidence in the findings. These are outlined below.

The two-phase design was expected to have some of the strengths of replication studies. The extent of comparability between the concurrent and retrospectively collected data on patterns of and reasons for drop-out and progression would inform conclusions on those two aspects of the research. It would help also in estimating the wisdom of generalising any conclusions relating them to aspects of provision.

A further concern was the availability of evidence. It was not clear to what extent tutors would be both able and willing to provide the data requested. The project design was based on an appreciation of the importance of obtaining LEA participation through ALBSU, and the consequent need to work through local organisers to approach tutors in such a way as to invite interest and cooperation. It was decided that the response rate and distribution would be inspected for signs of identifiable bias which could then be taken into account in reporting the results.

With the above considerations in mind and the need for an adequate sample size for a useful report, the decision was made to use the data returns on student attendance and questionnaires as the preferred tools for most of the work.

All requests made to tutors and students were tried out with small test groups before being finalised for circulation. In addition to questionnaires and class attendance registers, a prepared form was used to record in detail the procedure at the beginning of the academic year when most students enquire and register in classes.

An attempt to improve response rates was made by minimising the costs and optimising the timing of the requests made to tutors. In every set of data collected, including the letters forwarded to students, return stamped envelopes were provided.

Tutors were offered the reimbursement of any photocopying or additional postage costs. Requests for data were made in well spaced intervals and around times for class breaks or holidays with ample time allowed for returns.

Data collection

A two-phase project design

While contacts were being established with LEAs, preliminary interviews were carried out to find out student and tutor reactions to this survey in order to organise this short-term study optimally.

Pilots

Some face-to-face interviewing was necessary for pre-pilot and pilot work as well as a substantial amount of telephone interviewing for piloting questionnaires and prompting of returns. Preliminary interviews were carried out in west London at the beginning of the project with two classes of basic skills students (about 30 students) and their tutors (2). The information gathered served as a guide to the design of the survey as well as a pre-pilot to the initial questionnaire sent to tutors in **Phase 1**.

Phase 1: *The retrospective phase (May 1991 – August 1992)*

The eight LEAs, which welcomed ALBSU's invitation to participate in this project, were contacted during the final weeks of the summer term 1992. Organisers in each authority were asked to extend the invitation to participate

to tutors in their areas by forwarding an initial questionnaire, together with a cover letter prepared for this purpose.

The initial questionnaire was aimed at:

1. Collecting records of attendance for the basic skills classes each of the tutors held in the academic year 1991-92.
2. Recording the reasons for leaving and future plans, when known, for students who left the class.
3. Obtaining preliminary information on tutor qualifications, employment status, and other provision related variables such as type and length of basic skills classes taught, number of sessions per week, hours per session, experience in basic skills, etc.

Data on patterns of class attendance throughout the year as well as tutors' perceptions of why students left classes (reasons as given to or inferred by the tutors) were directly used to answer some of the issues of drop-out, completion or non-completion and progression. Collection and examination of patterns of attendance prompted issues such as when a student can be counted as having dropped-out (different approaches are adopted by different tutors) or indeed as having progressed.

The preliminary information collected on tutor characteristics and provision helped to establish which variables needed further examination and hence to design more accurate questionnaires. It was expected that the processes of seeking approval from an adequate range of LEAs and of contacting tutors through local organisers would leave little time for tutors to respond to requests. Follow-up would therefore have to continue into the second phase, both to maximise returns from tutors and to 'approach' students who had left courses. Through this initial contact with tutors their direct participation in the project (for the next 6-8 months) was sought.

Phase 2: *The concurrent phase (September 1992 – March 1993)*

It was expected that most responding tutors would be willing to be approached again and that similar information about both continuing and new students could be obtained early in the 1992-93 term and thereafter as long as was feasible in the funding time scale. During this phase of concurrent research, it was planned to obtain from tutors information about a number of aspects of provision, notably those that previous research and field experience had indicated might be related to drop-out and to progression.

In **Phase 2,** pilot interviews were conducted for both the students' and the final tutors' questionnaires, in areas east of London. These were particularly helpful especially for the questionnaire sent to students who ceased tuition; the pilots revealed that students could cope with a lot more reading than their tutors expected. There was very little writing required in the student questionnaire. Only a few of the replies were answered by a relative, mostly in cases where the student had some severe learning difficulty or physical handicap.

Visits to three areas with low response rates were made towards the end of **Phase 2,** to encourage returns and investigate reasons for the delay. About 90% of the tutors who responded in **Phase 1** agreed to participate in **Phase 2** (in September 1992). Of those, some 10% had difficulties keeping to their intentions due to changes related to their status of employment between **Phase 1** and **Phase 2.** Those who returned complete responses in the previous term (**Phase 1**) were asked to:

(i) keep a record of the students coming to enquire and/or register in the beginning of the new academic year 1992-93 on a prepared 'Enquiry and Registration' form. The aim of this step was to collect information on new students at the beginning of this year, which would help get an understanding of the incidence of drop-out in the first few months. In some cases it was the only reliable information in the absence of other record keeping procedures. This information included:

- dates of enquiry, interview and registration in class
- whether the student was continuing from the previous year or, if new, how they were referred to that class
- whether the student was advised to go to other provision or was put on a waiting list for the class
- reasons (as understood by the tutor) why the student did not register or left the class in the first term.

Tutors were asked to keep this record from September 1992 to February 1993, with two points of collection occurring in November 1992 and in February 1993.

(ii) forward questionnaires to those students who left classes in 1991-92 (and did not return in September). Questionnaires were also sent to some students who left classes (for either known or unknown reasons) during the autumn term. The student questionnaires were designed to obtain the following information:

- students' characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, etc)
- time they spent in class, with date of joining basic skills
- their perception of frequency of attendance
- reasons for leaving the class
- reasons for joining the class
- satisfaction with provision.

This sample of students from the year 1991-92 yielded data which will be treated with the rest of the **Phase 1** data in the rest of the report.

(iii) return copies of registers for the autumn term (September – December 1992) and

(iv) complete a final detailed questionnaire on:

- tutor qualifications, employment status, staff development
- type of provision, centre location and resources, class organisation, tutoring
- their views on causes of drop-out, persistence and progress, and changes necessary to improve provision.

Phase 2 was completed at the end of March 1993. At each point of data collection during this phase, tutor response varied from 90% to 54%. The results of the data collection are given at the end of this section.

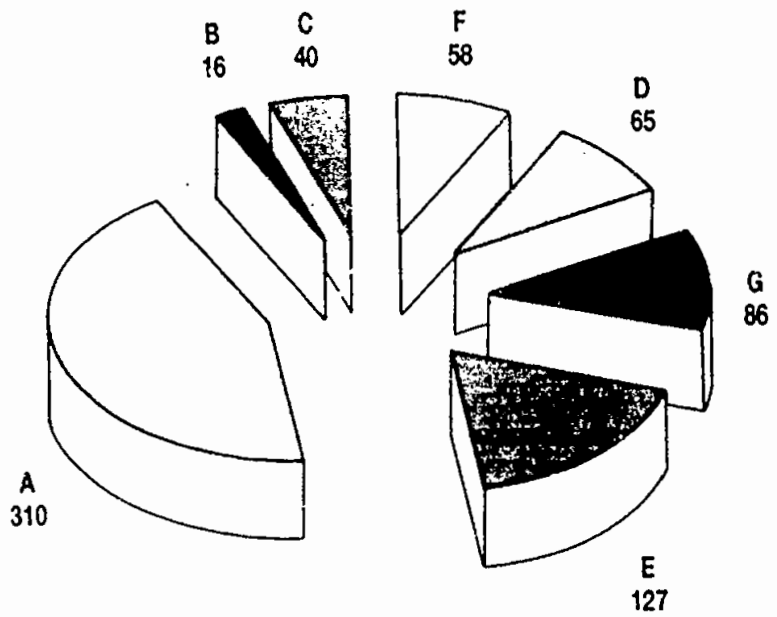
Sampling

The construction of the sample was dictated by factors such as the nature of geographical coverage required for a national picture, different types of provision, willingness of tutors to co-operate and adequacy of site records for the requisite period. Since the largest part of the information was obtained through the tutors the last two factors were of great importance.

The initial approach to LEAs was made by ALBSU. Eight LEAs agreed to contribute to the research but due to staff changes following the introduction of the 1992 Act, one LEA was unable to fulfil its commitment.

The seven LEAs who participated had the following distribution of tutors (source ALBSU):

Figure 1a: **Total number of tutors in each LEA (ALBSU data)**



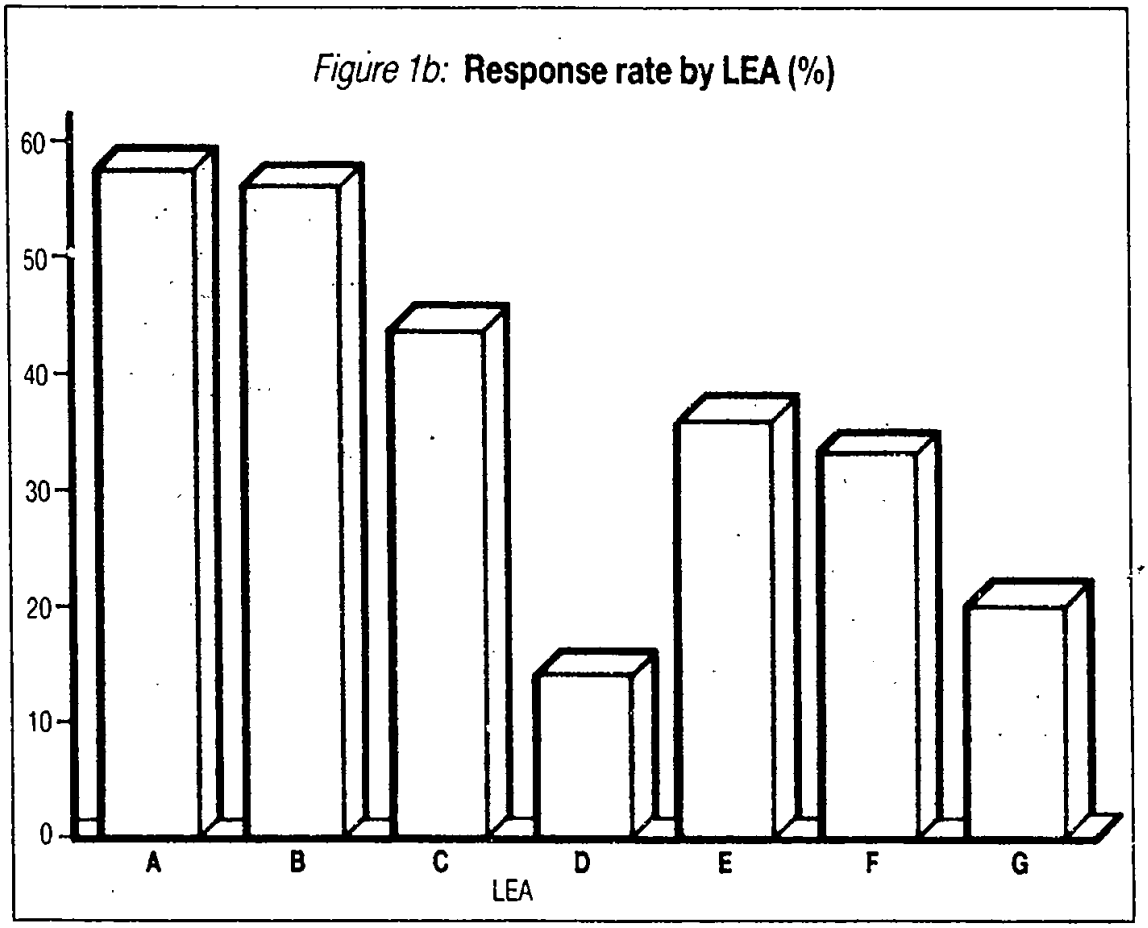
Initial contact with local LEA organisers was established by the researcher through telephone and mail communications in the beginning of **Phase 1**. The organisers invited some of their tutors to participate in the survey explaining the nature and length of the task. Tutor participation was voluntary. Tutors' response rate in **Phase 1** reflects this arrangement (see Figure 1b).

Following the design of the data collection, four samples of students were approached through a fairly stable core sample of tutors.

The Samples

Phase 1

A. In this retrospective phase, more than 300 questionnaires were sent out to organisers to forward to tutors. Only about 25% were returned from 82 tutors who agreed to participate further. Only 64 of the returns were complete,



including correctly filled-in questionnaires and class attendance records for a total sample of 1,920 students. This distribution of participant tutors and their students according to LEAs is shown in Figures 2a and 2b respectively.

Of the 64 tutors responding to this initial questionnaire only 13% were full-time; the rest were part-time.

On average tutors had an eight year-long experience in basic skills provision. (In one area this average reached 13 years). Half the sample of tutors had spent more than six years teaching basic skills classes.

Tutor workload in terms of the number of classes taught per week ranged from 1 to 6, with more than half of them teaching only 2 classes a week.

In this sample of classes there were 62% literacy and 38% numeracy classes. 86% of the classes were held only once a week, with 2 hours being the most usual length of a session. Only in one of the 7 LEAs (A) was the average hours per session 1.5.

Figure 2a: **Tutor participation by LEA (1991-92)**

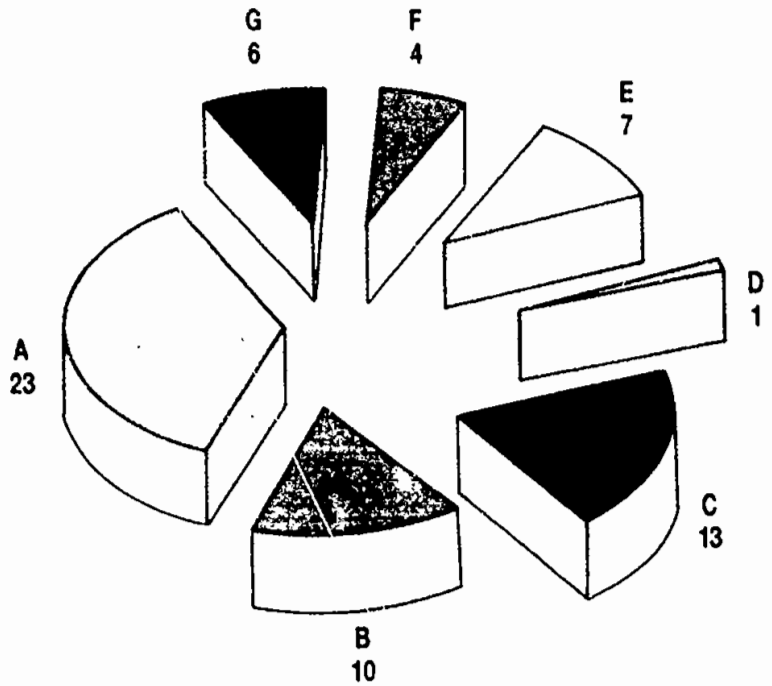
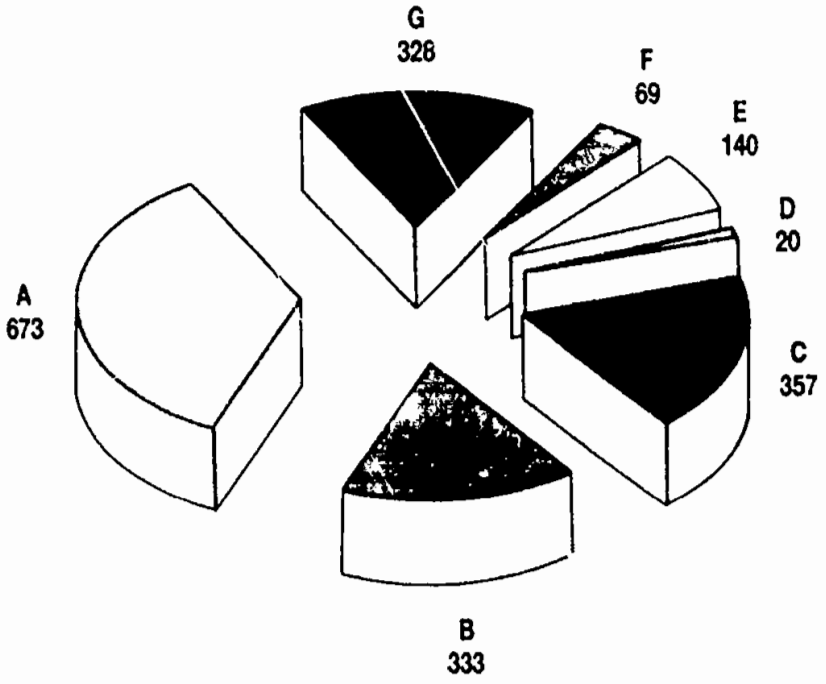


Figure 2b: **Student participation by LEA (1991-92)**



92% of courses in this sample lasted between 25 and 36 weeks. Short courses (7%) were between 6 and 18 weeks long. In five LEAs the yearly courses lasted on average 32 weeks, while in the other two they were shorter (B: 25 and E: 22).

The average number of students registered in a class was 20, although a much smaller number was present at each session.

In this sample of 1,920 basic skills students, 49% were men and 51% were women. This balance is comparable to the results obtained by ALBSU's recent surveys (see *Annual Report*, ALBSU 1991-92) (more student characteristics will be given for subsequent samples).

About 90% of tutors were female (a figure comparable with ALBSU national data).

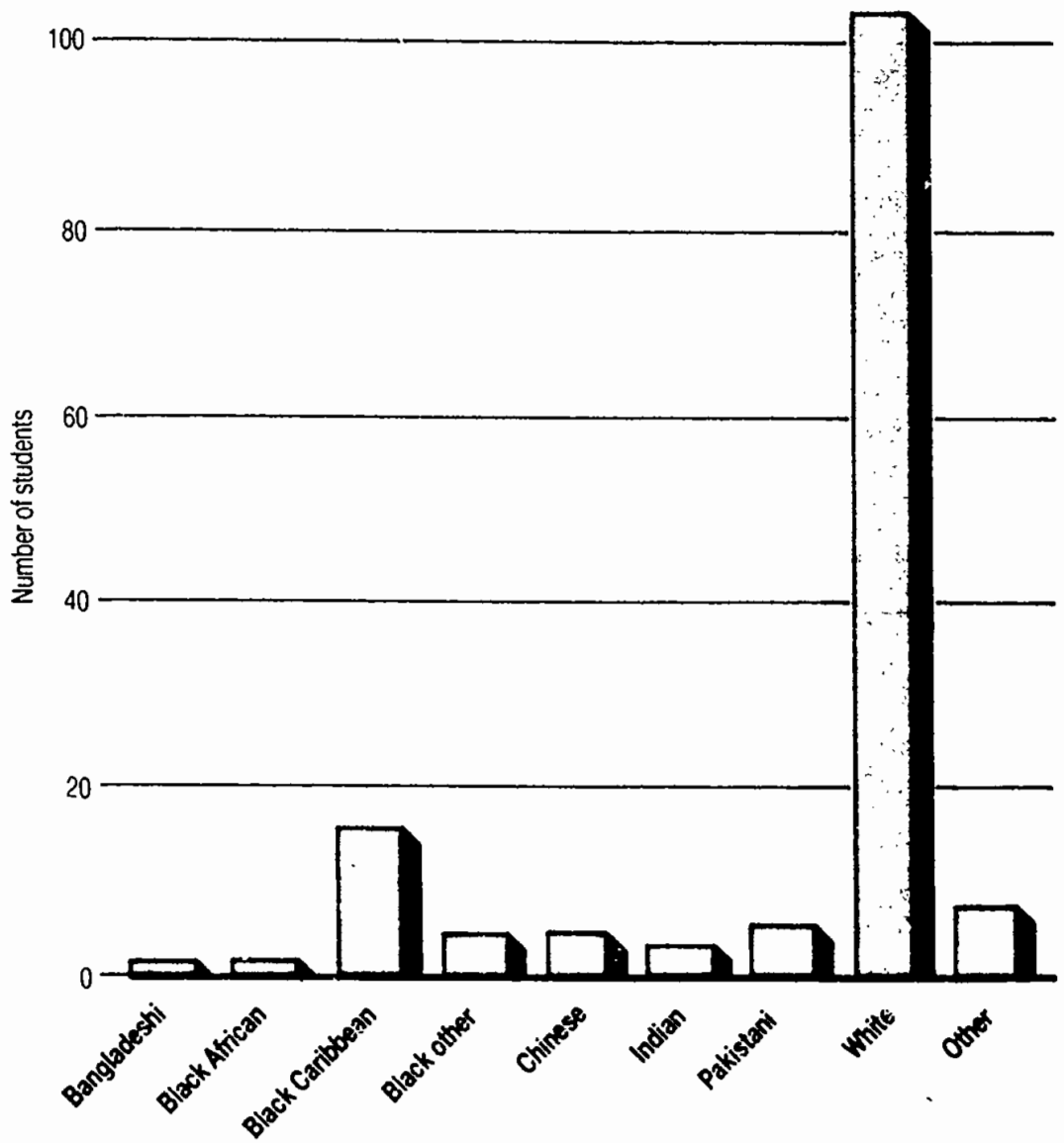
B. The student questionnaire was forwarded to students by the tutor. It was decided to rely on the participating tutors to reach those students who left classes in 1991-92. A certain amount of reticence was observed and indeed 3 tutors refused to forward questionnaires on grounds of privacy. Tutors were asked to send the questionnaire to all students who left their classes before they finished. An estimate of the number of questionnaires each tutor would have sent was made, based on the attendance records, and the estimated number of questionnaires were sent to each tutor with clear instructions. The students were asked to send this information, anonymously, directly back to the researchers in enclosed stamped addressed envelopes.

About 800 questionnaires were forwarded to tutors based on the estimated number of leavers: only 50% of those were forwarded and the rest were returned unused. The student response rate was about 30% (about 140 out of 420 forwarded). An additional sample of 216 student addresses (of those who had left classes) were sent from one LEA. The response rate on that sample was only 20% (this may be due to the mobility of the population in the area, since at least 10% of the letters were returned by the post office). The final sample of 176 student replies had the following characteristics.

More women (60%) than men returned questionnaires, either because there are slightly more women who leave classes or because more cared to reply.

The ethnic background of this sample of students who left classes is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: **The ethnicity of students who left**



Most of the students (72%) in this sample reported themselves as White, with the second largest group (14%) reported as Black Caribbean.

The student sample's age distribution is shown in Figure 4.

The LEA participation for this sample is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 4: **Student age groups (students who left)**

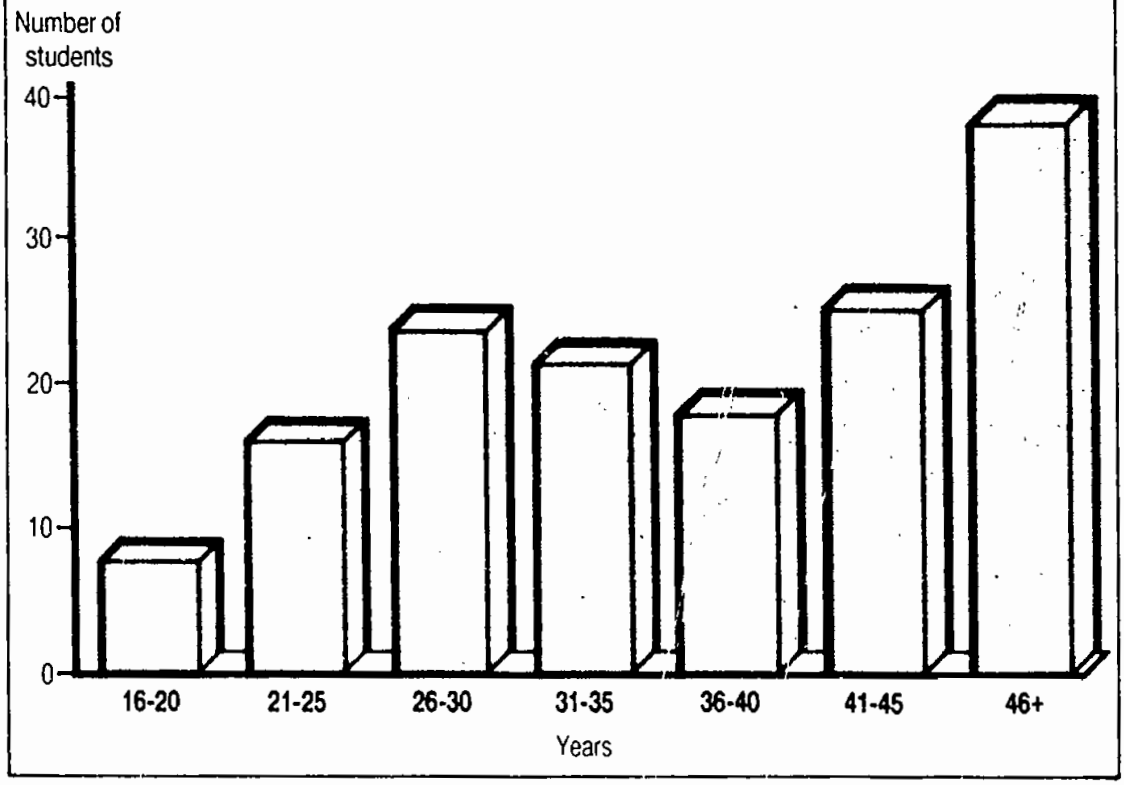
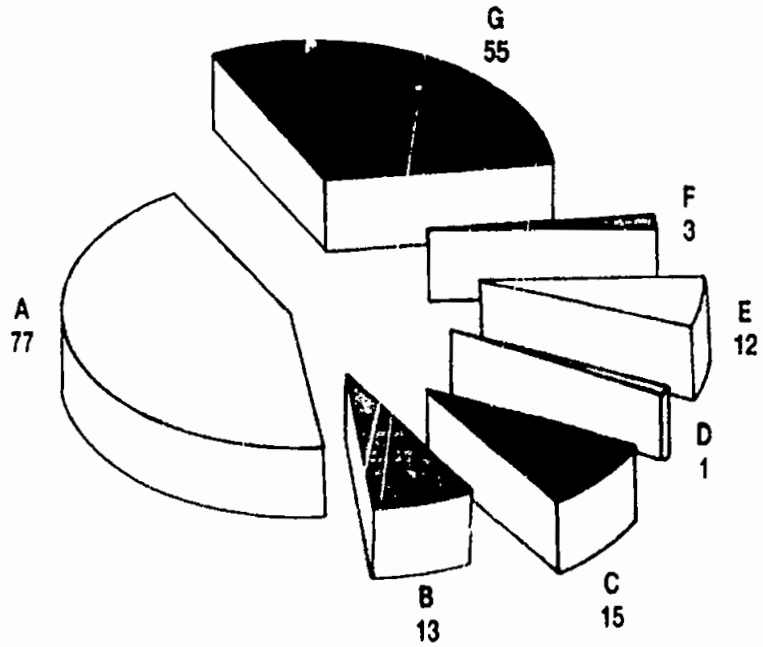


Figure 5: **Student participation by LEA (students who left)**



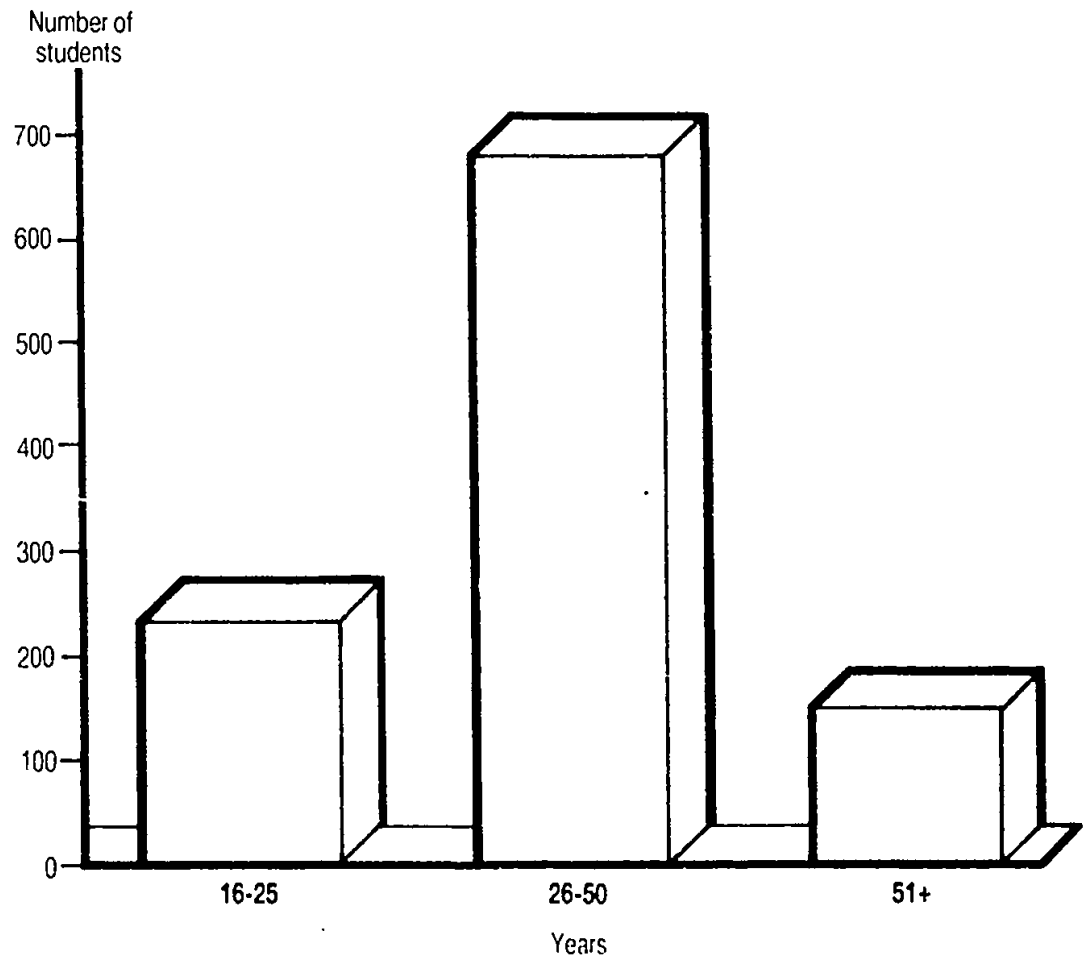
Phase 2

Sample characteristics in **Phase 2** are described for the four sets of data collected from tutors and on students. In general, the representation from each of the 7 LEAs was roughly the same for each sample. The number of tutors who responded varied from 59 to 35, while the numbers of students on whom information was provided was in the range of 800-1200.

A. The 'Enquiry and Registration' form was returned by 59 tutors, yielding information on 1,218 students. Records were kept for a period of up to 5 months (September 1992 to February 1993).

The distribution by gender was approximately the same as in the previous year's sample: 47% male and 53% female students. Students' age was distributed as shown in Figure 6.

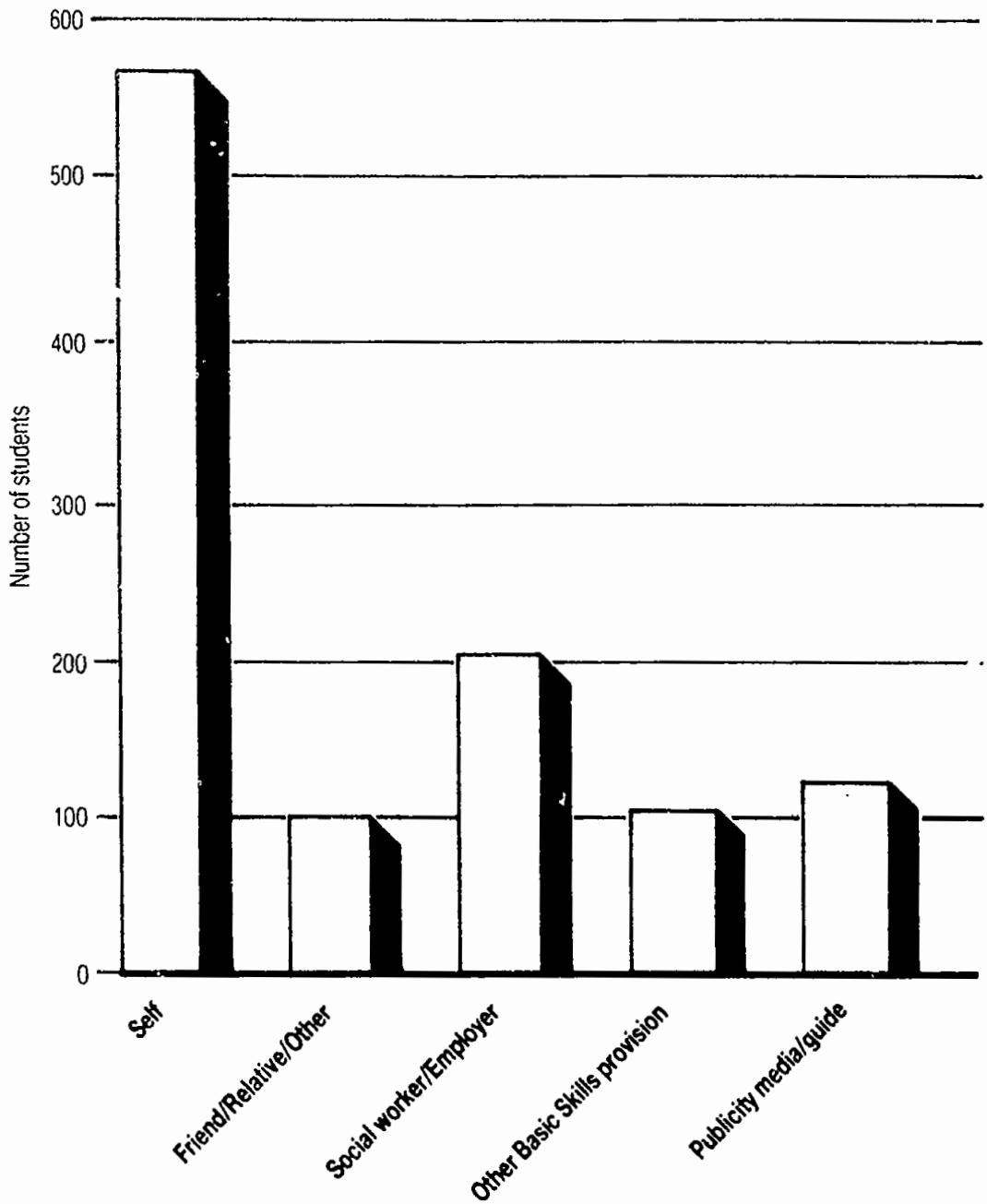
Figure 6: **Student age groups**



More basic skills students were unemployed (47%) than employed (39%), 9% were unwaged and nearly 5% retired.

A little less than half the students in this sample (47%) were continuing from last year while 53% were new.

Figure 7: **Sources of student referral**

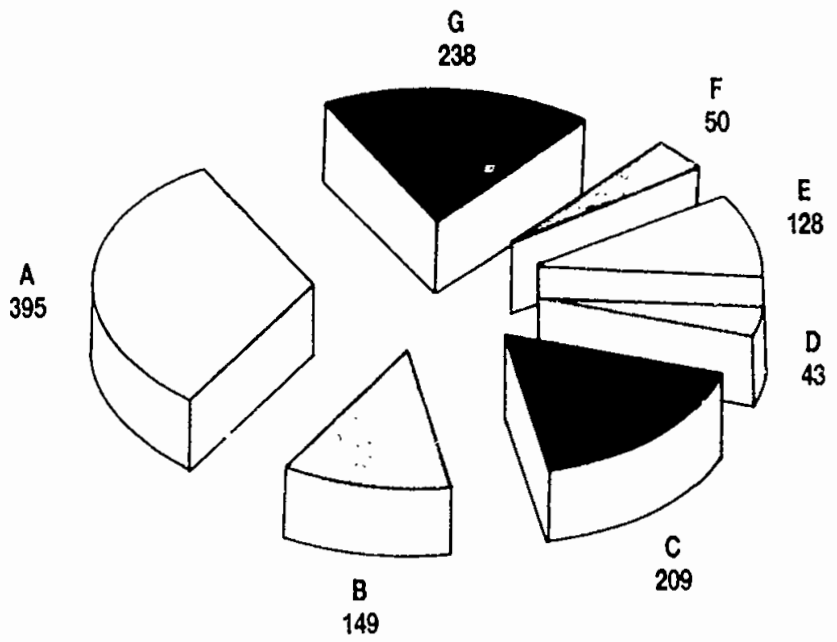


Only 4% of students were reported to have been directed to other basic skills provision. However this figure may not be accurate as many tutors only saw the students who were sent to their classes by the local organisers (only one organiser said they could provide a fairly accurate record of students who enquire about basic skills classes).

Most students were self referred, as shown in Figure 7.

Finally, this sample has a similar distribution of LEA participation as the previous one in **Phase 1** as the following pie chart shows.

Figure 8: **Student participation by LEA (1992-93)**



B. Attendance records of the first term (Sept-Dec) in the academic year 1992-93 were requested from the participating tutors. Only 35 tutors returned this information which included up to 801 students. In the later section on attendance patterns the results can be compared with those in **Phase 1**.

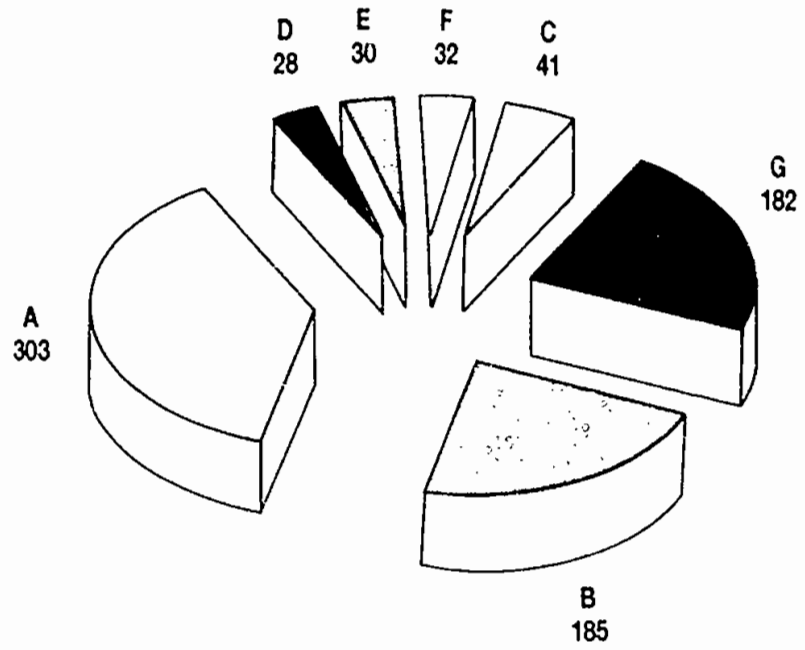
Slightly more female (54%) than male students followed these classes.

Only about 20% of classes were numeracy classes, the rest being literacy or both (the type of provision is described in more detail in the next sample of tutor responses).

The distribution of students by centre was about equally split between city centre locations, suburban and small town. Although centres in rural areas were sought, very few responded.

The number of students in the sample corresponding to each of the 7 LEAs is given in Figure 9.

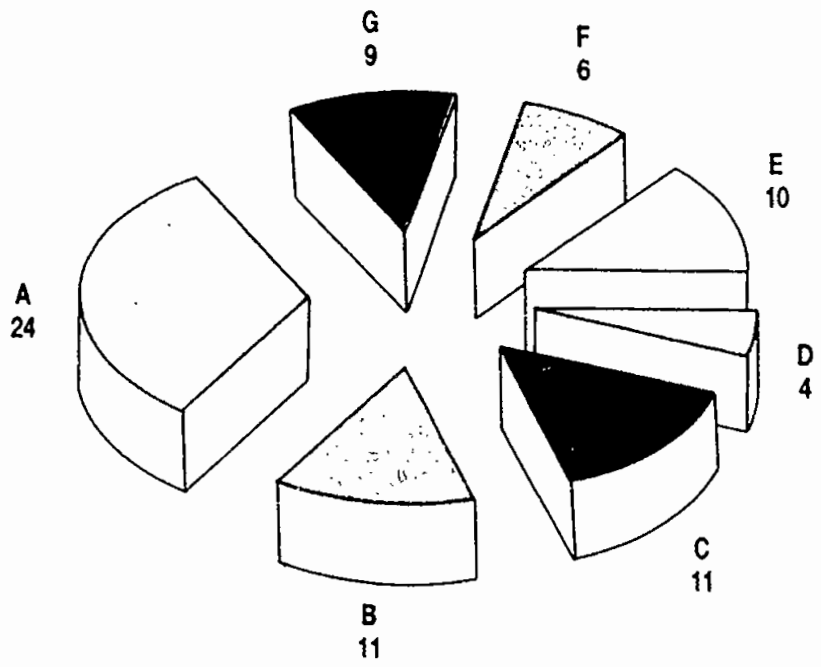
Figure 9: **Student participation by LEA (Autumn 1992)**



C. The last sample consisted of 56 tutors who returned questionnaires on aspects of provision. Tutors provided information about their employment status, experience and qualifications as well as details relevant to the classes they taught. Most tutors described only one class (even though in some cases they taught more than one), 7 tutors described 2 classes, 2 described 3, one 4 and one 5 classes.

The proportion of tutors who returned these questionnaires, by LEA is given in Figure 10.

Figure 10: **Tutor participation by LEA**



Technical aspects of the data analysis

Coding of the information was carried out by two experienced research students who followed strictly the prepared lists of variables. To ensure within-coder consistency, each coder was given a separate file to complete with data returns.

Coder's reliability was established by:

- discussing doubtful cases
- repeating the process for about 30 cases in each sample (agreement was obtained in over 90% of cases).

The data were entered on the computer using a data-entry system (SPSS, DE) with a self-cleaning mechanism to minimise error.

The *variables* identified for the analysis were as follows:

Dependent: The evidence of attendance and leaving basic skills classes indicating drop-out, progression or completion.

1. Attendance/non attendance
   (obtained for 4 terms or about 12 weeks each).

2. Leavers/non-leavers
   (obtained: a. by asking the tutors
   b. by calculating absences on a pre-defined rule
   (e.g. absent for more than 4 consecutive weeks).

Independent or Explanatory: The possible explanations of the results, or variables that may be indirectly influential.

1. Reasons given for leaving class (obtained both from tutors and students who left).
2. Reasons given for joining a class (obtained from students who left).
3. Student characteristics (age, sex, ethnicity, employment status).
4. Tutor characteristics (qualifications, experience, number of classes taught, etc).
5. Tutor teaching/organisation strategies (styles of teaching/tutoring, etc).
6. Provision characteristics (type of class, number of sessions per week, hours per session, interview/assessment procedures, volunteers, accommodation, etc).

CHAPTER 6

Research findings

The results of this research are reported in three sections. The first section concentrates on students' class attendance based on records as well as reports. The second explores the reasons given by students and their tutors for ceasing basic skills tuition. The third section describes the factors related to provision and their possible influence on drop-out, persistence or completion and progression.

A. Class attendance and leaving

Phase 1: *Patterns of attendance*

A complete picture of how student class enrolment changed throughout the year was obtained by the class registers provided by tutors. Although the collection of such invaluable information ought to have been a standard record keeping procedure for all basic skills classes, in some cases it was found incomplete or not readily available. The complexity of the record keeping task might be attributed to the nature of the data: not only did students leave any time after they enrolled but, they were able to join at any point throughout the academic year. Moreover, classes started and finished at different times and their length varied from area to area (see previous section on sample characteristics). On average, there were about 12 weeks of classes in the autumn and spring terms and 10 in the summer term. Since most classes (86%) met once a week, the student was counted present if she/he attended at least once a week. Class attendance is therefore discussed as weekly attendance.

How many students were enrolled in basic skills classes in the sample provided by tutors in **Phase 1**? The following graph (A1) shows the total number of students who enrolled in basic skills classes from the first week in the autumn term, beginning sometime in September 1991, to the end of summer term ending around June 1992. This total includes students who may have meanwhile left classes, as well as the ones who joined at different points throughout the year (the height of bars is therefore higher in the summer term than in the autumn term).

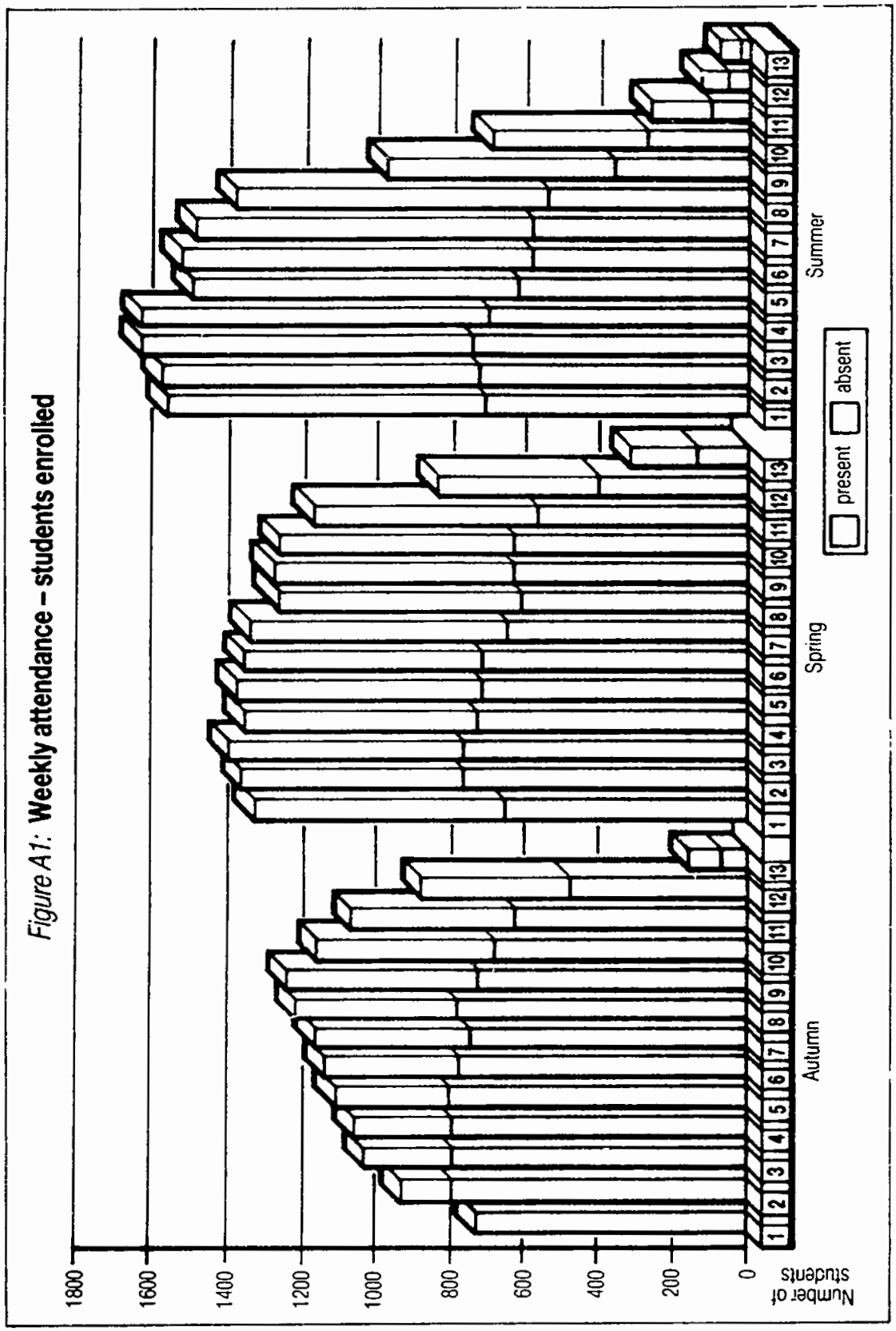


Figure A1: **Weekly attendance – students enrolled**

The patterns of weekly attendance in terms of students present (the lower part of the bars) or absent (the top part) are also shown. The results show that about half the students who enrolled in basic skills classes did not attend. Attendance decreased steadily throughout the year (top part of bars which show absences increase). In this calculation all students were counted present when they first attended class, therefore the first bar shows no absences, the second about 10%, the third almost 20% and so on. The number of students absent continued to increase but, as the following graph shows, the number of students who join did not.

Time of joining basic skills classes

Attendance registers show that most students joined classes in the first two weeks of the autumn term (Figure A2). Numbers of students joining were fairly constant throughout the rest of the year. Therefore, the increase in non-attendance obse[illegible] in the previous graph is an important trend.

Findings from the class register data were confirmed by students who left classes in 1991-92. The majority (64%) said that they joined classes in September. Some 18% joined in the beginning of the spring term (between January and March) and the rest at any point throughout the academic year.

According to tutors, almost half (49%) of the students in this sample left basic skills classes in 1991-92. This number includes drop-out and progression.

The following graph (A3) shows that the pattern of class enrolment is the same for students who left classes (*leavers*) and for those who continued attending classes (*persisters*). Leavers, according to tutor records, had either dropped-out, progressed or attained their goal.

There is a distinction to be made here (used in the analysis) in terms of students who were absent but persisted (*active*) and those who were absent and then left (that is they remained on registers until some decision was made as to whether they will come back or not). The term *leavers* is used for those students who, according to tutor records, left classes. To obtain a more accurate picture of a leaving trend those students who enrolled and persisted (*active*) were separated from those who enrolled and left.

Attendance patterns for the two groups defined by their tutors as leavers and persisters were examined as were attendance patterns according to enrolment and 'active periods of attendance', that is, counting presences and absences from the first to the last attendance on record.

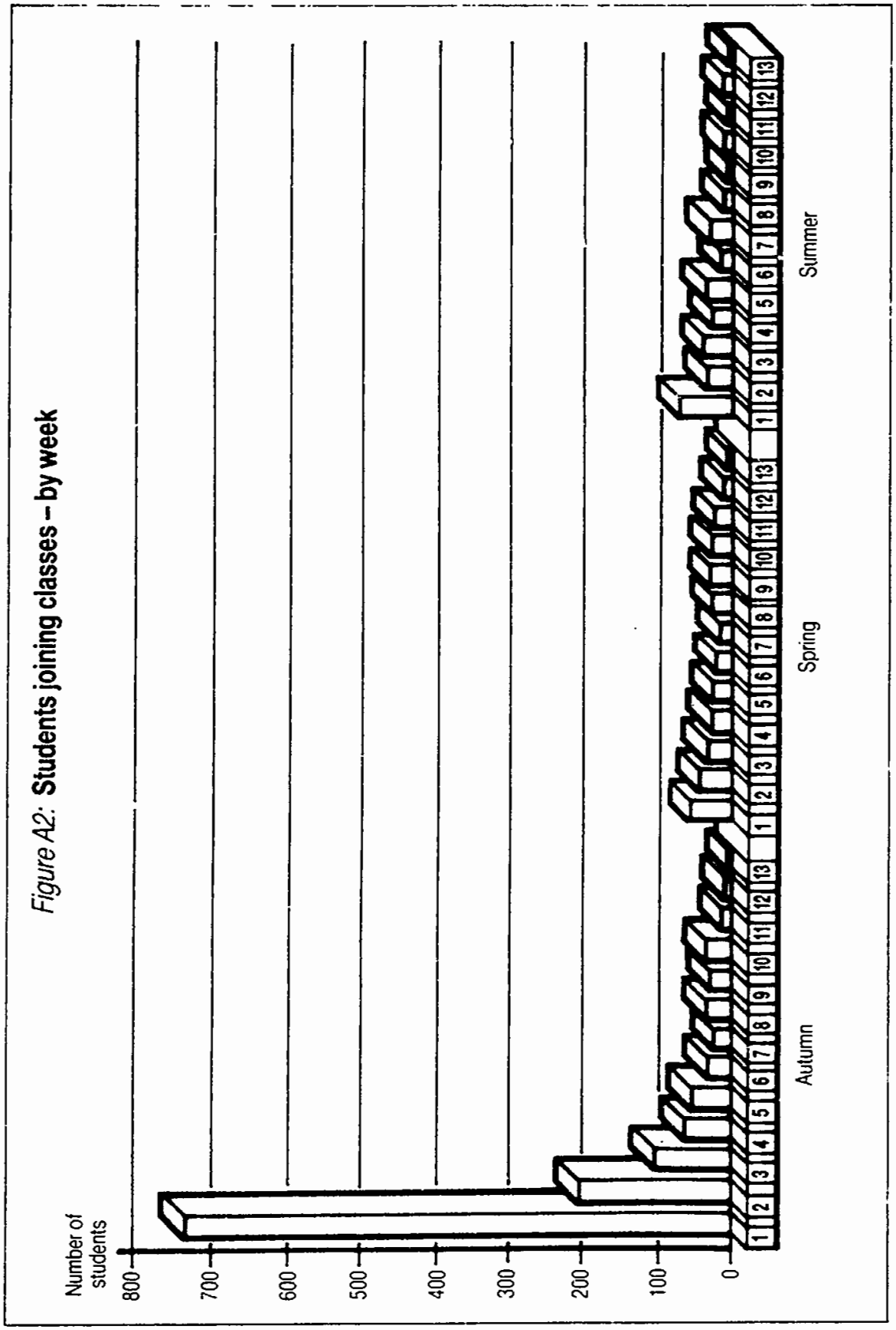
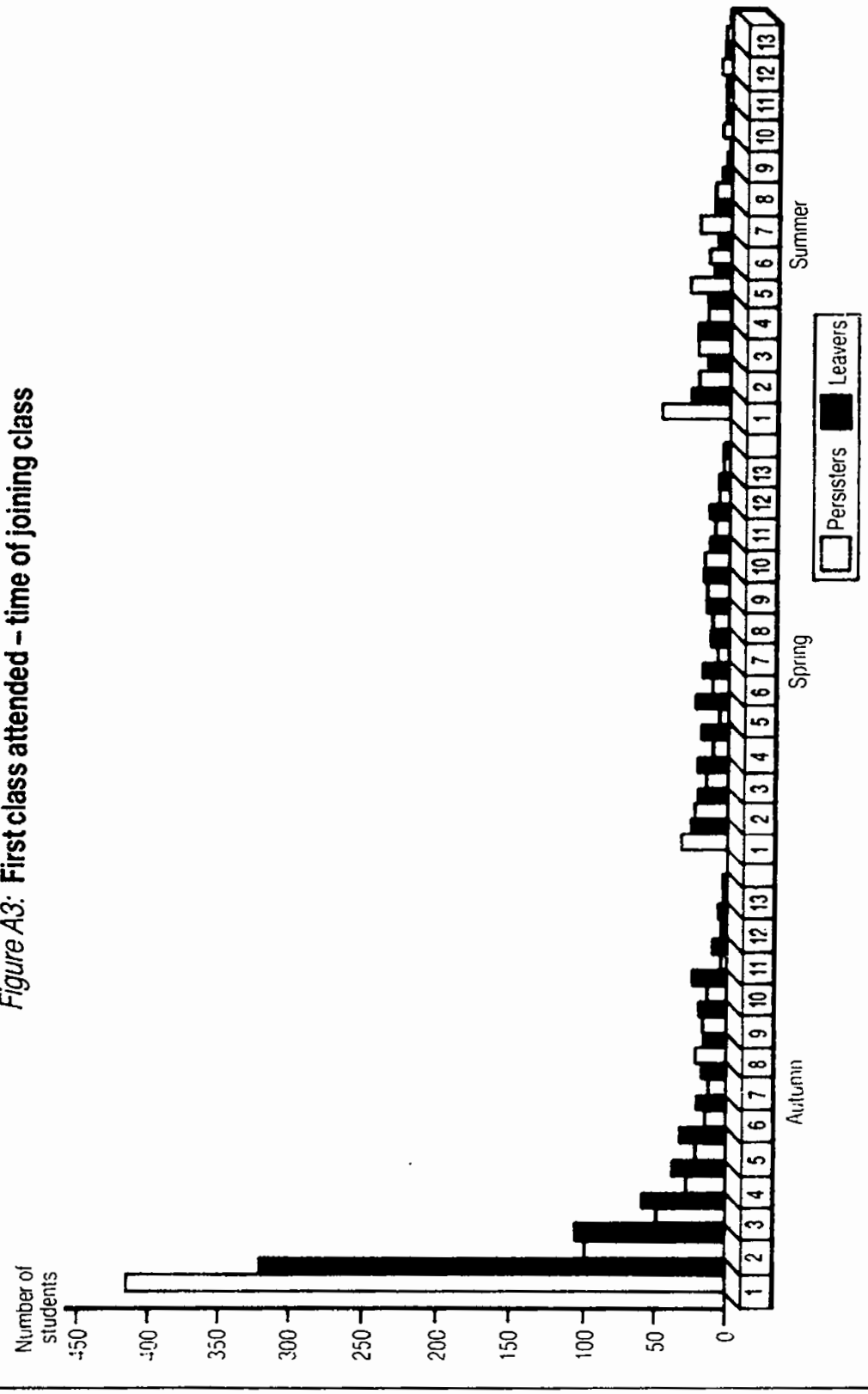


Figure A2: **Students joining classes – by week**

Figure A3: **First class attended – time of joining class**



The following analysis shows that the increase observed in the number of students absent in Figure A1 was due to students having stopped attending (dropped-out or progressed). The patterns of the overall weekly attendance for enrolled students do not give an accurate picture of the way attendance and non-attendance occurred for those students who were active (that is, those who continued attending). The following graph, (Figure A4), shows the distribution of active students over the three terms. The picture painted for those students who enrolled and persisted (active) is different. Patterns of attendance were very similar between terms: the number of absences did not change significantly throughout the term. That is, attendance decreased only slightly.

This finding can be demonstrated even more clearly through the weekly attendance rates.

Rate of attendance

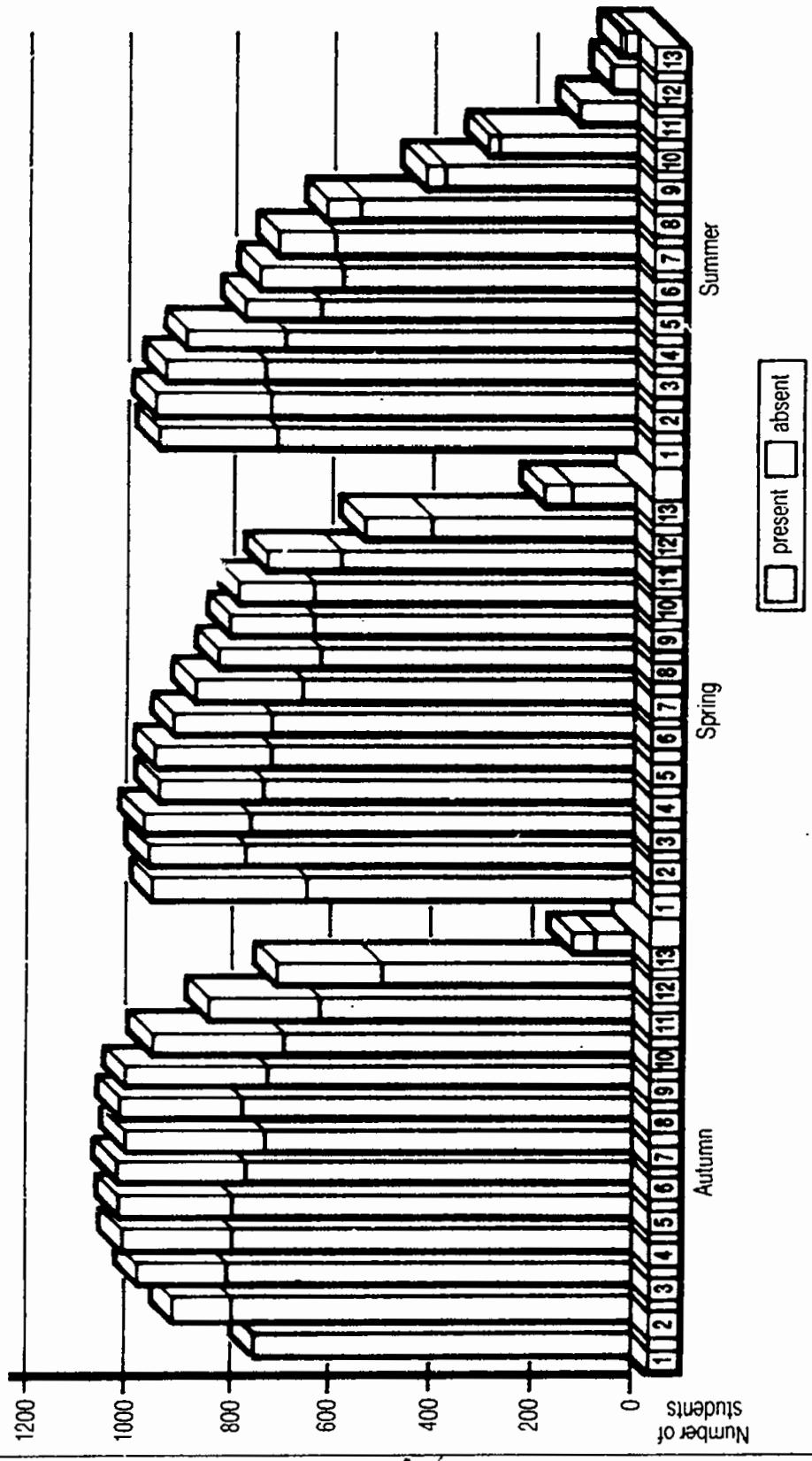
The rate of attendance can be calculated in a number of ways. In graph A5 the ratio of the number of students present over the number of those enrolled is shown by a line. The bars represent the ratio for leavers and persisters separately.

On average, all students enrolled attended 53% of the time (ALBSU suggest that an appropriate target for primary provision should be a student attendance rate over a year of at least 65% enrolments (*Challenges and Choices*, ALBSU 1992)).

However, it is interesting to observe that there is an important difference between those students who left the class and those who persisted. On average, leavers appear to have a much lower average rate of attendance of about 30% while persisters attended about 76% of classes. Moreover, the attendance rate for persisters varied very little throughout their stay in basic skills classes, while leavers' attendance appears to have dropped dramatically in the first term and continued dropping in the second and third terms.

In fact the rate of attendance perceived by tutors is in the range of 40%-60%. That is, tutors may have difficulty in forming an overall picture of attendance patterns and distinguishing between non-attendance and drop-out (or progression) because new students are coming to fill the empty seats. They will however observe a drop in attendance from about 60% to about 40% over the year, as the line for all students shows on the graph.

Figure A4: **Weekly attendance – active students**



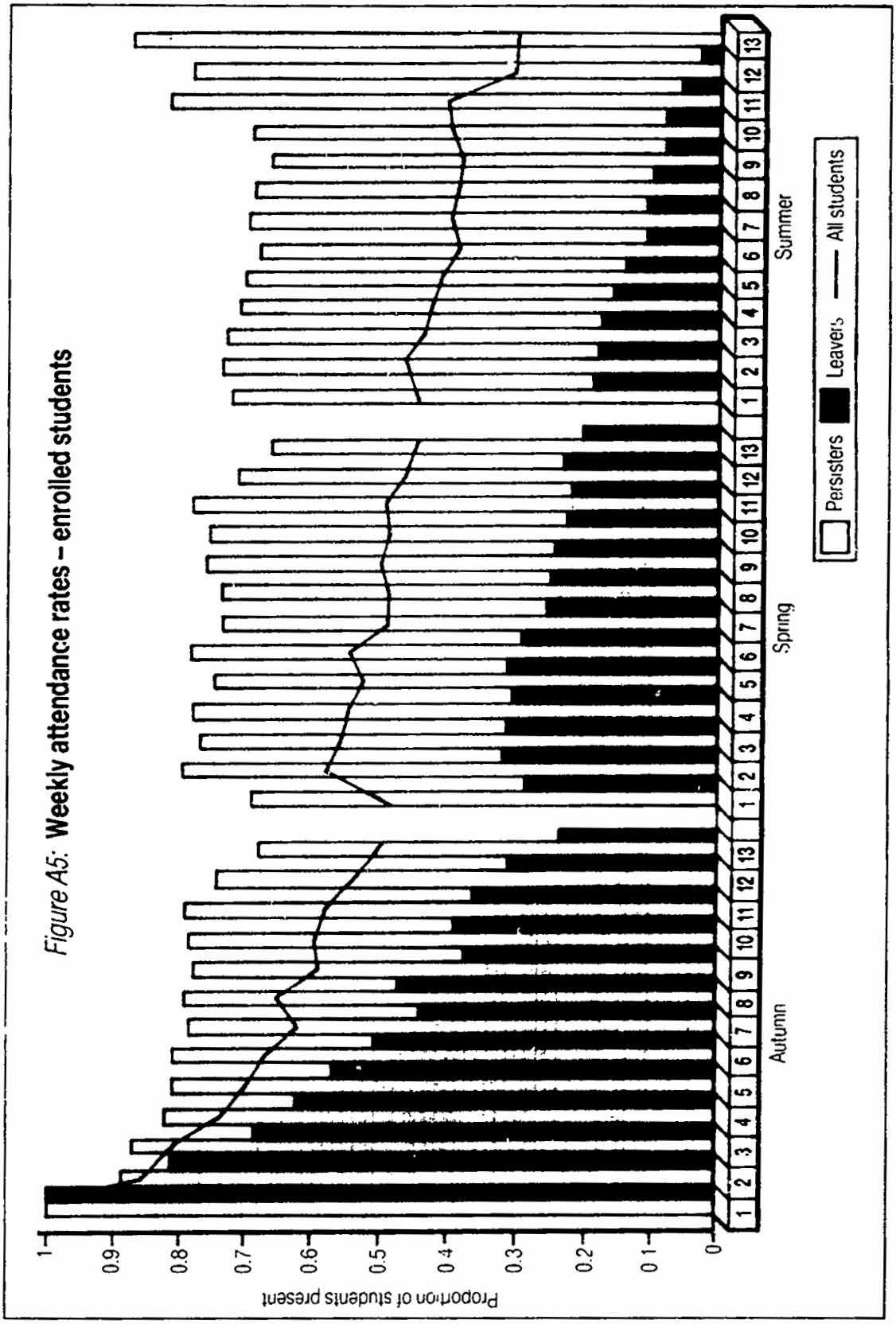


Figure A5: **Weekly attendance rates – enrolled students**

But is this the only picture of how attendance rates change over time? How does the weekly attendance rate change when the calculation is based on students active instead of total enrolled? (Students are regarded *active* from the first week the student joined to their last week in class. The weeks in which the student may have been absent before actually leaving are not counted). The results of this weekly rate are shown in Figure A6.

By accounting for the number of absences beyond the last class a student attended, the proportion of students present is much higher for leavers. The average yearly rate for leavers is now calculated to be as high as 73% and that for persisters 81%, bringing the total average rate for all students to 79%.

A significant difference in weekly attendance is still observed between persisters and leavers especially in the first term (the 13th weeks' figure is overestimated because there are very few students involved in the calculation). The last half of the summer term is also overestimated because there are many more students who leave classes overall and the number of classes is much smaller. Overall, leavers show a poor attendance after 3 weeks and attend less regularly than persisters. For example, in the first term, persisters miss 1 in 5 weeks while leavers miss 1 in 3. This discrepancy is evidently crucial in the long run where the actual decision of whether to stay in class, or not, is made.

In summary, the difference between the two graphs, Figures A5 and A6, reveals that, essentially, the variation in attendance rates lies in the number of students leaving classes rather than in non-attendance patterns.

The above conclusion becomes clearer when the distribution of the number of 'last attended classes' is examined for leavers and persisters separately (Figure A7).

Indeed, persisters left classes towards the end of the year, or after having attended basic skills classes longer. Leavers, on the other hand, dropped-out or progressed at a constant rate of about 4% a week.

Length of attendance

How long did students remain in basic skills classes?

As expected, more leavers stayed only 3-4 weeks. Most leavers left after the first 2-3 weeks. Most persisters left towards the end of the course.

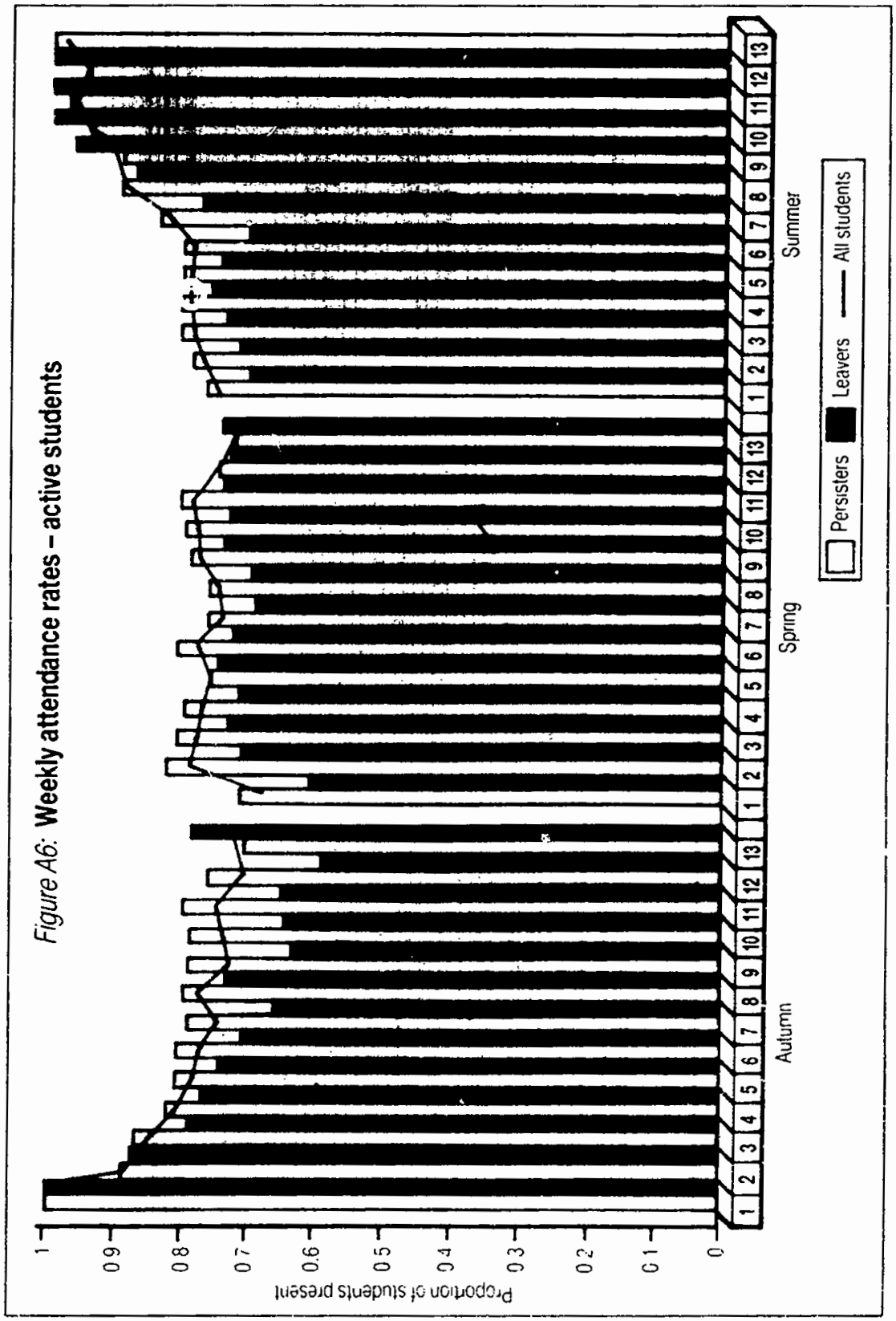
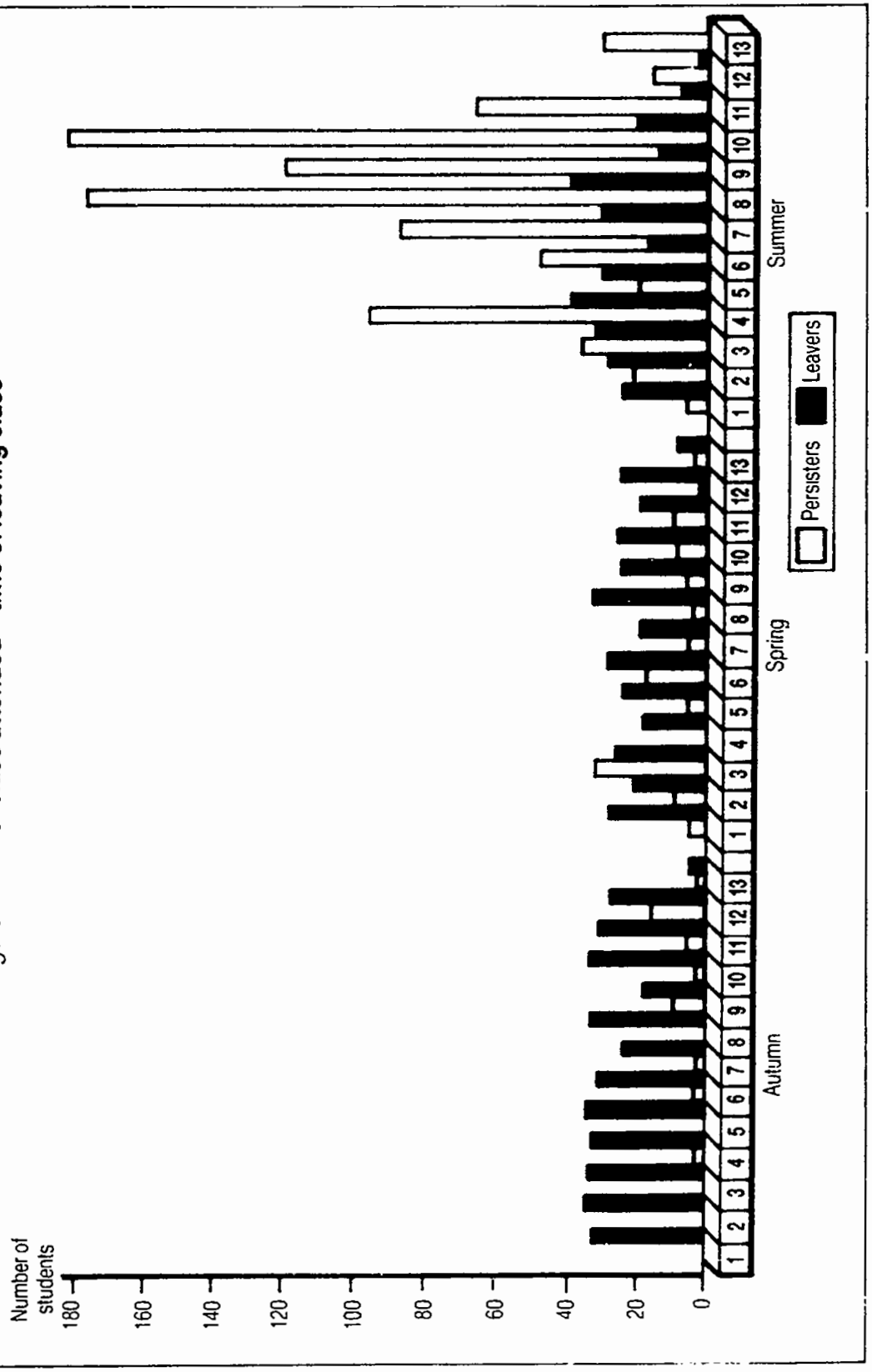


Figure A6: **Weekly attendance rates – active students**

Figure A7: **Last class attended – time of leaving class**



These results are confirmed by the data obtained through the questionnaires to leavers. According to the students who left classes during 1991-92 attendance was fairly regular: 71% of them said they attended almost every week, while 29% replied they attended only a few times. The majority (47%) of students who left classes said they stayed less than four months, and another 30% of them stayed less than a year (9 months). Less than 10% of the sample remained in basic skills between 18 and 54 months.

Cross-validation: Phase 1 *and* Phase 2

To validate the data on patterns of attendance obtained in 1991-92 registers were

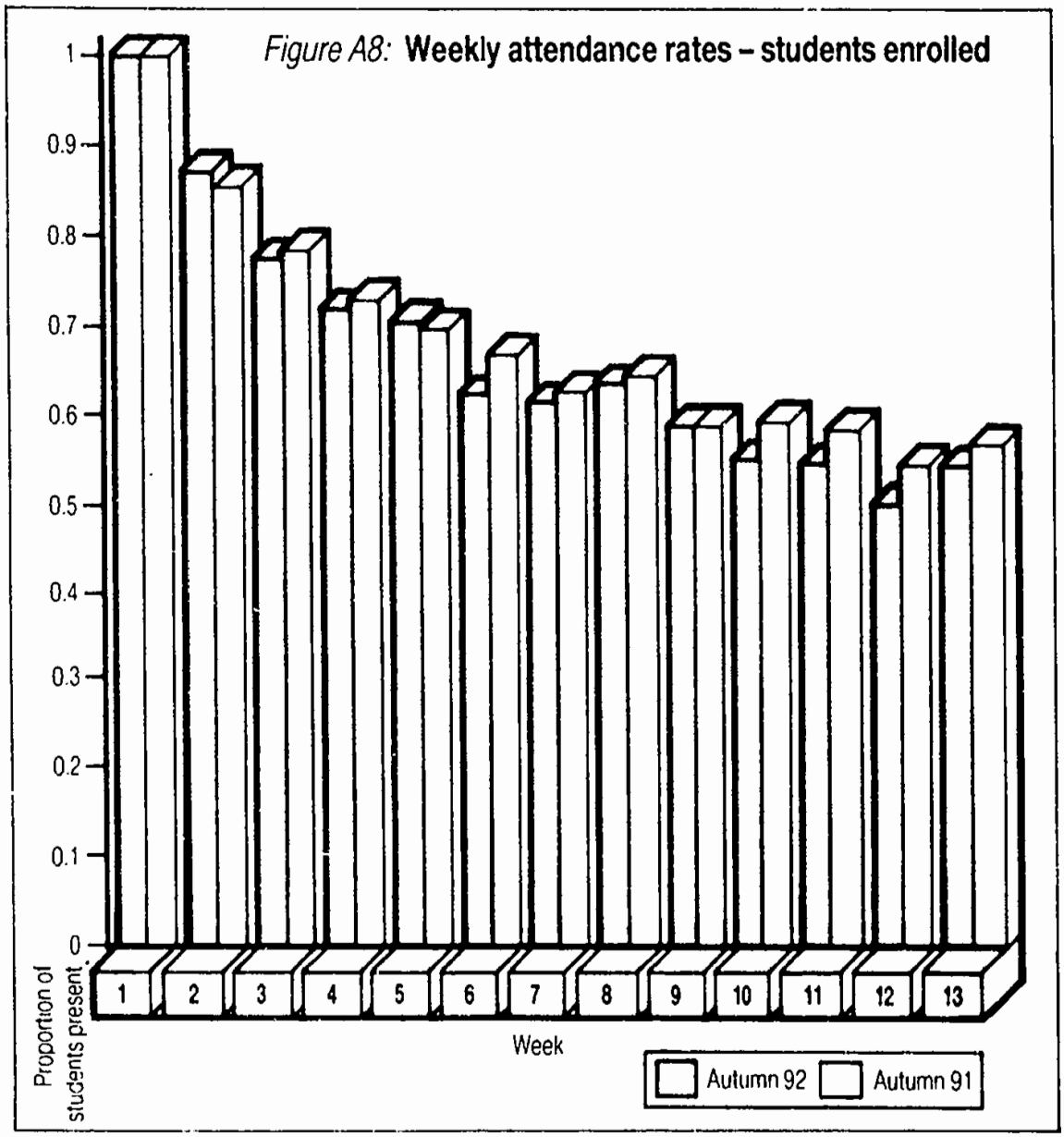
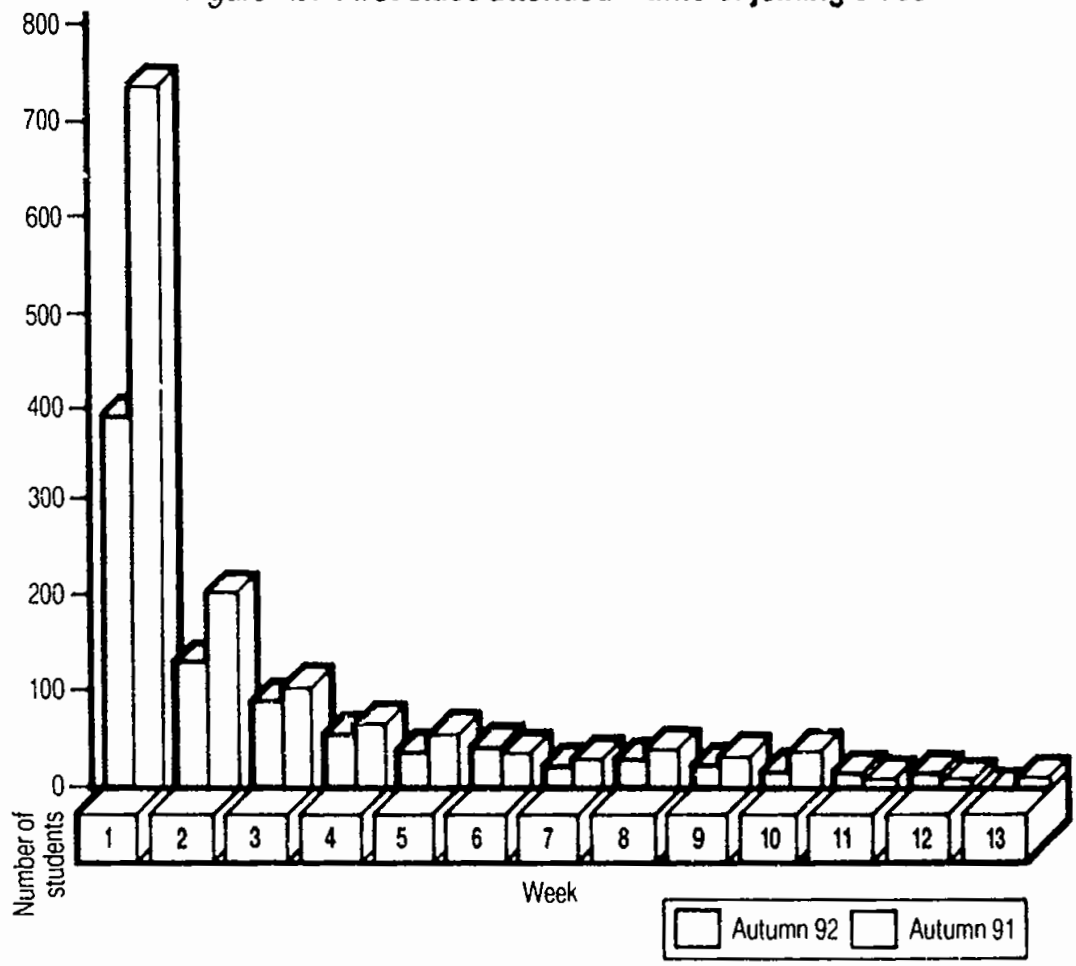


Figure A8: **Weekly attendance rates – students enrolled**

collected in the first term of 1992. The following graphs (Figures A8 and A9) show this comparison.

Attendance rates for these first terms in the two academic years are almost identical, confirming that the patterns did not change from one year to the next. Similarly, Figure A9 shows that the time of joining classes followed the same pattern in year 1991 and in 1992 (the numbers obtained in 1992 were smaller).

Figure A9: **First class attended – time of joining class**



Phase 2

In the initial period of acquaintance with basic skills classes, some students who left did not drop-out of basic skills altogether but moved to other basic skills classes which seemed more suitable or convenient. However there is little information about them doing so. An attempt was made to obtain further

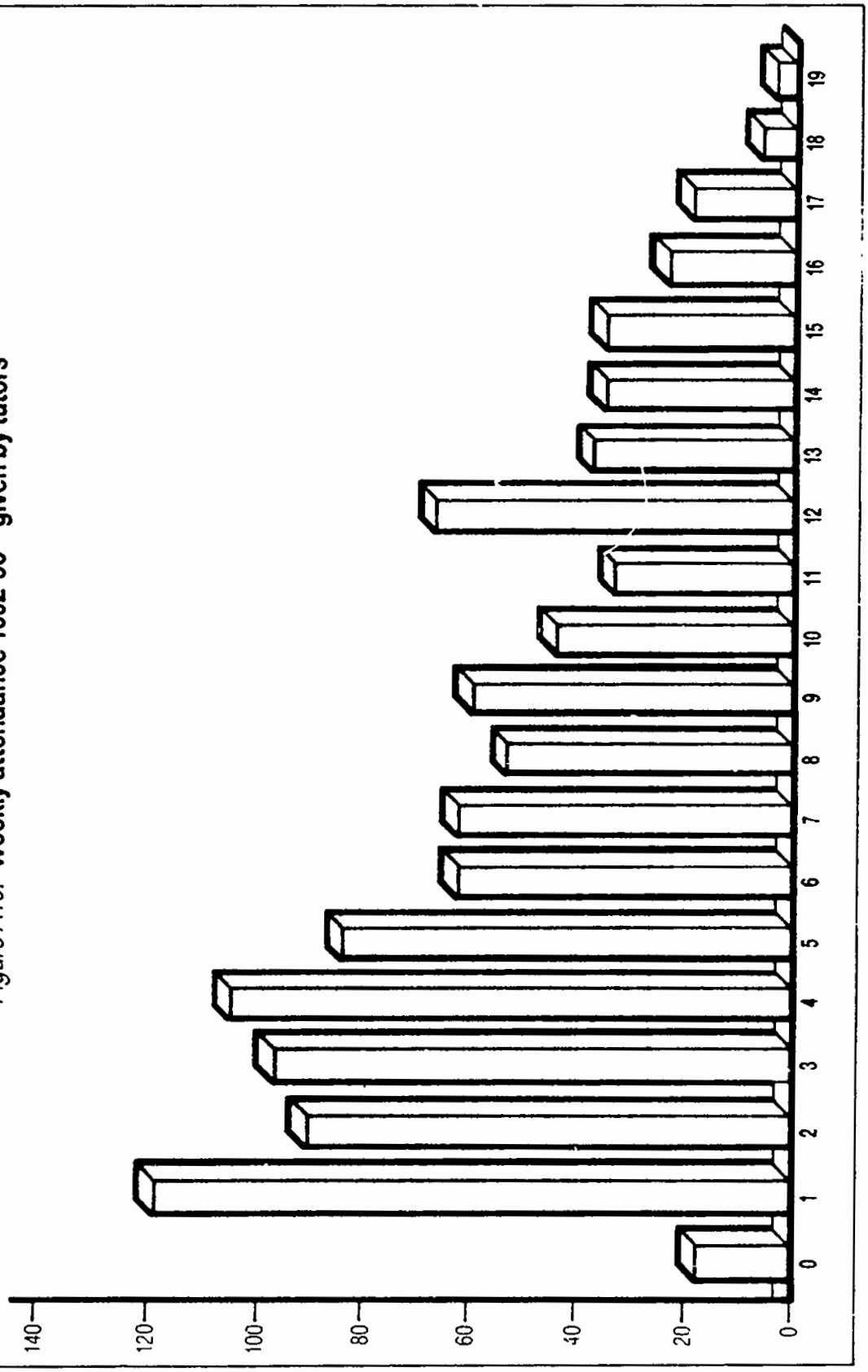
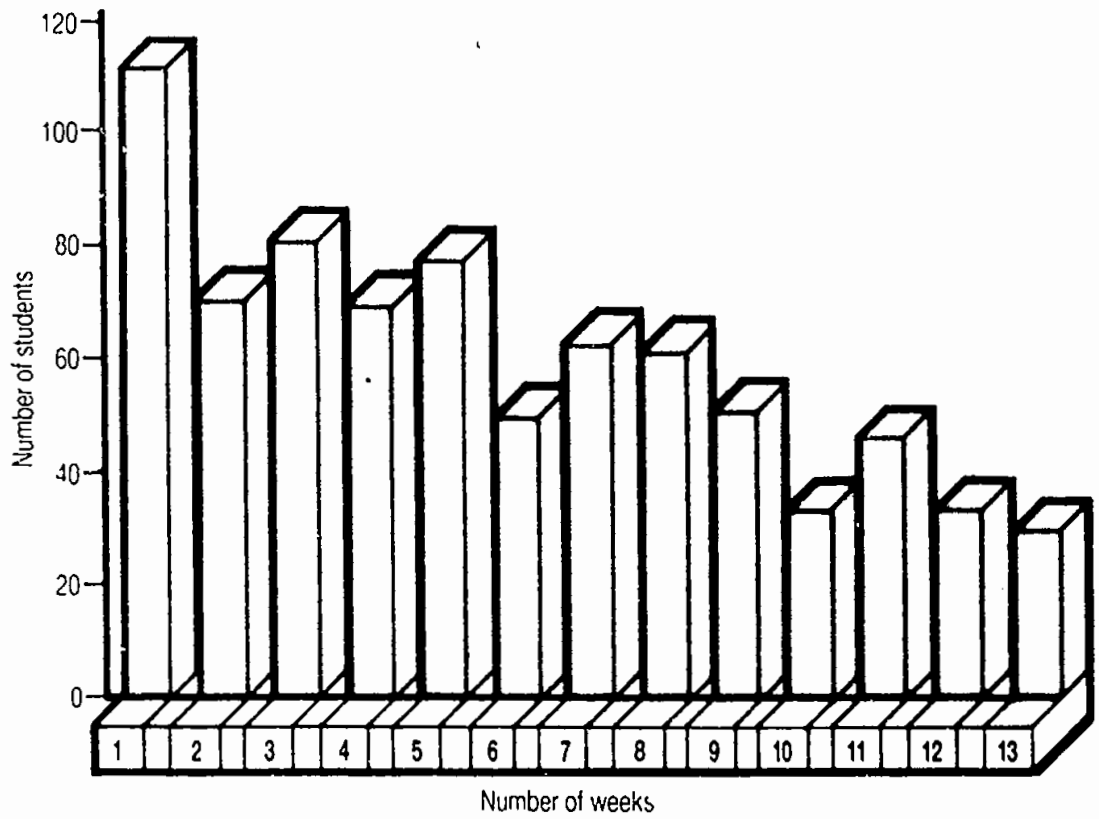


Figure A10: **Weekly attendance 1992-93 – given by tutors**

information on this important perio y asking tutors to use a standardised form on which to record students arriving in September enquiring for classes. In the resulting sample of 1,218 students almost 260 left in the first few weeks of the Autumn 1992 (about 23%), 4% were directed by the tutor to other classes and 3% were put on waiting list for that same class.

According to their tutors, half of the students in the sample attended classes for less than 6 weeks (30% attended for less than 3 weeks). Figure A10 shows the number of weeks students attended classes on average in the period September 1992-February 1993.

Figure A11: **Weekly attendance (Autumn 1992) – length of stay**



This picture is very similar to the one obtained from registers in Autumn 1992. Tutor's reports of students' frequency of attendance are therefore confirmed (see Figure A11).

Reasons for students leaving classes at any point throughout the year were collected from their tutors and themselves. These findings are summarised in the next section.

Summary

- Good records of attendance and leaving were not always available.
- Over half of the students who enrolled during the year joined in the first two weeks of the autumn term. The remainder joined in small numbers throughout the year.
- Almost half of the students who enrolled at the beginning of the year were continuing in the same class from the previous year.
- The average rate of attendance based on enrolment was between 40%-60%, but when based on enrolment minus students who were later discovered to have left it was 79%.
- Attendance was only slightly better for persisters than for leavers whilst they were still attending.
- Half of the students enrolled during 1991-92 were reported to have left classes at some time during the year. This figure includes drop-out and progression.
- Most leavers stayed only 2-3 weeks in class. Very few continued to attend for more than a year.
- Patterns of attendance were similar between the two years, 1991-92 and 1992-93.

B. Reasons for leaving

The problems of identifying leavers and 'drop-outs'

In this section, the reasons provided by tutors and students for leaving a class are reported and discussed. Their responses to questions about leaving illustrated some of the problems of deciding what kind of non-attendance counts as leaving. On one hand, different tutors (or organisers) have different opinions about when to expect that a student has left the class. For some, 2-3 consecutive absences, without justification and with unsuccessful follow-up,

are enough to declare a student 'gone', while others are willing to wait months for students to show up in class. On the other hand, some students themselves have difficulty deciding whether to continue with a course and therefore send mixed messages or they hesitate to give the real reasons for discontinuing tuition. Moreover, some students assume that being absent for a long period does not necessarily mean that they have quit basic skills tuition. Indeed some had come back again and again. It is no wonder that record keeping under such circumstances becomes a problem.

Some tutors investigate the reasons why a non-attending student might be dropping-out. Others adopt a more traditional view that a student's privacy should be respected and, therefore, no contact is made. There is usually no general rule in this matter in a centre or LEA: most decisions are based on individual cases. Before any kind of basic skills provision policies may be considered, it is important to juxtapose the opinions of the students and their tutors. This research has aimed to investigate both sources of information.

Reasons for non-attending/leaving class

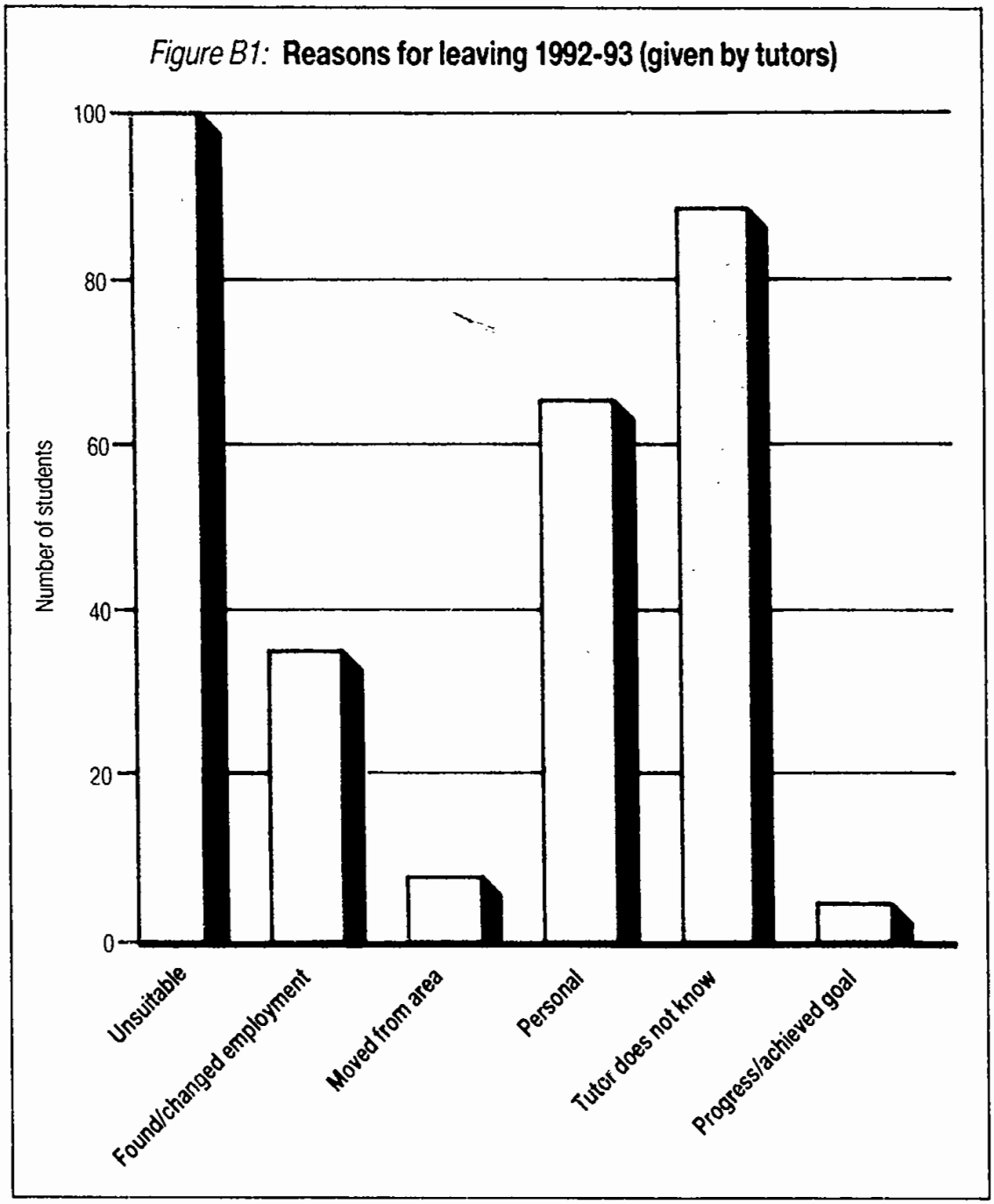
The reasons behind non-attendance cannot be stated simply. Students and their tutors share the responsibility and commitment. Often, students have personal, family or work-related problems which are more time consuming than anticipated. Sometimes a student's motivation has lessened. In some cases external factors such as the weather or seasonal occupation may play a part, or provision-related reasons may have an effect; a cold or unsuitable classroom, under-staffing, insufficient resources and so on. The reasons given by tutors as well as those collected through students' responses in this research are discussed below.

Both in **Phase 1** and **Phase 2**, tutors were asked to provide information for those students who left their classes.

Early leaving

In **Phase 2**, (September 1992 – February 1993) tutors were asked to pay particular attention to the first few weeks of the term, recording the information on the E&R form (see section 4). The reasons given by tutors about students who left classes during the Autumn term were as follows (see Figure B1).

A third of the students who left did so after only one or two weeks. Some found the class unsuitable, others were told it was too full (and were not put on waiting lists), and a few found it closed due to cuts in funding. Another third of students



left without giving reasons, while 21% of them said they had personal reasons for leaving. Some 12% of students left because they found or changed employment (it was often the case that students dropped-out because the time classes met overlapped with their new job arrangements or because they found the workload interferring with their social/family life or because by finding a job they achieved their goal).

The overall picture of leaving

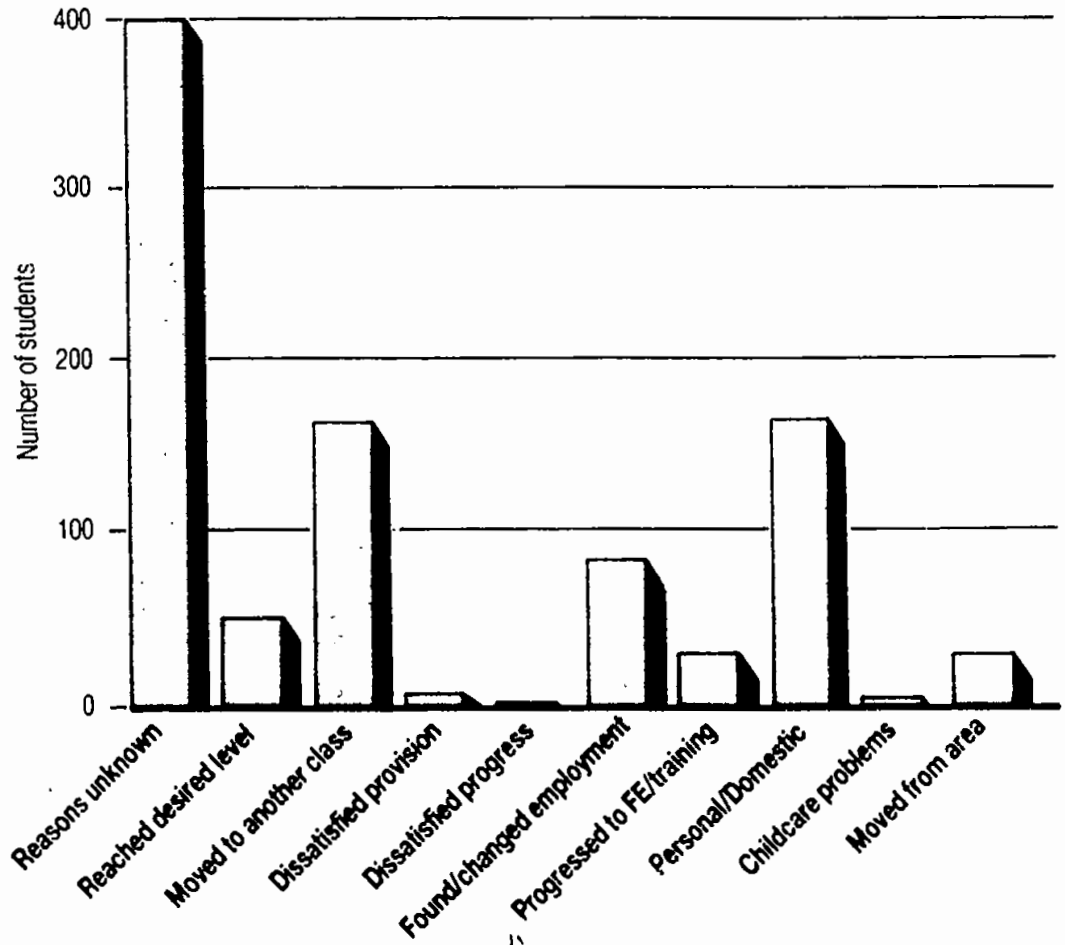
Phase 1

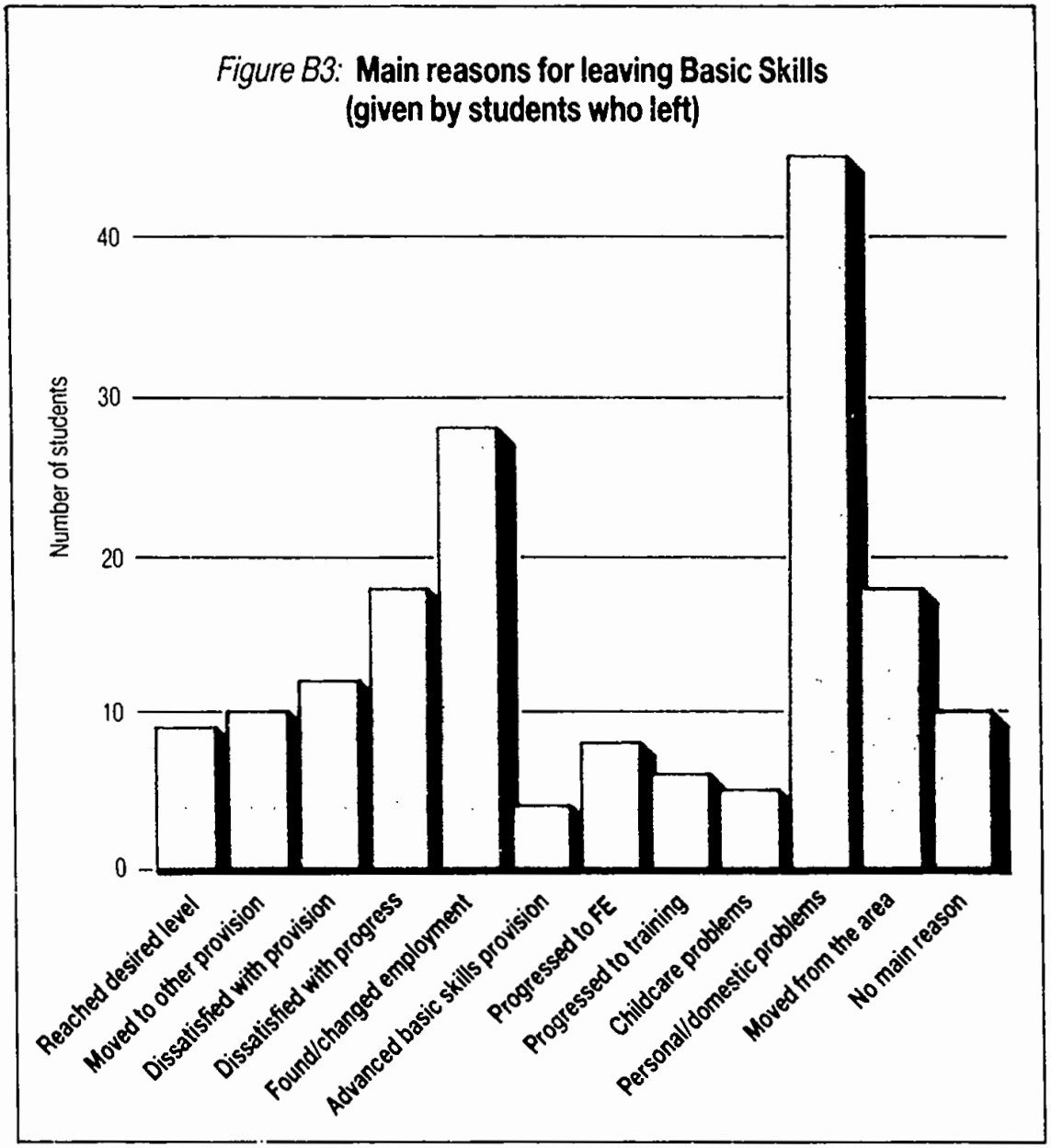
The results of **Phase 1** (for almost 1,000 students), in terms of tutors' reports of why about half of the students who enrolled in 1991-92 left classes, are summarised in Figure B2.

Based on a list of possible reasons students may have had when leaving a class, a questionnaire was designed to ask students why they had left during 1991-92. This yielded the information summarised in Figure B3.

The most surprising result (see Fig. B2) was that in 43% of the cases tutors did not know why a student left a class. As shown in Figure B1, this result is also quite high (30%) from the smaller sample obtained in the beginning of the following academic year 1992-93. Yet when asked whether they can usually tell if a student is likely to leave, 88% of tutors answered positively.

Figure B2: **Reasons for leaving 1991-92 (given by tutor)**





Specific reasons for leaving

The following first three categories of reasons for leaving include progression and satisfaction. The remainder refer to leaving in the sense of drop-out.

1. Reached goal

Tutors estimated that about 5% of their students left because they reached the desired level of attainment and indeed 5% of students confirmed this result.

2. Progression

About 17% of students who left were thought to have moved (or advanced) to other basic skills provision, yet only 8% of them said they actually did. On the other hand, 8% of students progressed to further education or a training scheme against a 3% estimated by the tutors.

Another interesting finding was that more students found or changed jobs (16%) than tutors thought (9%). Estimates of progression (in terms of learning or training and employment) show that tutors' information on students' plans is insufficient.

When tutors were asked (in **Phase 1**) to provide information on their students' future plans, the following results were collected.

Of about 1,820 students, 56% were thought to be continuing in basic skills next year (indeed from the data collection in **Phase 2**, 47% of students were reported as 'old').

Under 5% of students were thought to be progressing into further education training schemes or a job related situation.

Only 1% were expected to stop altogether and for the remaining 38% tutors had no information.

When asked why students leave classes, very few tutors reported positive causes, for instance that the student had achieved his/her goals or progressed to a more advanced course.

Further data on progression from the student's destination (e.g. FE colleges, advanced basic skills classes, employers) would help to complement this picture.

3. Moved from the area

Another underestimated figure was that of the proportion of people 'on the move'. In two different samples (**Phase 1** and **Phase 2**) tutors reported that 2 – 3% of students moved, while more than 10% of students said they had moved.

4. Child care

A common problem for female students, difficulty with child care, was the reason given for leaving by about 3% of the student sample. This was correctly estimated by the tutors in the larger sample.

5. Dissatisfaction

In terms of dissatisfaction, however, tutors largely underestimated students' opinions. 7% of students were dissatisfied with provision (tutors thought only 1% would be) and more than 16% were dissatisfied with their own progress against a 0.3% estimate by tutors.

6. Personal reasons

This was by far the most commonly presented reason (18% estimated by the tutors, 26% reported by the students) and the least well defined. It included student's illness, other personal, social or family related problems (except childcare) but also a whole list of psychological factors which affected the student's learning and commitment in a 'school' environment. Some of these factors (e.g. low motivation, low self-esteem) can be expected to improve under the right guidance. Others are too complicated to be tackled in a classroom.

'Changes in personal circumstances' was also the most frequent reason tutors gave when asked what, in their opinion, was the most important cause for students leaving basic skills classes.

7. Not matching expectations

The second most important cause for students leaving basic skills classes, according to tutors, was not matching expectations. Student progress may be slower than expected and the level of work, time and effort needed is underestimated by students.

The third major cause was low motivation mentioned especially when a student was referred by a third party, and lack of confidence and of commitment.

Other causes reported by tutors (in descending order of importance) were: change in student's work patterns, tutor failed to notice difficulties and therefore student's needs were not met, inadequate learning environment and fees.

More specific reasons for leaving without progression or goal satisfaction

From the questionnaire to students who left classes in 1991-92 the following more specific reasons were reported (often more than one ticked by each respondent):

Table B4: I left the class because:

	Number of ticks
I had not bec.. well	31
I could not attend at that time	30
I started work	29
I did not feel I was learning	29
I was expecting more class teaching	23
I had family problems	22
I moved from the area	21
I did not get enough help in that class	21
Doing homework was a problem	19
The work was too easy	17
I achieved all I wanted from the class	16
I went into another basic education class	11
I went into a more advanced class	11
I could not afford the fee for the course	11
I went into Further Education	10
Travelling to the centre was difficult	10
I could not afford the bus fare	10
I did not like working in a group	9
I did not like working on my own	9
The work was too hard	9
We did not have enough materials (books, etc) in the class	8
I had child minding problems	8
I was on the wrong course	7
The course did not run smoothly	6
I went into training (YT, ET, AT)	5
The classroom was too cold	4

Four further categories of reasons were given in an open-ended question: personal (54 cases), special needs (17), financial (7) and seasonal (5).

The main reason, corresponding to what the tutors suggested, was related to the students personal circumstances.

Other frequent answers were that the student could not attend at that time, had started work, or that the student did not feel he/she was learning. These were related to a change in job-related circumstances about which the tutors seemed to know less. Such obstacles preventing participation have been identified from early studies. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) in an extensive study in the US found three important barriers: financial, busy schedules and lack of sufficient physical energy at the end of the day.

Overall, students expressed a fair amount of dissatisfaction with provision, mostly in terms of style of teaching: 'I did not feel I was learning', 'I was expecting more class teaching', 'I did not get enough help in class', 'doing homework was a problem', 'the work was too easy'.

Another useful outcome of the use of this anonymous questionnaire was that almost all students thought the tutor did find out what they needed. If this result does not contradict those above, then the reasons for leaving must be (at least in part) that students have certain expectations when they join basic skills classes which may be difficult to match.

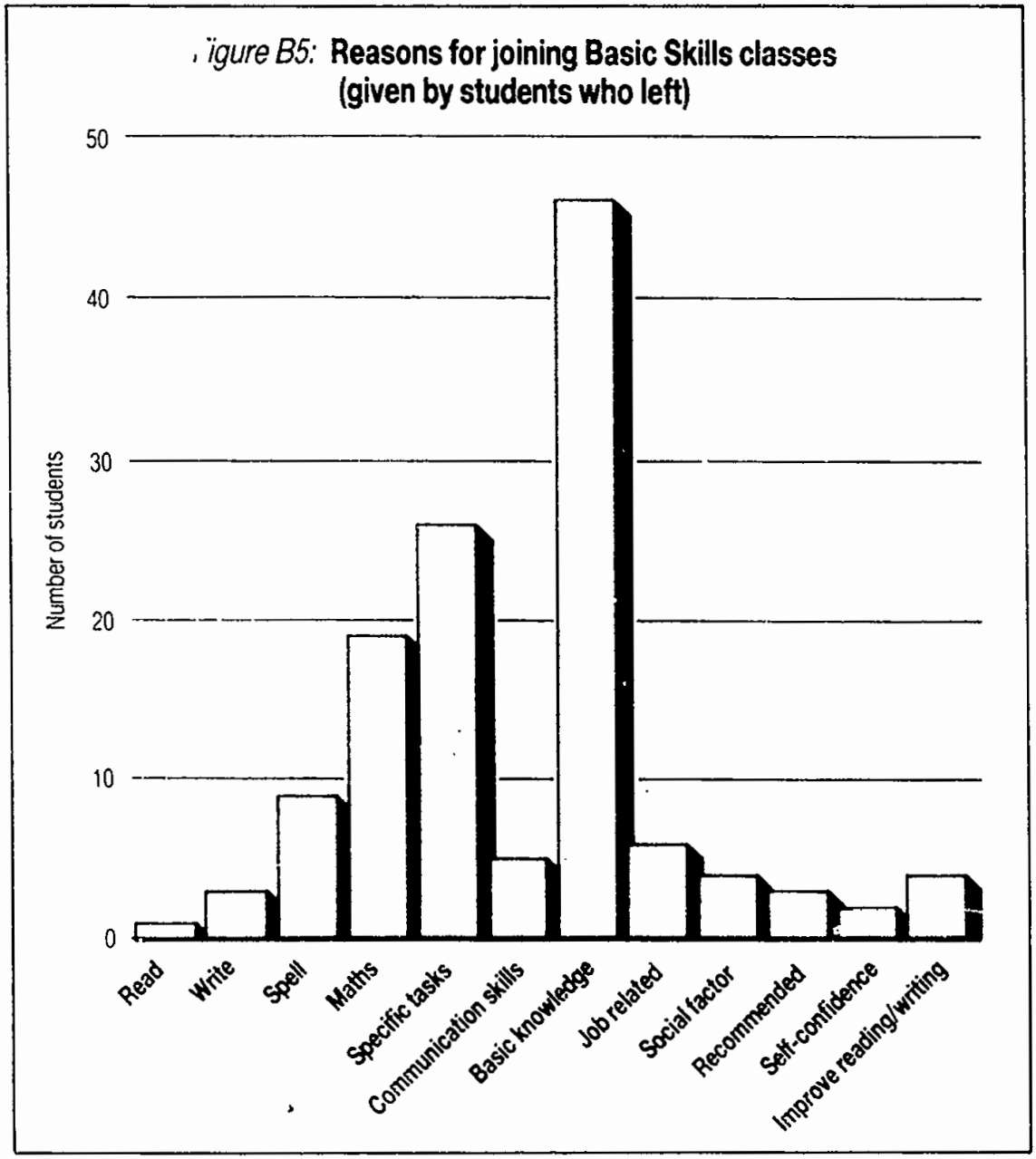
Reasons for joining basic skills classes

When asked why they joined the course in the first place, students' answers were as follows (*see Figure B5*:

Most students came to basic skills to improve their basic knowledge (education) or as they often put it: 'to better myself' (36%). Another 20% came to learn or develop a specific skill or task. About 15% came to increase their maths skills and 13% their literacy skills. Very few admitted they came to build self-confidence, although this seemed to be implied in their more specific answers.

The myth of the student's 'privacy'

Finally, the student questionnaire helped demystify a long-time favourite reason for not contacting students when absent for a long time. Although the research intention was not to invite people back to classes, the returned questionnaires contained a number of personal replies (about 7-8) thanking the



researchers for re-establishing contact and for asking why they had left. In addition, at least three centres reported a relatively high response to their standardised letter sent out to any student who missed 3 or 4 consecutive classes.

Tutors' opinions on making contact varied. The majority of tutors (83%) said they contact the student if he/she is absent for 2 or 3 weeks, and 13% wait for more than 3 weeks before they do so. Only 3 tutors (4%) said they do not contact the student.

A similar response was given to whether the tutor usually collected information about student's reasons for leaving a class. Only 10% of tutors said they did not.

Remedies

Although it is not always clear what the underlying reasons for leaving tuition may be, it is the tutor's task to help the student back to classes. Motivation factors have been recognised as major predictors of poor attendance or drop-out as many studies show (see Houle, 1992). Given the diversity of students in basic skills, the tutor's task is certainly a very difficult one.

How do tutors control irregular attendance? When asked how they motivate their students to attend on a regular basis, the majority of tutors (55%) agreed that the most important ingredients were based on the individual:

1. Helping students to see improvement through particular tasks.
2. Offering a work-scheme relevant to the individual's needs.
3. Reviewing progress regularly.
4. Letting the students know the lesson plans in advance (when applicable).

The next most important ways of motivating students to attend were based both on 'the individual and the group':

5. Make students feel welcome and provide a good atmosphere.
6. Encourage, value and praise students.
7. Establish personal contact (directly or with volunteer help).
8. Ensure good group dynamic and mutual support.

About a third of the tutors presented ways to motivate students to return to class which were based on teaching style:

9. Supply with interesting and relevant material and with flexible teaching to produce an enjoyable class.

Less than 10% of the tutors thought that informing students of the demand for places in basic skills classes, asking them to be advised when the student cannot come to class and thus maintaining contact with the student throughout the course, were ways to keep students attending.

Summary

- Over a third of leavers progressed in some way or other.
- Both tutors and leavers reported that about 10% progressed to further education or training schemes. Tutors reported about 17% had moved (or advanced) to other basic skills classes, but leavers reported only 12%.
- According to tutors, about 10% of leavers left because they found or changed employment. More than 16% of leavers reported this reason.
- Tutors reported only 5% of leavers reached their desired level of attainment, but 10% of leavers said they had achieved all they wanted.
- For other leavers the most common reasons for leaving classes were personal or domestic. Tutors estimated 20% left for these reasons while 26% of students who left gave these reasons.
- A third of the students who left in the Autumn term either found the class unsuitable or were put on a waiting list. Most attended for one week.
- About 7% of leavers were dissatisfied with provision while tutors estimated only 1%. More than 16% of students who left were dissatisfied with their progress while tutors' estimate was only 0.3%.
- It is worth noting that more than a third of students left basic skills tuition for reasons unknown to the tutor.

C. Provision

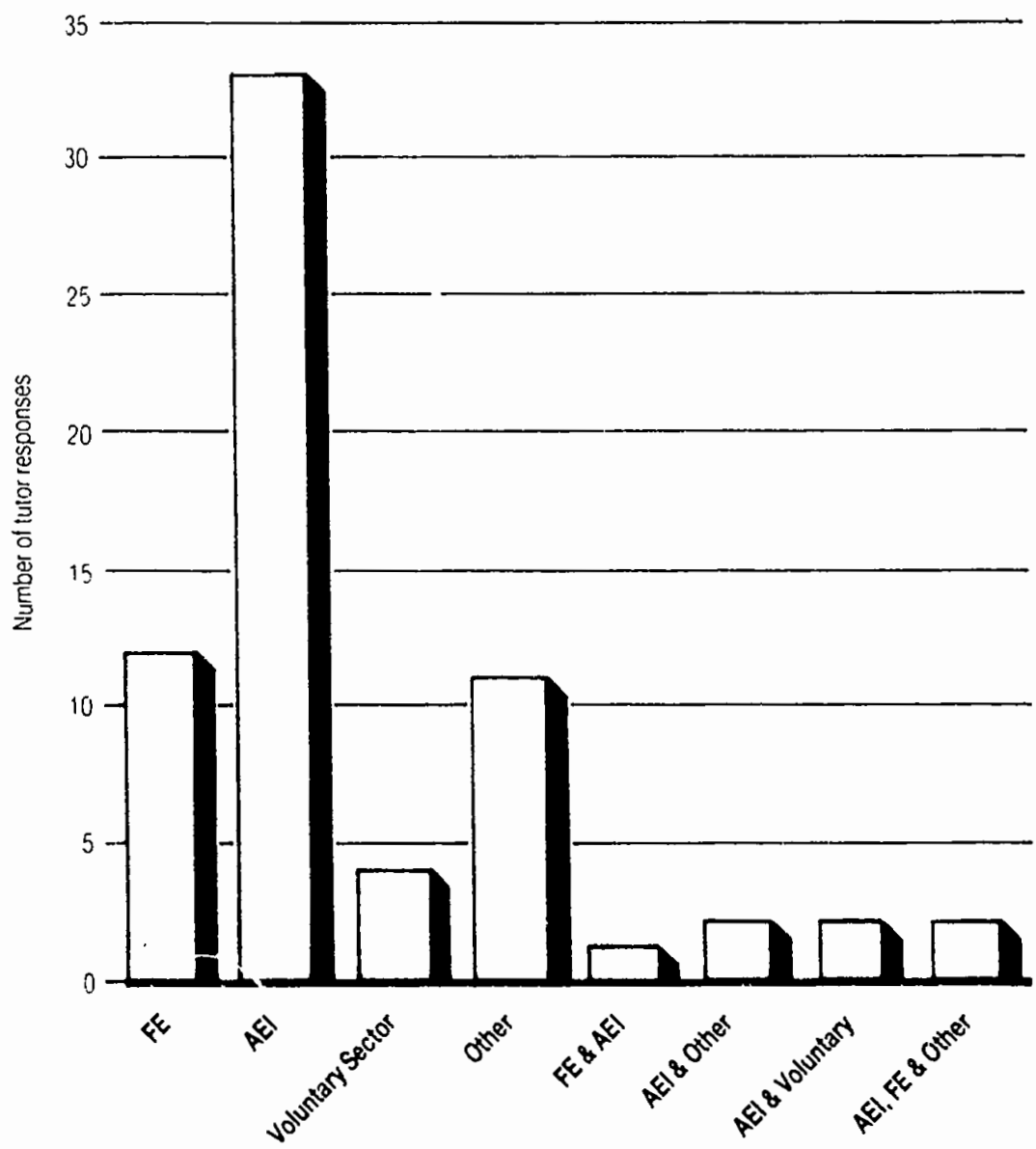
The factors related to provision which may influence drop-out, progression or completion were investigated via questionnaires to tutors and to students. As discussed in the previous Section, some of the reasons for leaving classes presented by students involved elements which were directly related to provision. In this Section, the findings reported are based on the information given by the tutors on what they considered to be important factors influencing student progress, satisfaction and drop-out.

Centres

On reading the results reported in this Section it should be borne in mind that responses came from class tutors (not organisers) and the following statistics should be taken into consideration:

- Half of the Centres were located in surburban areas, about 20% in city centres and 24% in small towns. Only 5% were in rural areas.

Figure C1: **Type of Basic Skills Provision**



- Access to the Centres by public transport was thought in 85% of cases to be relatively easy. Access by phone was reported quite good during the day (40%) and in the day and evening (37%). Only in 8% of the cases was it reported difficult or unsuccessful. However, if it was not good for 60% of tutors this did not augur well for students.

- Half of the classes were offered free of charge, 37% had a very small fee (up to £2) and only 13% required a more substantial amount. It was not possible to estimate the effect of fees on enrolment or leaving.

- Most tutors reported that centres had no links with other provision or industry. 48% were linked with Youth Training (YT) or Employment Training (ET).

- Provision was mostly managed by adult education (50%) and only 18% of it was further education based (see Figure C1).

  Of the tutors who participated in **Phase 2** and replied to questionnaires, 46% taught mostly general literacy and 20% taught basic literacy classes. Only 15% of tutors taught basic numeracy and about 10% both literacy and numeracy (see Figure C2).

- About 60% of tutors taught up to 6 hours a week and 75% of them taught up to 12 hours (see Figure C3).

- In terms of the number of classes taught per week, half of the tutors held one or two classes.

- Finally, in this sample of tutors, only 5% taught short courses (less than 12 weeks long).

Centre resources

This item was the highest on most tutors' priority list for change in the Centre, in terms of resources, class material and most of all teaching accommodation. However when asked about it specifically 85% found the class material at least sufficient and 88% found teaching accommodation adequate or better. Few however spoke enthusiastically about resources. There was clearly room for improvement. More than half of the tutors replied that their students had access to computers.

Tutor qualifications, experience and training

Almost all tutors were employed part-time.

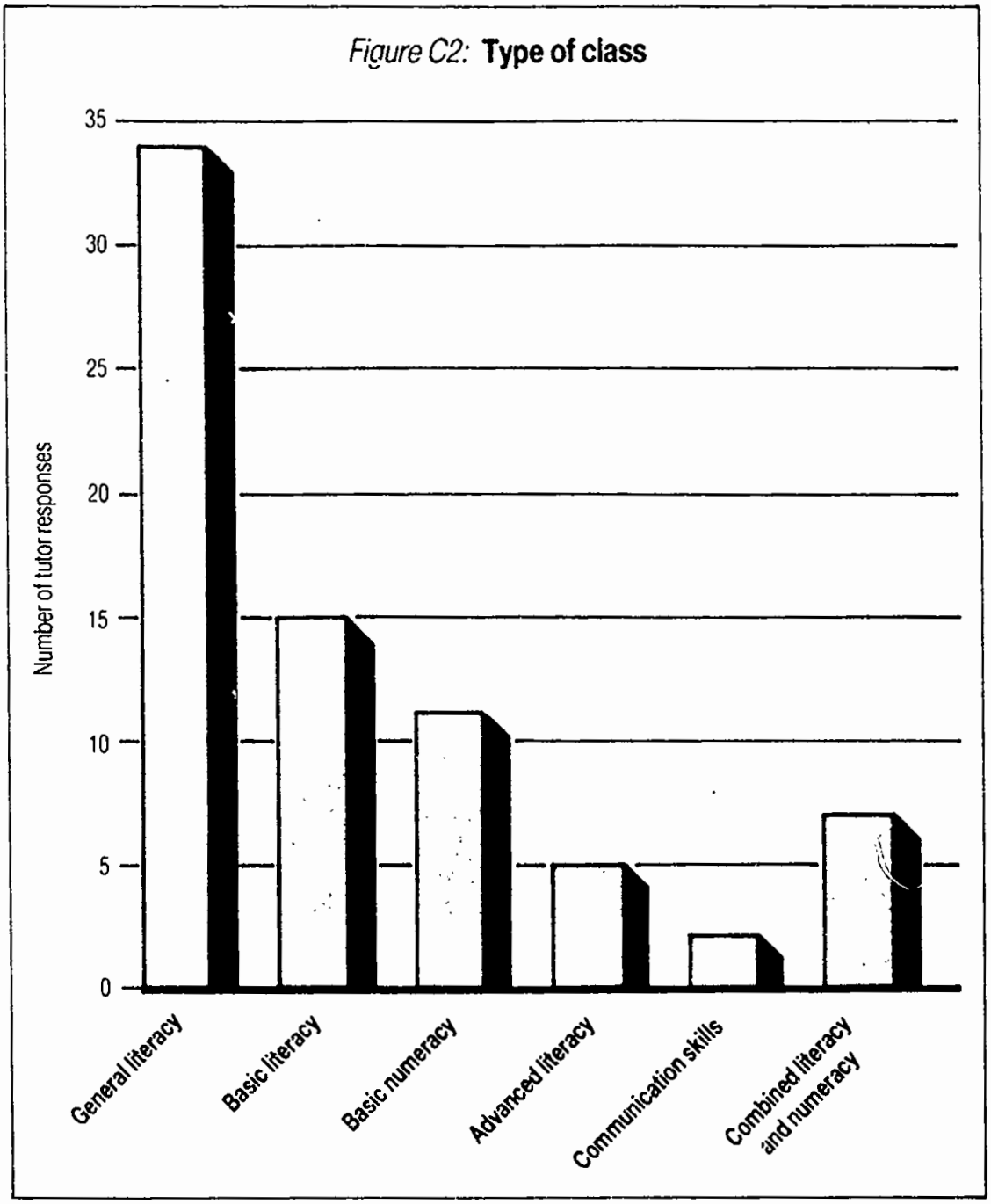


Figure C4 shows the number of tutors possessing a qualification.

Most of the tutors who particiated in this project held a Certificate of Education or other teaching certificate and (or) some academic qualification. About a fifth of the tutors had taken the Initial Certificate (C&G 9282/3) or the Certificate in Basic Skills (C&G 9285).

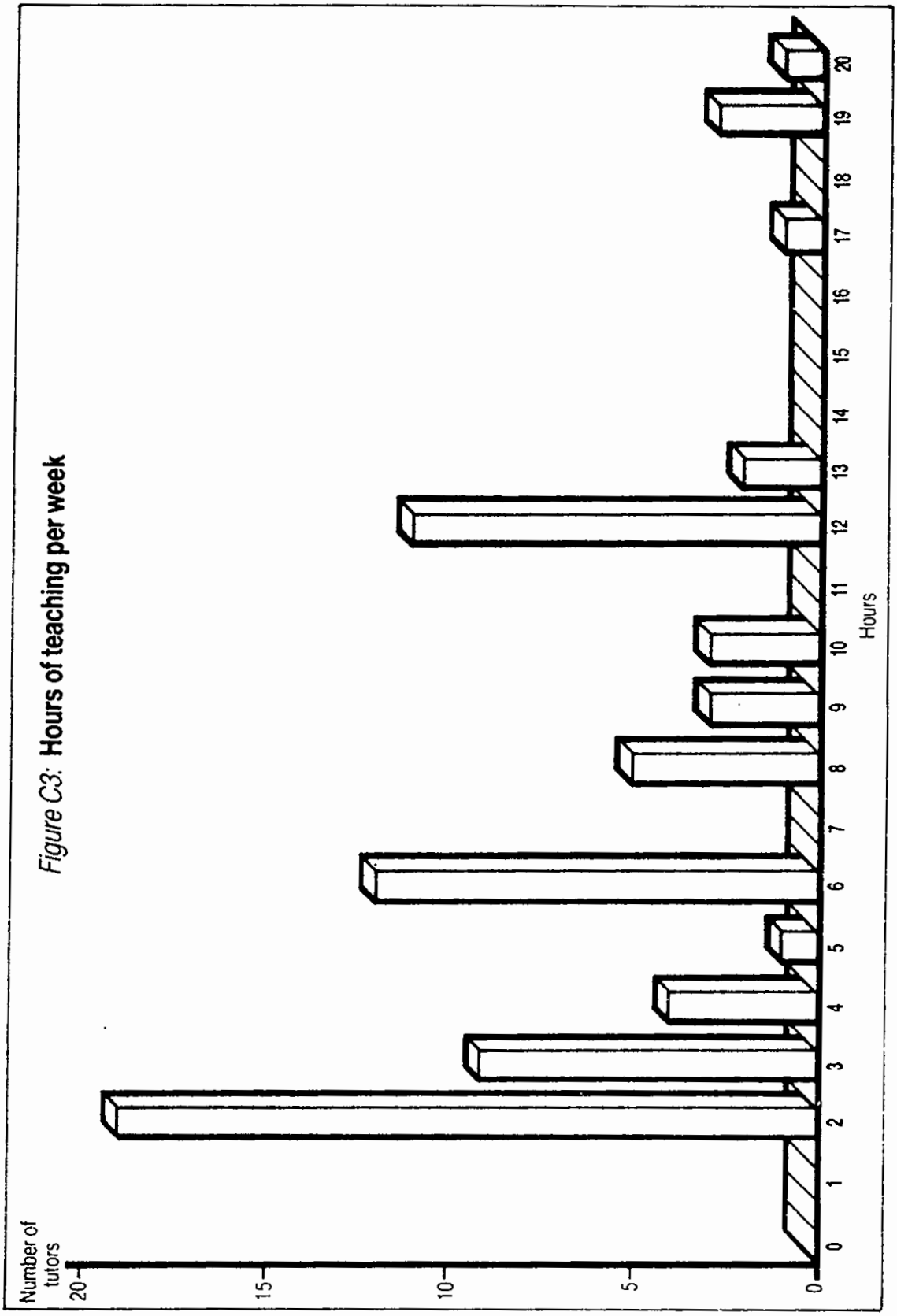
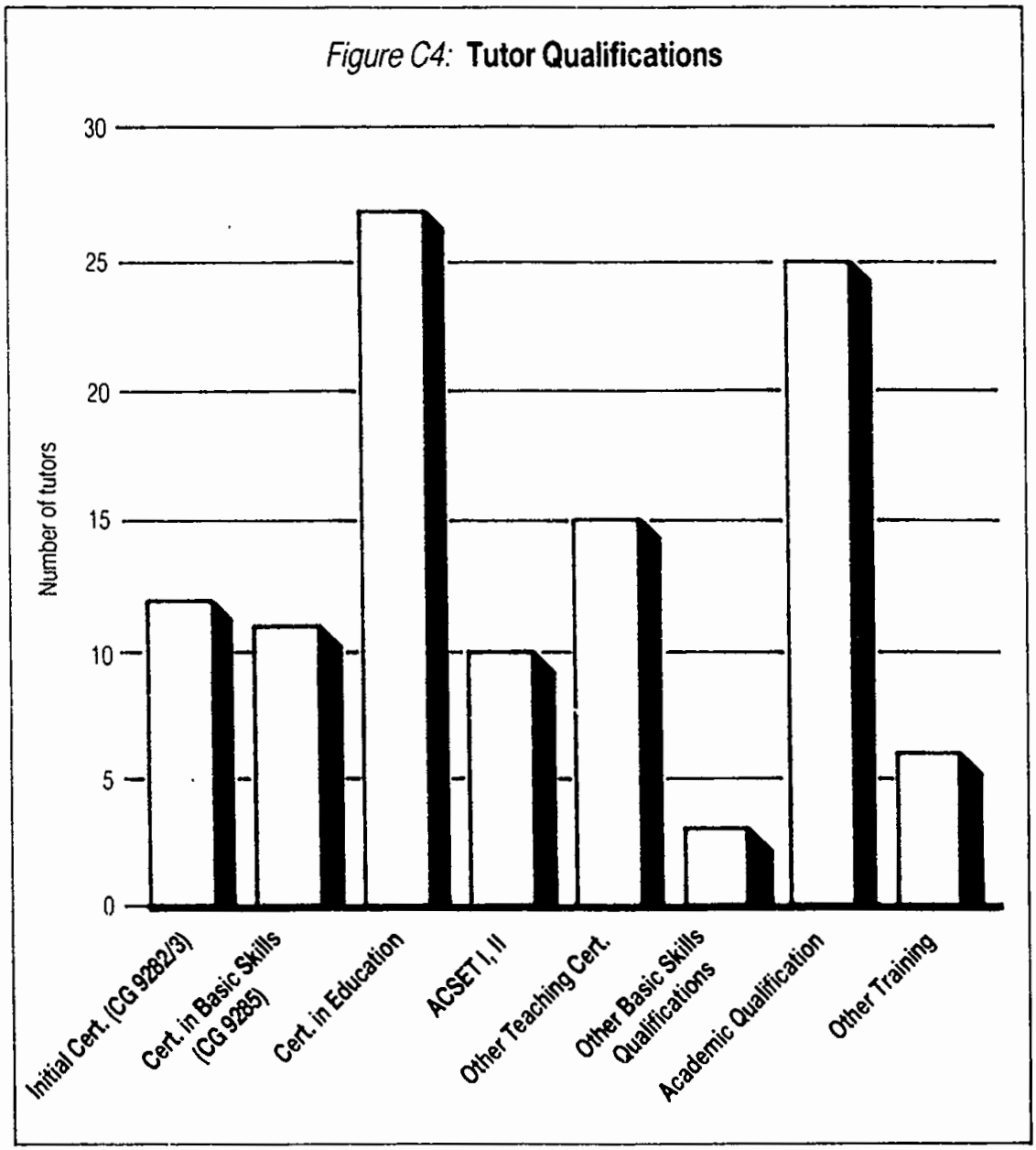


Figure C3: **Hours of teaching per week**



Half of the tutors thought that the in-service training offered to them was sufficient. The other half found that training was offered only occasionally. 20% of tutors proposed more training as a desirable change in the centre. There are numerous reports for a need to improve staff development (e.g. Daines and Graham 1992, McGivney, 1992).

Most tutors found that meeting with the organisers and other tutors once a term (41%) or occasionally (21%) was insufficient and about a third of them placed this matter high in their priorities for change.

The number of years spent in teaching basic skills was the criterion used for tutors' experience. This number includes years spent as a volunteer and both part-time and full-time employed. 85% of tutors said they had been volunteer helpers before becoming tutors. Graph C5 shows the total number of years spent by tutors in basic skills.

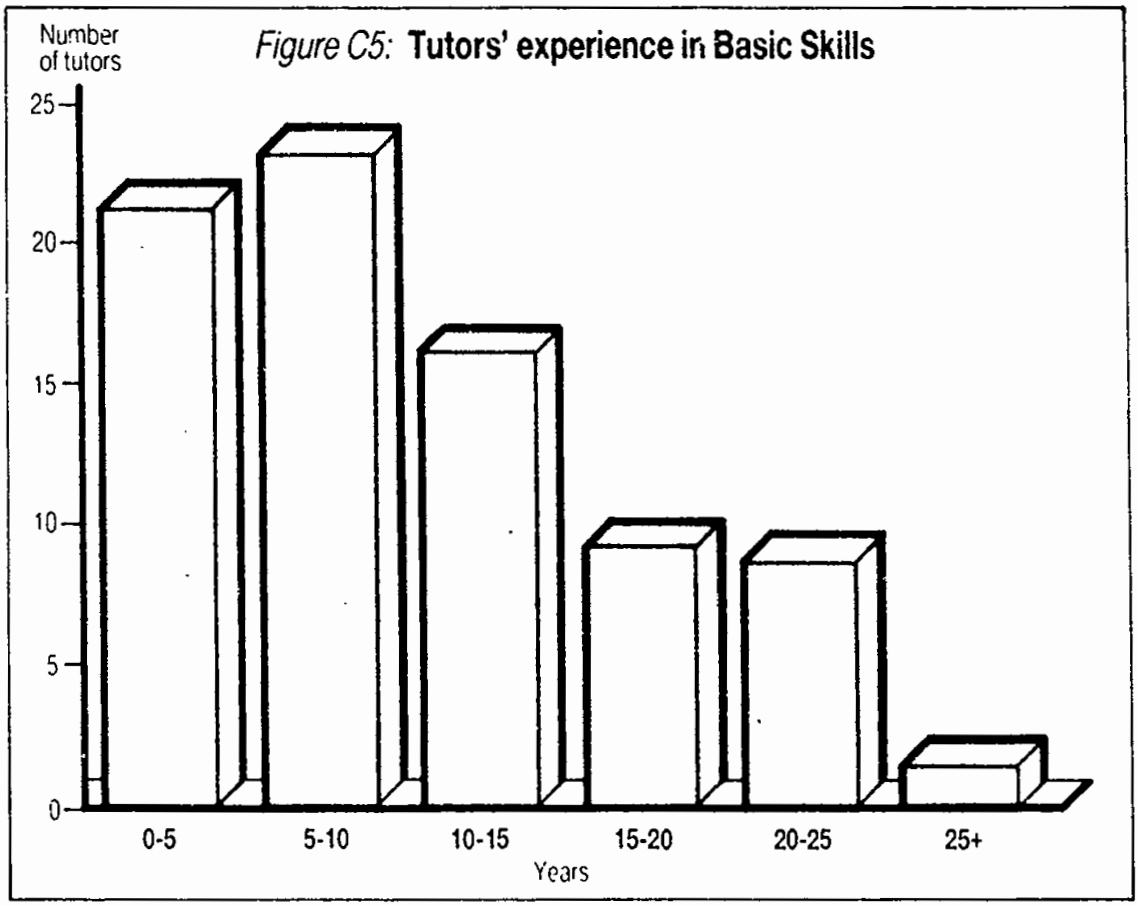


Figure C5: **Tutors' experience in Basic Skills**

Only 5% of the tutors had been in basic skills provision for less than 3 years. Most of them had spent between 3 and 11 years (65%) and quite a few had a long experience of up to 26 years working in basic skills classes.

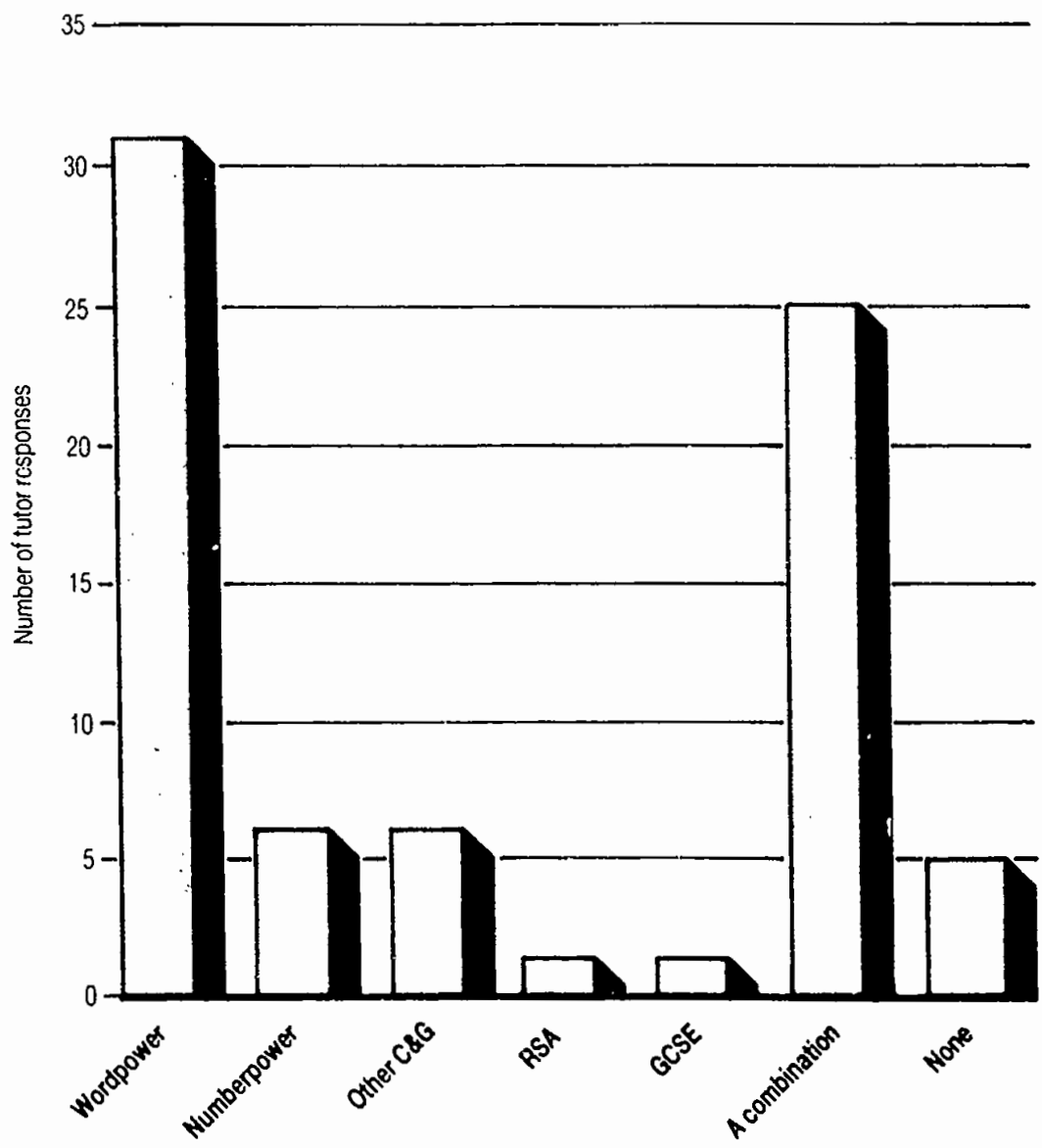
Class organisation and teaching

Most tutors (88%) said that their classes were very mixed in terms of learning needs. Almost half replied that students joined to improve a particular basic skill or to satisfy a particular job interest. The rest of provision was not targeted.

Tutors reported that they always provided flexible arrangements both in terms of class attendance and in terms of teaching (74%). Only 4% said they did not.

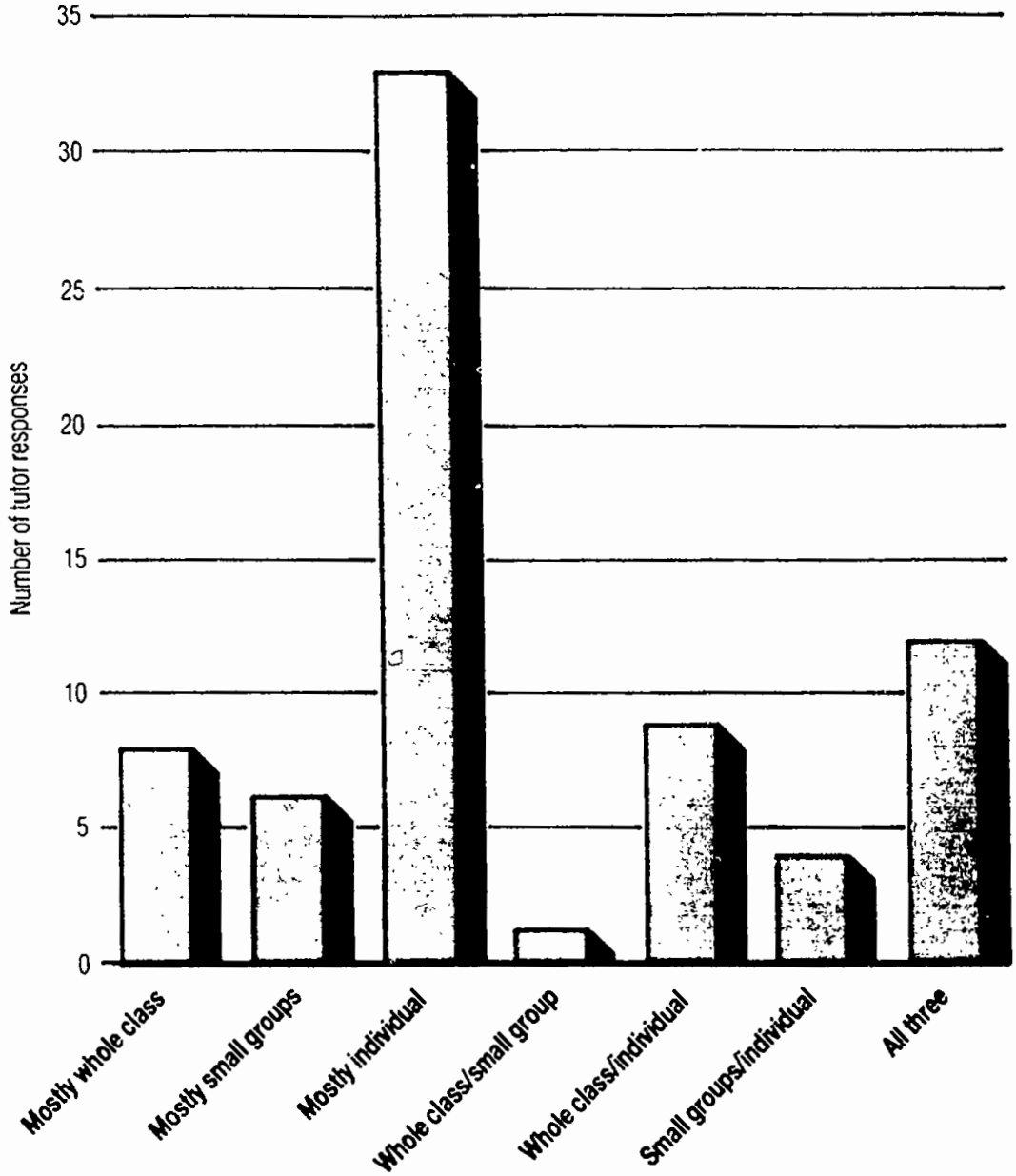
In terms of accreditation, most tutors used Wordpower and Numberpower modules. Only 7% said they used none. Tutor responses according to types of accreditation are shown in Figure C6.

Figure C6: **Types of accreditation used**



How did tutors distribute their teaching time? As expected, by far the most popular approach was individual teaching (see Figure C7). This result confirms previous research findings on teaching styles in basic skills provision (e.g. Abell, 1992).

Figure C7: **Time spent on teaching**



In planning a lesson, however, 68% of tutors said they planned both for the group and individual students (only 26% planned for individual students). 20% did not keep a written plan.

Most tutors (65%) kept weekly records of student progress and almost all of them answered that the student did contribute to this process. Standard forms were used in 85% of cases.

Although a few of the students who had left classes mentioned homework as one of the problems encountered, 88% of their tutors said their students did return homework assignments, although more than half admitted that 30% of the students found it difficult. Only 20% of tutors thought that returning homework affected student progress a great deal.

Most of the tutors had been volunteer helpers. Very few tutors (13%) reported that they did not have regular volunteer help in their classes in either year covered by the survey. About 10% said they had help in 1992-93 but not in 1991-92. A few tutors reported having volunteer help on an occasional basis only.

Student assessment and guidance

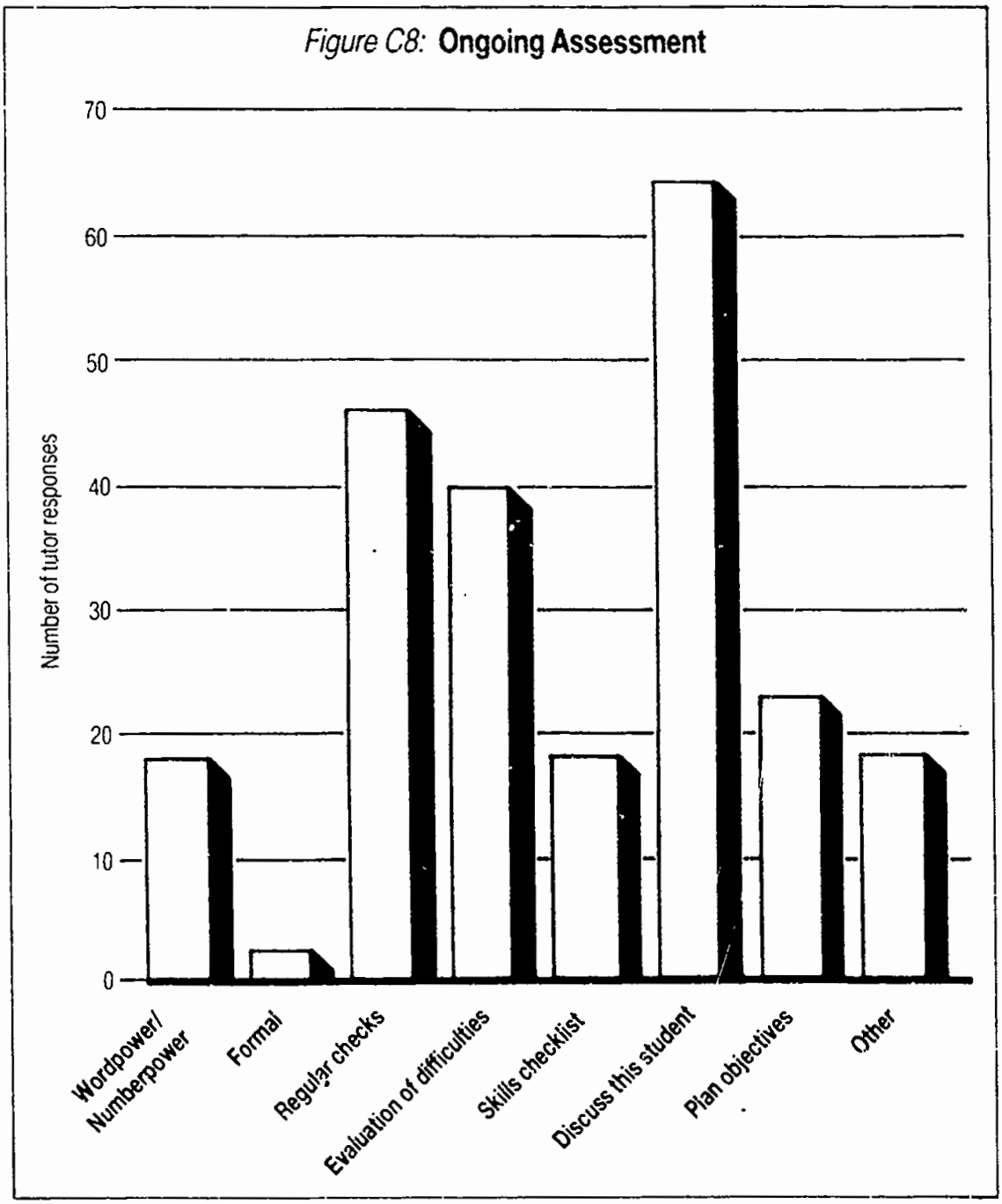
When asked whether any students were wrongly assigned to their classes, 30% of tutors answered positively. Some (13%) thought certain students should have been in a more advanced and others in a less advanced basic skills class, 9% found they had students who should have been in ESOL classes and 6% said students with special needs were wrongly assigned to their classes. Although tutors did not feel strongly about the assignment of students to classes, students may have felt disinclined to attend.

Half of the tutors said that the initial assessment or interview for assigning students into classes was made by them. 25% said they only had access to the results of assessments made by others. In 60% of the cases tutors reported that there was a formal initial assessment while 40% said it was an informal discussion. Students who left classes confirmed (through their responses to the questionnaires) that they had received an interview or had a chat with the tutor (96%). When asked whether the tutor had found what they needed, most of them replied positively. 20% were not completely satisfied.

Tutors strongly preferred the discussion with the student as the way to assess his/her progress (first choice for 63% of tutors). This result was consistent with the style of teaching they adopted. Second and third preferences were assessment by regular checks of progress and evaluation of difficulties. Only 14% used Wordpower and Numberpower as a first choice for ongoing assessment.

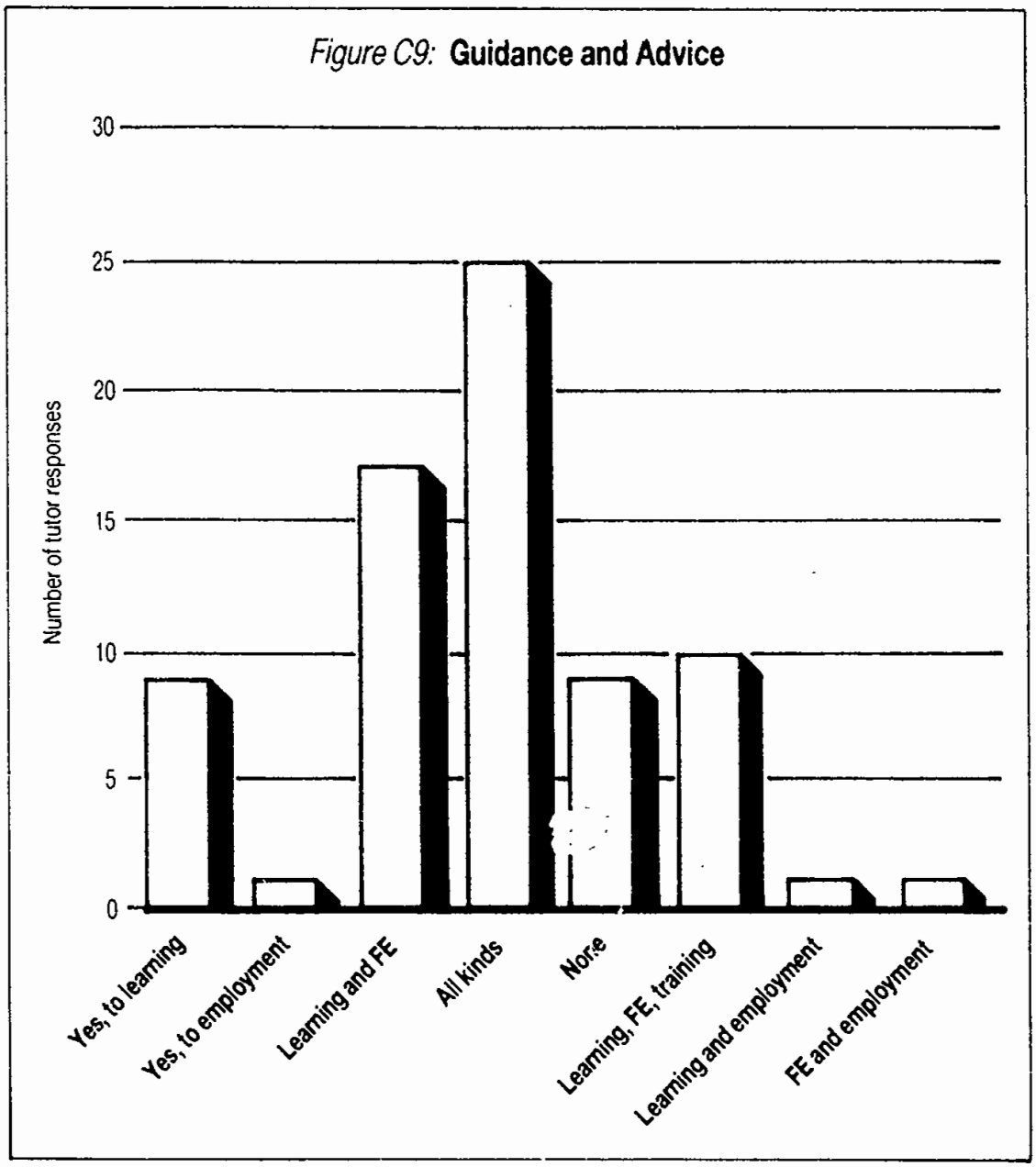
The different types of ongoing assessment and the frequency with which they were used by the tutors is shown in Figure C8.

In terms of guidance and advice made available to students, 12% of tutors reported there was none. Most tutors replied that guidance was given to



students and was particularly related to their learning and progressing to FE colleges. Figure C9 shows the tutor responses:

Although tutors seemed to provide guidance and advice and especially on learning issues, 26% of them reported that progression routes were not available to their students.



Changes suggested by tutors

First, tutors expressed the need to spend more time with individual students either by having smaller numbers in class or by having more classes. The second most popular wish was more time for preparation and with other tutors to discuss teaching issues and develop work schemes. More in-service training and longer sessions was suggested by some. Stability in student support systems, less administrative work and improvement of record keeping procedures was urged by others..

In terms of centre resources the lack of permanent and more spacious class accommodation was voiced. More basic resources (photocopiers, computers, etc.) were suggested but also better access to the resources provided to students was signalled.

Summary

- Class accommodation was often thought by tutors to be poor or inadequate. Termly meetings with other staff were considered insufficient.
- Most tutors had long experience in basic skills, although their employment status was part-time; they held a teaching or some academic qualification and 20% had taken the new basic skills certificates.
- Individual teaching was preferred by most tutors, although lesson planning was carried out for both individuals and groups.
- Volunteer helpers were widely available though not often trained.
- Only in 60% of the cases was initial assessment a formal procedure, the rest used informal discussions with the student.
- Wordpower and Numberpower were widely used for accreditation purposes but not for ongoing assessment where discussion with the student prevailed.
- Smaller number of students in class and more frequent classes were suggested by tutors to give more attention to students.
- Time for class preparation and with other tutors to discuss teaching issues and develop work schemes was said to be needed.
- Better class accommodation and access to more basic resources was recommended.

CHAPTER 7

Variables influencing drop-out and attendance

(i) Tutors' views on what causes students to carry on with the course and make progress

Tutors' views on this question were consistent. More than half stressed the importance of rendering the student's progress visible and recognisable so the student can be satisfied with it. Building students' confidence by enabling them to see their achievement was the way to keep students motivated.

The second most important factor, according to tutors, in keeping the student in class and progressing was the support given to students by staff and their integration in the group through friendships with peers.

Other important considerations addressed the student's contribution: the student must have a sense of direction, a goal set or a purpose for learning. Accreditation could play a positive role in this. Self-motivation, willpower, determination and interest were other terms used to describe the student who persists.

Student participation with regular discussion, evaluation and review of the work was also stressed. Awareness of different routes to progress was another reason put forward. Support from the family and, finally, the ability to learn were also mentioned.

(ii) Prediction from data

Statistical analysis was carried out which included a regression analysis, correlations and tests for the comparison of the means of provision and tutor-related variables with those of attendance (number of weeks attended) and drop-out. Drop-out was calculated from the number of leavers (students who left provision in 1991- 92) for reasons (given by tutors) other than to move or

progress on to other basic skills classes, further education or training, to have found or changed employment, or to have reached their goal. The analysis was restricted by the number of tutors who responded to the final questionnaires from which most of the provision variables were taken.

The biggest factor influencing drop-out and attendance was found to be the tutor variable. However, only 15% of the variance was explained by the tutors. None of the provision variables gave a notable result. This finding is not totally unexpected for two reasons: the first is related to the type of data obtained (mostly about tutors and tutoring) and the second to the strength of each of the individual provision variables (as they were measured) to alter student intentions significantly. As the previous section testifies, the personal reasons given by students who left classes outweighed their dissatisfaction with provision. Contrary to any expectations, Sullivan (1984) also reached the conclusion that tutors had only a small effect on student motivation and drop-out, with other factors such as student characteristics and personal circumstances being more important. In a more general study of adults in education, Woodley et al (1987) concluded that although the majority of surveys indicate that mature students tend to withdraw for reasons unconnected with the course itself or the institution, there are a number of reasons to treat such findings with caution.

Additional data from students would be needed to establish that provision-related variables did not affect leaving basic skills. Unfortunately, the difficulty of obtaining more extended statistics (as certain reports show: OECD 1977) has limited research on these issues. Meanwhile, there is reason to believe that a general improvement of provision will reduce drop-out and increase progression. Tutors' numerous suggestions for change are certainly to be taken into consideration.

In a study which investigated the needs of basic skills students from their own perspective, through examination of their attitudes concerning their own motivation, expectations and satisfaction with provision of part-time education, May (1985) concluded that the data indicated the need for teachers to facilitate student participation and interaction in the classroom, to challenge and overtly encourage each student in class, and to give them the opportunity to 'learn how to learn'.

Among the tutor variables, the one that showed a significant correlation with drop-out was the tutor's qualifications; drop out was high from classes where

tutors had no qualifications and low especially for those with academic qualifications. The results were very similar for the non-attendance and drop-out variables confirming the validity of the tutor-given reasons for students leaving basic skills classes.

There was no variation between LEAs in terms of drop-out or attendance. The results of this project reflect a national picture.

CHAPTER 8

Implications of the findings

With regard to *progression* the study found that approximately a third of leavers progress in some way or other. However such progress was not well monitored and there was some uncertainty about capability for advising students appropriately about other provision. It was evident, from some of the difficulties of data collection, that there was room for improvement in the record keeping practices which could themselves affect tutor awareness of student needs. The absence of data on progression was particularly noticeable. Any serious attempt to monitor and improve provision for student progress and progression will require the collection of appropriate data from students after they leave a class. The above findings have indicated where more refined data might yield even more informative results. It is clearly the case that more information from students is also needed to explain drop-out.

The study found that although irregular attendance was related to drop-out, the latter was mainly characterised by early leaving whatever the point of entry during the year. The strongest factor in leaving without completing or continuing to other forms of provision appeared to be student personal circumstances. Students were given the opportunity to anonymously and directly report reasons to do with provision, but even so, their personal circumstances reasons far outweighed these. The definite similarity of attendance patterns across two years when aspects of provision were changing quite considerably strengthens the above finding. However this is not the whole story.

Most students who left did so after two or three classes. This indicates a need for improvement in monitoring and attention to student needs over this period of time. A possible way of identifying these needs is a second interview after two weeks in class. Since more than half of students enrol in September it might be more useful at this time to report the first two to three weeks as an induction period before enrolment in a particular class. Experience of such practice might assist tutors in supporting students who enrol later in the year.

Reports from students (and tutors) about the importance of keeping in touch when they are absent suggest that tutors may be helped, perhaps through

training, to develop ways of retaining students. Some good practice was identified by some tutors in the study. Sending follow up letters was particularly important.

Analysis of data on provision suggested that variation in tutors was a statistically significant factor, though this only accounted for 15% of the variance measured independently for both attendance and drop out. However, it was not possible to identify which were the most important tutor variables except for qualifications. Presence or absence of degree qualifications correlated with drop-out. This may be due to the longer experience that tutors themselves gained as adult students, enhancing their awareness of the nature and variety of student needs. It was disappointing to find that only 15% of variance was explained by tutor variables because the nature of the student and tutor responses indicated that changing some aspects of provision and practice might lessen drop-out rates.

In addition to the points raised above there was little evidence of targeted provision, either in terms of recruitment or goals, and tutors felt unable to avail themselves fully of the range of resources on site.

The findings raise some concern about the management and organization of basic skills provision within further and adult education. In the past basic skills provision has tended to be marginalised. The future holds all the uncertainties of the new funding arrangements referred to in the introduction to this Report, but this is perhaps a time when lessons learned from the past may contribute to improved provision.

APPENDIX I

Glossary of terms used

Basic Skills (ALBSU): the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general.

(And similarly for Welsh, in Wales.)

Other terms are used to describe effectively the same educational activities: Adult Education (AE), Adult Basic Education (ABE), Second Chance, etc., and more specifically: Adult Literacy, Numeracy, Basic Maths, etc.

Basic Skills Needs (ALBSU): range of needs is wide and includes young people and adults: who can read hardly at all; with such limited reading skills that they can only read and understand simple information; who can read not too badly but find writing and spelling very difficult; who have difficulty with number work at the level of the four rules; who have problems with more advanced mathematics at a level below a qualification in maths; whose first language is not English and who need English tuition or language support.

Drop-out: leaving a course at any point from the first point of contact without either completing it or transferring to further provision.

Leaver: a student who discontinues coming to class, temporarily or permanently.

Also used: Non-persister.

Completion: finishing a course with or without final certificate or other accreditation as well as reaching individual goals. It is a broad definition of achievement and does not necessarily lead to progression in further education.

Progression: leaving a course (either during or on finishing it) in order to move on to further provision or training, or upon finding or changing employment.

Training: includes formal training (Employment or Adult Training, Youth Training, etc.) as well as training with a particular employer.

APPENDIX II

Bibiography

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Research instrumentation

(Preliminary) Questionnaire to Tutors

Name: ..... Name of Programme: .....

Centre/Location: .....

Basic Skills employment status: Full-time ☐ Part-time ☐ Volunteer ☐

Education/Training qualifications: .....

How long have you been in this programme? .....

How long have you been teaching Basic Skills? .....

Please give the following information about the class(es) you teach:

Class	*Total No. of weeks*	*Sessions per week*	*Hours per session*	*No. of students on the register*

Are students interviewed before joining the course? (Yes/No) By you? (Yes/No)

Please indicate any accreditation schemes that are being undertaken by students in your class(es): .....

Is lesson planning based on student choice/needs? (Yes/No)

Do you develop and follow some written plan? (Yes/No)

Do you use any scheme? (Yes/No) Which?: .....

.....

Are you willing to provide information next term about students enrolling in September? (Yes/No)

Please give address for correspondence:

.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME

Urgent!! Please Help Us!!

Your answers will help us to meet students' needs better. We are trying to find out why people leave their classes.

We asked your tutor to send this form to anybody who left the basic education class last year.

Please tick or fill in the spaces which apply to you in the form below and on the other side of the paper.

Female:				Male:			
Bangladeshi:		Black/African:		Black/Caribbean:		Black/Other:	
Chinese:		Indian:		Pakistani:		White:	Other:
Age:	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46+
In the last year did you attend class: almost every week:		twice a month:		once a month:		only a few times:	
When did you **start** the course (month and year): When did you **finish/stop**:							

I LEFT THE CLASS BECAUSE:

*(Please tick **all** those which apply to you ✓.....)*

I could not attend at that time: .....
I was on the wrong course: .....
I started work: .....
I went into another basic education class: ...
I went into training (YT, ET, AT): .....
I had not been well: ....
I had child minding problems: .....
I did not feel I was learning: .....
Travelling to the centre was difficult: .....
I had family problems: .....
I could not afford the bus fare: .....

Please turn over

I could not afford the fee for the course: .....
The work was too hard: .....
The work w, , too easy: .....
I did not like working in a group: .....
I did not get enough help in that class: .....
Doing homework was a problem: .....
The classroom was too cold: .....
The course did not run smoothly: .....
I was expecting more class teaching: .....
I did not like working on my own: .....
We did not have enough materials (books, etc.)
in the class: .....
I moved from the area: .....
I went into Further Education: .....
I achieved all I wanted from the class: .....

Other reasons for leaving:: .....

.....

Why did you join the course?: .....

.....

When you arrived at the centre, did you have an interview or chat with a tutor?: .....

.....

Did the tutor find out what you needed?: .....

.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

(Please send the form to me in a brown envelope).

Maria Kambouri

Enquiry and Registration Form 1992-93

(Please keep this form to record information about every student who comes in to enquire about classes).

Centre: Class: Tutor: Location: Code:

Date of enquiry (todays date)	STUDENTS' NAME	M/F	Date of birth	Referred from	Continuing from 1991/92	Date of interview	Directed to other provision	Put on waiting list	Date of registration in this class	Weeks attended over total	Reasons for leaving or not registering

Final Questionnaire to Tutors

All information will be treated as confidential.

Tutor's name: ..... Our ref: .....

SECTION A

Tutor qualifications:

1. Initial Certificate in Teaching Basic Skills (C&G 9282/3/4):
2. Certificate in Teaching Basic Skills (C&G 9285 ex-9281):
3. Certificate of Education:
4. ASCET I, II (C&G):
5. Other Teaching Certificates (e.g. RSA):
6. Other qualifications

Tutor employment status:

1. Full time (years):..... Part time (years): .....
2. Have you ever been a volunteer helper in basic skills? (Y / N)
   If so, for how long? .....
3. Number of hours basic skills teaching per week this term?: .....
4. Number of basic skills classes taught per week this term?: .....

Staff development:

1. How often are you given the opportunity to discuss problems and seek advice from organizers (staff or group meetings)?
   once a fortnight ..... once a month ..... once a term .....occasionally .....
2. a. Are Staff Development/In-service training courses provided by your employer? (Y / N)
   b. Are they frequent or occasional? .....

SECTION B

(If you teach more than one course, please fill in this Section *separately* for each course on the provided copies)

Name of Centre: .....

Name of Course: .....

Centre location:

City centre: ..... Surburban: ..... Small town: ..... Rural: .....

Access by Public Transport: easy: ..... difficult: .....

Type of basic skills provision:

1. FE: ..... AEI: .....Voluntary Sector: .....Other:.....
2. Linked with Industry: ..... ET: ..... YT: .....
3. Fee level: .....

Centre resources:

1. Do students have access to formal advice and guidance relating to:
   - their learning (Y / N)
   - progression to FE (Y / N)
   - training (Y / N)
   - employment (Y / N)
2. Can students successfully contact the centre by telephone? (Y / N)
   - during the day (Y / N)
   - evening only (Y / N)
4. Are computers available to students? (Y / N)
5. Is teaching accommodation:
   good: ..... adequate: ..... poor: .....

Class organisation:

1. Is your course designed to be:
   a. a short course with completion date? How many weeks? .....
   b. or available for 30 to 36 weeks a year? .....
2. Do you **always** provide for different learning arrangements
   a. in terms of teaching? (Y / N)
   b. in terms of attendance? (Y / N)
3. Which accreditation schemes are you using?
   WP: ..... NP: ..... other C&G: ..... RSA: ..... GCSE: ..... Other: ..... None: .....
4. Are there any students assigned to your class this term who should have been, in your view, in another class? (Y / N)
   Please specify: a. more/less advanced basic skills class .....
   b. ESOL .....
   c. special needs .....
5. Do students in your particular area have a choice of classes to enrol? (Y / N)
6. a. Were your students recruited according to *a particular*
   – need to improve a basic skill? .....
   – job/training interest? .....
   – group characteristic (e.g. women)? .....
   b. Is the class very mixed in terms of learning needs? (Y / N)

Tutoring:

1. a. Do you have regular and reliable volunteer help? 1991-2 (Y / N)
   1992-3 (Y / N)
   b. Do you only have occasional volunteer help? 1991-2 (Y / N)
   1992-3 (Y / N)
2. How much teaching time do you give to:

	more than half	*about half*	*less than half*
the whole class	.....	.....	.....
in small groups	.....	.....	.....
individuals	.....	.....	.....

3. a. Do your students bring homework assignments back to class? (Y / N)
   b. What proportion find it difficult to do this? .....
   c. Does this affect their progress?
      a great deal ..... moderately ..... not much .....

4. Do you keep written records of student progress and/or evaluation? (Y / N)
   How often? weekly ..... monthly ..... termly .....
   b. Does the student contribute in this process? (Y / N)
   c. Do you use a standard form? If so, *please send a copy with this form.*

5. Is there a formal initial assessment? (Y / N)
   a. Do you have access to the results (Y / N)
   b. Do you carry it out yourself? (Y / N) *Please send an example*

6. Please tick the types of *ongoing* assessment that you *use* for this class indicating order of preference: (1 if first choice, 2 if second, etc).
   ALBSU basic assignment pack ..... ( )
   completion of WP/NP units ..... ( )
   formal assessment ..... ( )
   regular checks of progress ..... ( )
   evaluation of difficulties ..... ( )
   skills checklist ..... ( )
   discussion with student ..... ( )
   check learning plan objectives ..... ( )
   any others ..... ( )
   Comments .....
   .....

7. a. Do you plan lessons mostly for:
      the whole group .....
      each individual .....
      groups and individuals .....
   b. Do you keep a written record of your lesson plans? (Y / N)
      Please provide an example – *send a photocopy* of such a plan.)

8. Is a progression route scheme available to students? (Y / N)

9. How do you motivate students to attend on a regular basis?

.....

.....

.....

10. Can you usually tell if a student is likely to leave the course? (Y / N)

11. How long is a student absent from class before you try to contact him/her?

.....

12. Do you usually collect information about students' reasons for leaving a class? (Y / N)

13. Which of the following steps do you take to cope with irregular attendance by students:
    a. Decide how to conduct a class when you see who's present.
    b. Adapt prepared plan of work to be covered.
    c. Organize class in groups or as individuals to teach according to attendance.
    d. Other, please specify: .....

    .....

SECTION C

1. What in your view is the most important cause for students leaving basic skills classes?

.....

.....

.....

1. a. From your experience, is there a particular time (of the year) that students leave class?

.....

.....

.....

2. What do you think causes students to carry on with the course and make further progress?

.....

.....

.....

3. Given adequate resources, what change would you want to make in your tutoring? (Concerning your training, time with students, organizing class, accommodation, preparation, etc.)

.....

.....

.....

4. What changes would you want to see in the Centre?

.....

.....

.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION THROUGHOUT THIS PROJECT

Maria Kambouri

Further copies are available from:

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Tel: 071-405 4017. Fax: 071-404 5038

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The Basic Skills Unit