

Chapter 2

Students' motives, aspirations and choices

Introduction

2.1 This chapter explores students' motives for entering higher education, what they wanted from higher education and the reasons for which they chose their particular institution and course. It also discusses the role of information in informing the students' choices and what attracted them to their institution and course.

Why did students enter higher education and what were their aspirations?

What were students' main reasons for entering higher education?

2.2 Students' strongest motives for entering higher education were instrumental ([Table 2.1](#)). They were largely associated with their desire to improve their labour-market prospects and to fulfil their career aspirations. But they were able to combine this with an interest in the subject or course.

2.3 The two most important reasons which students most frequently gave for entering higher education were:

- to help get a job or better job (29%);
- to pursue a particular career which needed a particular qualification (19%).

2.4 The third and fourth most frequent reasons students gave were related to intellectual issues. One sixth (16%) were interested in the subject and one eighth (13%) wanted to continue studying and learning. Interestingly, few students were motivated to go to university primarily because of social pressure or norms.

What factors affected students' reasoning for entering higher education?

2.5 There was little variation in the overall pattern of students' main reasons for entering higher education by whether they were studying full- or part-time ([Table 2.1](#)). Nor were there any consistent differences by students' age, sex, social class, the type of institution they attended or the qualification they were pursuing. However, younger students (under 25 years old) were more likely than older students (25 and over) to say that the most important reason for going to university/college was to help them get a job (33% compared to 21%) and less likely to cite a desire for a change in direction in their life (3% compared to 18%).

2.6 Of students at universities, a smaller proportion (17%) than of those attending other types of higher education institutions (30%) said that they wanted to pursue a particular career and needed a specific qualification. There

were also some differences in students' main rationale for entering higher education by the subject they were studying. In particular, nearly half of all students studying mathematics or computing mentioned the desire to get a job or better job. Four in ten students studying medicine and subjects allied to medicine said that they wanted to pursue a particular career and needed a particular qualification, reflecting the vocational nature of their courses, and a similar proportion of creative arts students reported that they were interested in the subject.

Table 2.1 – Most important reason for entering higher education

Reason	Column percentages		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Instrumental			
To help get a job or better job	28	29	28
Could not find a job	1	0	1
Wanted to pursue a particular career and needed a qualification	21	15	19
Wanted a change in direction in life	9	10	9
Needed a higher qualification to get on in life	9	6	8
Intellectual			
Interested in the subject	15	19	16
Wanted to continue studying	10	17	13
Social norms			
The normal thing to do after finishing school/college	4	0	2
Felt it was expected of them to go to university	1	0	1
To get away from home	1	0	0
Weighted base (n%)	697	390	1,087

Source: PS Survey of Students, 1997

What did students want from higher education?

2.7 Students wanted a mix of opportunities for personal development, intellectual growth and to meet new people (Table 2.2). The four opportunities they most frequently mentioned were:

- to develop new or existing skills (86%);
- to broaden their horizons (80%);
- to experience intellectual growth and stimulation (79%);
- to meet new people (73%).

Table 2.2 – The opportunities offered by higher education

Opportunity	Column percentages ^a		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Personal development			
To develop new or existing skills	86	87	86
To broaden my horizons	84	73	80
To increase my self-esteem/confidence	66	58	63
Intellectual development			
To experience intellectual growth and stimulation	77	82	79
To learn about and discuss new ideas	68	76	71
Social development			
To meet new people	87	49	73
To have a good time	77	18	56
Weighted base (n%)	697	385	1,077

^aIndividual could give as many as three answers
Source: PS Survey of Students, 1997

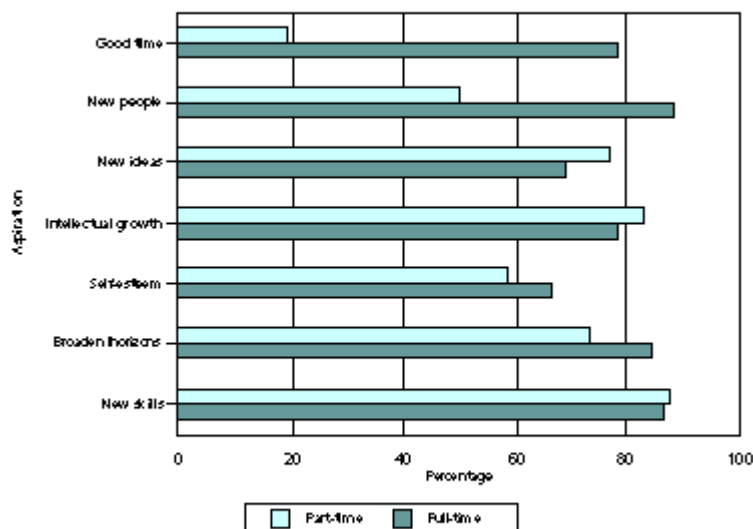
Were there any differences in students' aspirations?

2.8 Full and part-time students had broadly similar aspirations, with one significant

exception ([Chart 2.1](#)): full-time students put a much greater emphasis on the social side of university/college life. Nearly nine out of ten of them hoped to meet new people and over three-quarters wanted to 'have a good time'. This contrasts with corresponding proportions of only a half and one in five part-time students respectively. These differences were also associated with the students' respective ages, lifestyles and stage in their life-cycle (Tables [1.1](#) and [1.2](#)). Clearly these younger, single, full-time students had a broader agenda than that of the older, part-time, working students.

2.9 The extent to which students' aspirations of higher education had been met will be discussed in [Chapter 5](#).

Chart 2.1 – Students' aspirations of higher education



RR Survey of Students, 1997

What choices did students make about their educational institution?

2.10 As suggested in [Chapter 1](#) students now have a much wider range of choices when entering higher education. It is important to investigate, therefore, what influenced their choices.

Were students attending the institution of their choice?

2.11 On the whole, most students had very real choices about which higher-education institution to attend. Indeed, the majority (82%) of students surveyed reported they were attending the institution of their first choice. Some students' choices, however, appeared more restricted than others. Thus, full-time students were less likely than part-time students to be attending the institution of their first choice (77% compared to 93%) as were those at '1992 universities' rather than 'pre-1992 universities' (78% compared to 87%).

Why did students choose their particular institution?

2.12 The reasons given by the students for choosing their particular university or college were very different depending on whether they were following a full- or part-time course. Part-time students' choices were dictated by practical

considerations while full-time students were not restricted in these ways and could take greater account of academic-related issues (Table 2.3).

2.13 The most important reason which full-time students most frequently mentioned for choosing their institution was that it was the best for the subject they wanted to study. Three times as many full-time students (18%) as part-timers (6%) gave this reason. The second most frequently cited reason was that they liked what they saw at the institution when they attended an interview or open day. One in six full-time students gave this reason, while hardly any part-timers did so. This suggests that interviews and open days are important in helping potential full-time students decide which university or college to select. Yet, increasingly, universities are no longer interviewing potential candidates. The third most commonly mentioned reason for choosing their university or college was its academic reputation. Once again this was a more significant reason for full-time students than for part-timers (14% compared to 4%).

Table 2.3 – Most important reason for choosing the particular university/college

Reason	Column percentages		
	Full-time	Part-time	All
I could do the course I wanted part-time	n/a	48	17
It was the best one for the subject I wanted to study	18	6	14
It was near my home	13	15	14
I liked what I saw when I went for an interview or attended an open day	16	1	11
It has a good academic reputation	14	4	10
I particularly liked the course I was going to take	8	7	8
It was the only institution that ran the course I wanted to study	5	8	6
It was the only one that offered me a place	7	1	5
Other reasons	12	11	10
Weighted base (n)	697	390	1,087

Source: PS Survey of Students, 1997

2.14 By far the most important reason for which part-time students chose their institution was that it offered the course they wanted to follow on a part-time basis; this was mentioned by nearly half of them. The second major issue these students took into consideration was the location of the institution and its proximity to their home. This was also of importance to full-time students (15% compared to 13%). Clearly, given that most part-time students were working full-time and had familial ties, they were much less mobile than full-time students, and so their choice of institution was in reality also much more constrained.

2.15 Most of the variation in students' reasons was associated with the characteristics of full- and part-time students. However, when we control for these, one significant difference stands out. Just under a quarter (23%) of full-time students attending 'pre-1992 universities' chose their institution because of its academic reputation compared with less than one twentieth (4%) at '1992 universities'.

Did students move to attend the institution of their choice?

2.16 Overall, four in ten students had moved from the region they were living in before they started their course to an educational institution in a different region. Not surprisingly, given part-time students' commitments and their reasons for choosing

their institution, the majority of them (80%) had stayed within their locality, unlike full-time students of whom only 49 per cent had done so.

2.17 There was an element of regionalism in students' choice of institution which was most pronounced amongst Scottish students who were particularly loyal to Scottish universities or colleges. Only one in fifteen Scottish students had moved outside their region to attend a higher-education institution compared with two out of five students originating from other regions. They had opted for a Scottish institution for very similar reasons to those given by other full-time students from elsewhere in the UK. As a result Scottish universities or colleges were populated nearly exclusively by people who had lived in the region. Only 16 per cent of all students attending a Scottish institution came from outside the region.

2.18 There was no evidence to suggest that those attending the educational institution of their first choice were more likely to have moved than those who had been required to compromise on their choice of educational institution.

What role did prior information play in informing students' choice of institution?

2.19 All the students were asked whether they knew about certain aspects of their university or college before they started their course. The purpose of these questions was to get an understanding of what helped inform their decision-making process.

2.20 Overall, students were not very well informed about their institution before they attended ([Table 2.4](#)). The majority (65%) knew about only one aspect of their institution before starting - its academic reputation. In other words, prior information about the institution did not generally play an important role in informing the majority of students' choice of institution.

2.21 There were, however, some important exceptions to this which were associated with the type of course and institution attended. Full-time students, especially those attending 'pre-1992 universities', tended to be better informed than either part-time students or full-time students at '1992 universities'.⁹ Particularly stark was their prior knowledge about their institutions' academic reputation (70% of all full-time students knew about this, compared with 56% of all part-timers and 85% of full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities' compared with 54% at '1992 universities').

2.22 The differences between the full- and part-time students in relation to accommodation and extra-curricular opportunities reflect their respective needs and interests. Unlike full-time students, most part-time students did not require accommodation because they lived near their educational institution. Nor, as we have seen, were they particularly interested in the non-academic and social side of university or college life. Hence they were uninformed about extra-curricular opportunities. In addition, full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities' were much better informed than those at '1992 universities' about these two facets of their institution (accommodation - 72% compared with 52%; extra-curricular facilities - 58% compared with 33%). This may have been associated with the facilities available, the type of students attracted to

such institutions, and their respective ages.¹⁰

Table 2.4 – What students knew about their institution before starting their course by type of course and institution

Feature	Column percentages ^a				
	Full-time students			Part-time students	Total
	'Pre-1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	All		
Academic reputation	85	54	70	56	65
The type of living accommodation available	72	52	62	9	48
The type of extra-curricular opportunities available	58	33	46	13	34
Teaching record	32	18	26	34	29
Research status	30	9	17	17	19
Weighted base (n _{ij})	358	339	697	390	1,087

^aMultiple could/should be than one answer
Source: P3 Survey of Students, 1997

What attracted individuals to their institution?

2.23 Students who knew in advance about certain aspects of their university or college were asked if it made their institution more or less attractive, or made no difference. The purpose of these questions was to get a sense of what drew individuals to a particular institution. Moreover, several of the aspects listed are traditionally highly valued by academics and therefore we were interested to discover whether they were also highly valued by students.

2.24 The majority of students who knew about these aspects of their institutions said that they found them attractive ([Table 2.5](#)), with the exception of the availability of living accommodation.

2.25 Three-quarters of all students reported that they were drawn to their institution because of its academic reputation and its teaching record. And around six out of ten of all students found their institution attractive because of its research status and the extra-curricular opportunities it offered.

2.26 All these features, and especially the extra-curricular opportunities and the accommodation available were a greater pull for full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities' than either part-time students ([Table 2.5](#)) or full-time students at '1992 universities'. Full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities', rather than at '1992 universities', were particularly drawn by their institutions' academic reputation (92% compared with 65%). Part-time students were much more likely to be indifferent towards all these features, reflecting their constrained choices and differing concerns.

Table 2.5 – What features of their institutions made them more or less attractive to students?

Feature	Row percentages								
	More attractive			Less attractive			No difference		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Academic reputation	82	64	76	2	3	3	16	33	21
Teaching record	85	61	75	2	5	3	13	33	22
Research status	70	50	64	3	5	4	27	45	33
The type of extra-curricular opportunities available	65	28	60	2	0	2	33	72	39
The type of living accommodation available	48	5	45	9	0	8	43	95	47

^aOne response for each feature
Source: P3 Survey of Students, 1997

2.27 The majority of students, however, irrespective of the type of course they were

taking or the institution they were attending, were most attracted to features which are highly prized by academics. As PSI's research on academic staff clearly shows, academics believed that they should be rewarded for their excellence in teaching and research, which, in turn, are the foundation stones of their institutions' academic reputation.¹¹ This suggests that the values of the majority of students tend to be congruent with those of academics.

What choices did students make about their course?

Why did students choose their particular course?

2.28 Students were asked an open-ended question on what their most important reason was for choosing their course at their institution (Table 2.6). Their responses were very diverse and there were marked differences between full- and part-time students.

2.29 Overall, just over a third (36%) of all students had chosen their course mainly because they liked it and the subjects that it covered. However, this was considerably more important for full-time than for part-time students. Three times as many full-time (48%) as part-time (16%) students mentioned this reason and it was by far the most frequently cited reason amongst full-time students.

2.30 One sixth of all students had chosen their course because of its reputation and the reputation of the institution. Again, this was more significant for full-time students: twice as many of them (21%) gave this reason as did part-time students (10%). In short, then, full-time students' choices were being influenced primarily by academic and intellectual reasons.

Table 2.6 – Students' most important reasons for choosing their particular course at their institution

Reason	Column percentages ^a		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Liked the course and the subjects covered	48	16	36
Reputation of the course and institution	21	10	17
It was near my home	10	20	14
Course was part-time and/or can continue full-time employment	0	26	10
Liked the institution	14	2	10
Improved career prospects	10	7	9
Most relevant to occupation or was a job-related course	5	14	8
Only place that did the course	5	9	6
Expanded my knowledge or understanding	5	7	6
Other reasons ^b	14	22	15
Weighted base (n%)	697	390	1,087

^aIndividual could give more than one reason in their reply
^bMore than 25% of students mentioned a particular reason
 Source: PSI Survey of Students, 1997

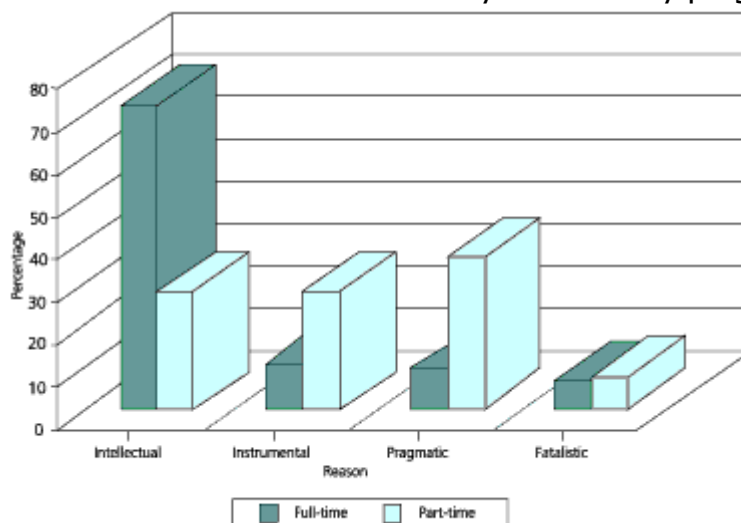
2.31 In contrast, part-time students' choices were driven by very different issues. Their two most important reasons for choosing their course were, in essence, pragmatic. Over a quarter (26%) had chosen their course because it was part-time and so allowed them to continue working full-time. And, related to this, one in five said that the location of the course was their main reason for choosing it compared with only one in ten full-time students. Clearly, full-time and part-time students' choice of course was affected by very different considerations. Clearly, too, students' reasons for choosing

their particular course were different from their reasons for entering higher education, especially in relation to job opportunities.

2.32 Students' reasons for choosing their course were grouped into four quite distinctive attitudes and orientations towards their studies. These were:

- intellectual - related primarily to their intrinsic interest in the course, the subjects covered, and the academic standing of the course and institution;
- pragmatic - related principally to practical issues such as, the part-time structure of the course, which allowed individuals to continue full-time employment, and proximity to home;
- instrumental - associated with the outcomes of the course and, especially, students' longer-term job and career prospects;
- fatalistic - related to negative reasons such as the only course offering a place.

2.33 Although over half (56%) of all students exhibited an intellectual orientation in their choice of course there were some very important differences between students on full and part-time courses (Appendix 1 [Table 1](#), [Chart 2.2](#)). The majority (71%) of full-time students opted for their course for predominantly intellectual reasons and the proportion was even higher for full-timers at 'pre-1992 universities' (80%). By contrast, part-time students' reasons were more mixed but they were mostly pragmatic.



PSI Survey of Students, 1997

2.34 Other differences in students' dominant orientation to their studies can largely be explained by the different profiles of full- and part-time students. There were no consistent differences in students' orientation by the type of subject they studied.

What role did prior information play in informing students' choice of course?

2.35 Overall, students were better informed about their course, before starting it, than they were about their institution. In this area, the differences between full- and part-time students and those at different types of institutions were less marked ([Table 2.7](#)). The majority knew about various elements of the contents of their course, and especially the subjects covered (76%), and about certain aspects of its organisation. They were, however, less clear about: the non-academic skills that would be taught such as communication skills (36%);

their course's overall organisation (43%); and the hours involved (42%).

What attracted individuals to their course?

2.36 Those students with prior knowledge of these different features of their course were asked whether each feature made their course more or less attractive or made no difference ([Table 2.8](#)). The purpose of these questions was again to get a sense of what attracted individuals to their particular course and what informed their decision-making process.

Table 2.7 – What students knew about their course before starting

Feature	Column percentages ^a		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All
Contents			
Subjects covered	74	80	76
Non-academic skills covered	39	32	36
Job-related nature of course	59	68	62
Whether a sandwich course	69	39	58
Organisation			
Organisation of the course	39	50	48
Modular course	71	77	73
Number of hours involved	28	68	42
Timing of the teaching	51	94	66
Other			
Assessment methods used	51	62	55
Whether qualify for a grant	74	31	58
Weighted base (n%)	69.7	39.0	1,08.7

^aIndividuals could give more than one answer
Source: H3 Survey of Students, 1997

2.37 The features which students found most attractive of all about their courses ([Table 2.8](#)) were:

- the subjects covered (74%);
- the job-related nature of the course (71%);
- the non-academic skills included (64%).

2.38 Students on full- and part-time courses found these first two features equally attractive. Part-time students, however, were less drawn by their course's non-academic skills (54% compared to 69%) but were twice as likely as to be attracted by the timing of their course when their teaching would take place (72% compared with 35%). This is not surprising, given the preoccupation of part-time students with the practicalities of fitting in their studies around their existing commitments.

2.39 The majority of students were indifferent to: the overall organisation of courses, the assessment methods used, the number of hours involved, and whether it was a sandwich course. Full- and part-time students were equally indifferent to these features. However, many more part-time students were indifferent to whether they qualified for a maintenance grant. This was because these students did not qualify for mandatory grants compared with about a third of full-time students.¹²

Why did students choose to study full or part-time?

2.40 The key reasons for which full-time students had decided to pursue their studies full-time were because:

- they preferred to study full-time and concentrate on their studies (26%);
- it was the quickest way to complete their course and achieve their desired qualification (25%);
- they thought it was the only option available (17%); and
- it was a natural progression from A levels and the expected thing to do (11%).

Table 2.6 – Features of their course which made it more or less attractive to students

Feature	Row percentages								
	More attractive			Less attractive			No difference		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Contents									
Subjects covered	80	71	76	1	1	1	20	29	23
Non-academic skills covered	69	54	64	1	2	1	30	44	35
Job-related nature of course	73	69	71	4	2	3	24	29	26
Whether a sandwich course	32	18	30	6	3	5	61	79	65
Organisation									
Organisation of course	47	51	49	2	3	2	51	46	50
Modular course	49	57	52	4	2	3	47	42	45
Number of hours involved	23	30	27	13	8	10	64	62	63
Timing of the teaching	35	72	54	1	3	2	64	25	44
Other									
Assessment methods used	42	44	43	3	5	4	55	50	53
Whether qualify for a grant	56	6	46	7	7	7	38	87	47

Exam notes for each feature
Source: H3 Survey of Students, 1997

2.41 The concerns of part-time students were very different from those of full-time students. Their key reasons for doing their course on a part-time basis were because:

- they had a full-time job (59%);
- they had family commitments (10%);
- they were being sponsored by their employer and/or they had only been released from work for part-time study (8%).

What role did employers play in helping part-time students?

2.42 As we have seen, the vast majority of part-time students were employed (90%) and they were doing their course part-time because of their work commitments. These employed students were asked a series of questions about the role played by their employers.

2.43 Overall, employers were both encouraging and supportive. Nearly six out of ten (58%) employed, part-time students said that their employer had encouraged them to do their course. This was especially so for the minority (20%) who were studying for a qualification because it was a job requirement, and, in turn, they were most likely to be following a non-degree course.

2.44 Over half the students (51%) said that their employers were supportive in helping them to pursue their studies. The majority (79%) had their fees paid by their employer and most (64%) had been given paid time off work. Once again, employees who were undertaking their qualification because it was a job requirement were more likely than others to have supportive employers

(80%) and to have had their fees paid and to receive help with the costs of books, materials and travel (Table 2.9).

Table 2.9— Help from employers (part-time students only)

Type of help	Column percentages ^a		
	Job requirement	Not a job requirement	All
Fees paid	87	77	79
Paid time off work	68	63	64
Books and materials paid for	44	27	30
Travel expenses	39	22	26
Unpaid time off work	9	12	11
Weighted base (n=)	47	188	235

^aStudents could give more than one answer
ISS Survey of Students, 1997

Conclusion

2.45 It is quite clear that full- and part-time students had similar motives for entering higher education. Their aspirations of higher education were also broadly similar. They both wanted the benefits of a 'university/college education' but the younger, full-time students also valued highly the 'university/college experience' and the social life, independent living and associated activities which contributed to their personal development and their transition into adulthood and into employment.

2.46 Students' motives and aspirations together influenced their choice of both educational institution and course. Consequently, full-time students chose their institution for a mixture of academic and subjective reasons. They were attracted to their institution not only because of its overall academic reputation, teaching record and research status but also because of the extra-curricular opportunities available. And their institutions' academic reputation was particularly important for students at 'pre-1992 universities'. They chose their course nearly exclusively for intellectual reasons - because of their intrinsic interest in the course and the subjects it covered. Moreover, the subject coverage was the prime attraction of their course, along with its job-related nature.

2.47 In contrast, the choices of part-time students were heavily constrained by their full-time jobs and familial ties. These overshadowed their aspirations and all their choices. Their key considerations when choosing which institution to attend was the availability of a part-time course and the proximity of the institution to their home. They chose their course principally for pragmatic reasons - their ability to follow the course part-time so that they could continue working full-time and, again, its proximity to their home. However, their choices were also influenced by intellectual reasons and by instrumental ones, such as relevance to their occupation. What attracted them most of all to their course was at what time of day their teaching would take place.

2.48 These very important differences in full- and part-time students' aspirations and choices highlight the importance of examining the experiences of these two groups of students separately. It is to these experiences that we now turn.