

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 This report is about students' expectations and experiences of higher education in the UK today. It is based on research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) for the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, which included a postal survey of 1,270 students attending higher educational institutions.

Background to the research

1.2 In May 1996 the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education was established by the Government. It seeks to make recommendations on how the shape, structure, size and funding of higher education should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next twenty years. Thus it aims to address the issue of how to fund and organise what is becoming a mass higher-education system.

Changes in the student population

1.3 Higher education has in recent years undergone considerable change. The student population, its structure and funding have been especially subject to change.

1.4 The key changes amongst students can be summarised as follows:

- The total number of higher education students almost doubled between 1979 and 1995/96 to over 1.5 million. Consequently, the proportion of young people entering full-time higher education rose from 12 per cent in 1979 to nearly 30 per cent in 1995/96.²
- The growth has been especially marked since 1988 and amongst full-time students and those studying in '1992 universities'. Between 1988/89 and 1995/96 their numbers grew by 77 per cent and 102 per cent respectively.
- During this period the number of women undergraduates increased by 86 per cent while the number of men increased by 69 per cent.
- The number of students aged 21 years and over rose by 103 per cent between 1988/89 and 1995/96. Approximately 43 per cent of all first-year, full-time students in 1995/96 were over the age of 21 compared with 37 per cent in 1988/89.
- The growth in the number of older students has been especially marked, with those aged 25 years and over rising from 15 per cent to 21 per cent of the student population. Indeed, of the total increase in undergraduate student numbers between 1988 and 1993, those over 21 years old accounted for 57 per cent.
- Similarly, the number of part-time students since 1988/89 has grown by about 66 per cent although their overall share of enrolments (27 per cent in 1995/96) amongst undergraduates has fallen. The growth has been most marked amongst women and those in '1992 universities'.
- The subjects studied by students have also changed since 1988. The most rapid rises have been in subjects allied to medicine (including nursing) (increased by

109%), multidisciplinary subjects (increased by 90%), business and financial science and information science. There have, however, been relatively low rises in the number of students on physical science and engineering courses.

Changes in the structure of higher education

1.5 There have also been radical changes in the structure of higher education. Indeed, some of the changes witnessed among students can be attributed to these changes. Some of the most substantial changes have arisen from the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. This abolished the binary divide between universities, which were centrally funded, and polytechnics, which were locally funded. Although there was overlap in the types of provision of these institutions, it was understood that universities generally provided academic courses while polytechnics and colleges provided more vocational and technical courses.

1.6 As result of the 1992 Act and subsequent legislation, a much broader range of higher- education institutions have been granted degree-award status. Moreover, the range and type of courses on offer have expanded. Consequently, potential students now have more choices when entering higher education in terms of the type of institution they attend and the qualification and course they pursue. They also can choose from a widening range of subjects and interdisciplinary areas of study, often involving different styles and approaches to teaching and learning. In turn, this diversification has led to concerns about the comparability and the quality of degrees.³

1.7 The dramatic expansion of higher education since the 1980s, along with the changes in the composition of the student body and the structure of higher education, are likely to have had an impact both on students' experience of higher education and on staff working in higher education. Yet the impacts of these changes have not been systematically charted.

1.8 It is against this background and in line with the National Committee of Inquiry's terms of reference that the Committee commissioned the Policy Studies Institute to conduct a series of studies on the attitudes, experiences and expectations of:

- students;
- academic staff;
- administrative and support staff.

1.9 This report focuses on full- and part-time students currently attending an institution of higher education. It examines students' motives for entering higher education, the choices they made, the quality of their university experience and whether it met their expectations.

1.10 The other two studies are concerned with staff working in higher education. One concentrates on academic staff⁴ while the other focuses on administrative and support staff⁵. Both examine how changes in higher education have affected their staff's roles, responsibilities, career opportunities, the quality of teaching and research, their working conditions, and whether their expectations are being met.

Research aims

1.11 The main aim of the research was to collect valid and reliable information on the views of students on the quality of their university experience and the extent to which it meets their expectations.

Methodology

Research design

1.12 The research consisted of a postal survey undertaken in November 1996 of a nationally representative sample of full- and part-time students attending higher education institutions in the UK. Only students in their second year and above were surveyed because new students would have had very limited experiences of higher education to report about in their first term.

1.13 The sample of full-time students was drawn from a nationally representative group of students who had participated in PSI's recent study, Student Finances: Income, Expenditure and Take-up of Student Loans.⁶ These students were drawn from 73 higher education institutions. The randomly selected sample of part-time students was drawn from a total of 11 higher education institutions which provided PSI with the details of students. This mix of students enabled us to compare and contrast the experiences of full- and part-time students and those taking first-degree and sub-degree courses.

Timing and contents of the survey

1.14 The survey was conducted between November 1996 and January 1997 after a pilot study in October. The questionnaire sought information on students' motives and choices on entering higher education, and on their experiences of higher education including an assessment of the quality of the teaching and facilities provided. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix 2 to this report.

Response rates

1.15 A total of 1,270 usable questionnaires was received, 697 from full-time students and 573 from part-time students, giving response rates of 66 per cent and 60 per cent respectively, and an overall response rate of 63 per cent. These response rates were higher than anticipated given the nature of the study, and better than other studies which have examined similar types of issues.² The high response rate of this study gives us confidence that its results are representative of the student body as whole.

1.16 Full details of the methodology, the weighting and response rates are given in [Appendix 2](#).

The students surveyed

The characteristics of the students

1.17 There were some striking differences between students doing full-time courses and those doing part-time courses ([Table 1.1](#)). While the majority (76%) of full-time students were under 21 years old when they started their course, the majority (79%) of part-timers were over 25 years old. It is not

surprising, therefore, that far more full-time than part-time students were single (86% compared to 26%) and had no children (89% compared to 60%). Nor is it surprising, given their respective age profiles, that the majority (75%) of full-time students had been in full-time education immediately before starting their course while the vast majority (87%) of part-timers had been working in either full- or part-time jobs. Nine out of ten part-timers were also working at the time of the survey and nearly all were in full-time jobs.

1.18 There also appeared to be considerable differences in the social-class composition of the two groups of students. Some of these differences, however, may be a result of the way in which data were collected.⁸

The type of institution and courses attended by the students

1.19 There were some significant differences between full- and part-time students in terms of the type of institutions they attended and the courses they were pursuing ([Table 1.2](#)). This is not surprising given the distribution nationally of part-time students and the availability of part-courses. Just over half of all full-time students were studying at 'pre-1992 universities'⁹ and nearly all of them were taking an undergraduate degree course. By contrast, a third of part-timers were studying at 'pre-1992 universities' and only one in seven was taking this qualification. In other words, part-time students were much more likely than full-timers to be following a non-degree course at a '1992 university' or other type of higher-education institution ([Table 1.3](#)). Slightly higher proportions of full-time students were studying sciences, social sciences and the creative arts. The converse was true for all other major subjects.

1.20 The duration of full and part-time students' courses also varied given the nature of the qualifications they were pursuing and the amount of time they could devote to their course. Thus, the majority (92%) of full-time students anticipated completing their undergraduate degrees within four years compared with only a half of part-time students doing degrees. Part-time, non-degree courses tended to be shorter. Consequently, a half of part-time, non-degree students were on courses lasting only two years.

1.21 These differences between full- and part-time students in terms of their personal characteristics, the institutions they were attending and the courses they were following, form an important context for understanding the findings of this study. Of particular significance are the differences in their age, marital status and employment status.

Table 1.1 – Socio-economic characteristics of students surveyed

Characteristics	Column percentages		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Age when started their course			
Under 21	76	7	52
21–24	7	14	9
25+	17	79	39
Gender			
Male	42	38	41
Female	58	62	60
Ethnic origin			
White	94	91	93
Black	2	2	2
Asian	2	3	3
Other	2	1	2
Unknown	0	2	0
Social class			
AB	49	25	36
C1	28	45	34
C2	22	5	15
DE	7	5	6
Unknown	1	21	8
Marital status			
Single, never married	86	26	64
Married/co-habiting	10	65	30
Widowed, divorced, separated	4	1	6
Unknown	0	8	3
Dependent children			
Yes	8	35	18
No	89	60	79
Unknown	3	5	3
Economic status before starting the course			
Full-time education	75	5	50
Caring for children full-time	3	3	3
Full-time employment	12	77	35
Part-time employment	6	10	7
Unemployed	4	3	4
Unknown	0	2	1
Current economic status (part-time students only)	n/a		n/a
Full-time employment	0	77	0
Part-time employment	0	13	0
Not in employment	0	8	0
Unknown	0	2	0
Weighted base (n)	697	390	1,087
Unweighted base	697	573	1,270

Source: IES Survey of Students, 1997

Table 12 – Details of the institutions and courses of students surveyed

Characteristics	Column percentages		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Type of HE institution attended			
pre-1992 university	51	39	45
1992 university	39	62	47
Other HE institution	10	5	8
Type of qualification			
First degree	97	73	88
Sub-degree/other	3	27	12
Subject			
Medicine/dentistry/subjects allied to medicine	8	11	9
Maths/computing	6	6	6
Sciences	10	4	7
Engineering/technology	11	15	13
Social science	19	16	18
Humanities/law/languages	22	21	21
Creative arts	9	1	6
Education	7	8	8
Multidisciplinary	5	13	8
Unknown	3	5	4
Duration of course			
2 years	3	19	8
3 years	55	15	41
4 years	37	30	34
5 years or more	5	31	15
Unknown	0	5	2
Whether in final year of study			
Yes	41	40	41
No	59	60	59
Whether receive a maintenance grant			
Yes	72	2	47
No	28	98	53
Weighted base (n)	697	390	1,087
Unweighted base	697	573	1,270

Source: PS Survey of Students, 1997

Table 13 – Full-time and part-time students by type of qualification and type of higher education institution attended

	Column percentages					
	Full-time students			Part-time students		
	'pre-1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	Other	'pre-1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	Other
First degree	99	96	90	82	71	46
Sub-degree/other	1	4	10	18	29	54
Weighted base (n)	356	271	68	128	241	21

Source: PS Survey of Students, 1997

Report structure

1.22 [Chapter 2](#) explores students' aspirations and motivations for entering higher education and the reasons for which they chose their particular university and course. It also discusses the role of information in informing their choices and what attracted them to their university and course.

1.23 [Chapter 3](#) describes students' experiences of and views on higher education. It focuses on their teaching and assessment and on the skills they acquired.

1.24 [Chapter 4](#) reports on students' views on higher education resources and especially the facilities available at their institutions.

1.25 [Chapter 5](#) discusses what changes students would like to see in their

courses and institutions, what they personally have gained from their experience of higher education, what they intend to do once they have completed their course and whether their expectations of higher education have been met.