The Chemicals Industry

The industry

In their study of health and safety arrangements in the chemicals industry during the 1980s, Dawson et al. (1988) described an industry in which there were relatively stable patterns of employment with a largely permanent, well-qualified full-time workforce, well-developed management structures and a significant presence of large firms. There have been developments in the decade and a half since Dawson et al.’s study in which there has been a tendency to shift operations towards speciality chemicals (intermediates and consumer products) and away from bulk production (Pearce and Tombs 1998: 159–160). This has been partly responsible for the decline in the number employed in the sector in the UK since the 1980s. Nevertheless, the features of the industry noted by Dawson et al. have remained largely in place. Furthermore, the industry continues to be essentially one in which trade union organisation is still relatively well established and unions play a significant role in joint arrangements, including those for health and safety.

In 2000/01 the chemicals industry had about 230,000 employees (two-thirds of them men) representing around 6 per cent of employment for the manufacturing sector as a whole. Within the industry 1 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women were part-time (compared with 2 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively, for manufacturing as a whole) (HSE 2003). Over the last quarter of a century, employment in chemicals remained relatively stable until the mid-1990s, from which time there was some reduction until 2000 with relative stability since then (Figure 3.1). Production in the sector rose over the same period, following the trend in the economy in general (Figure 3.2).
Since the 1980s, employment has been predominantly full-time and long term, with relatively little fluctuation in the employment of temporary and part-time workers other than that accounted for by economic cycles. The industry remains capital intensive and employs comparatively large numbers of non-manual, skilled and professionally trained workers — in contrast with construction. As Table 3.1 shows, employees in the industry are also better qualified than those in other sectors of manufacturing and in construction with 30 per cent possessing a degree or its equivalent in 2002.

Chemicals has a similar age structure to manufacturing as a whole with about 8 per cent of its employees aged from 16 to 24 (10 per cent for manufacturing as a whole), 56 per cent aged between 25 and 44 (52 per cent) and 34 per cent aged from 45 to 65 (36 per cent in manufacturing). A similar pattern is evident in employees’ length of