

Chapter 4

Students' views on higher education resources

Introduction

4.1 This chapter is concerned with students' views on the type of academic and extra-curricular facilities available at their institution. It also explores the extent to which resource constraints may have affected students' overall evaluation of these facilities.

What did students think about their academic-related facilities at their institution?²²

What did students think about their library?²³

4.2 An essential resource for all students is their library. Indeed, the role of libraries is both changing and becoming more central to students' learning experience with the moves towards independent learning, the growing use of computer-based learning packages and the development of IT. However, some libraries at some institutions have been particularly affected by resource constraints in recent years. It was important, therefore, to gather students' views on the adequacy of the facilities available.

4.3 Overall, students were most satisfied about the opening times of their libraries ([Table 4.1](#)). Nearly three-quarters (73%) of them were satisfied while one in seven were not. Two-thirds (66%) of students were content with the range of facilities available in their library but nearly a quarter were dissatisfied. Students, especially full-time students, were much more critical about the availability of books. Nearly two out of five (38%) were satisfied but half (47%) were dissatisfied.

4.4 The differences in students' level of satisfaction with their library can be explained mainly by the type of institution they attended. Indeed, it was within this context that the old binary divide was prominent. Full-time students at '1992 universities' were more likely than similar students attending 'pre-1992 universities' to report higher levels of dissatisfaction, particularly with the range of facilities available (35% compared with 15%) and the availability of books (59% compared with 44%). Students studying education were consistently more critical of their library facilities than students studying any other subject.

What did students think about computing facilities?

4.5 Another issue of increasing importance to students is the growth of IT and hence the availability of computing facilities. Nearly all full-time students appeared to have had some access to, or knowledge of, the computing facilities in their institution. However, about one in five part-time students reported that the questions asked about computing were not applicable to

them. This is an interesting finding and suggests that IT was of less relevance to part-time students, possibly because they already had access to computing facilities at their workplace.

4.6 Of those students who had some views on the issue, just under three out of five (58%) were satisfied with the computing facilities available while nearly a quarter (23%) were dissatisfied ([Table 4.1](#)). Students were even more critical of the amount of computing support available. A third of all students were both satisfied and dissatisfied.

Table 4.1 – Students' attitudes towards academic-related facilities at their institution

Method	Row percentages								
	Very satisfied and satisfied Full-time students			Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied Full-time students			Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied Full-time students		
	'pre 1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	All stu. (FT+PT)	'pre 1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	All stu. (FT+PT)	'pre 1992 Univ.'	'1992 Univ.'	All stu. (FT+PT)
Library									
Opening times	76	72	74	10	12	12	14	16	14
Range of facilities	76	50	66	9	14	13	15	35	22
Availability of books	39	32	38	17	9	15	44	59	47
Computing									
Facilities	69	49	58	14	15	19	17	35	23
Support	40	34	34	31	26	34	29	40	32
Laboratory facilities	60	35	45	34	40	43	6	19	12
Specialist equipment needed for course	58	37	48	28	32	35	14	30	22

Source: *HE Survey of Students, 1997*

4.7 Once again, full-time students at '1992 universities' were the most discontented with both the facilities and support available. Twice as many of such students (35%) were dissatisfied with the facilities compared to similar students at 'pre-1992 universities' (17%). Four in ten full-time students at '1992 universities' were dissatisfied with the support they received compared to three out of ten at 'pre-1992 universities'.

4.8 Satisfaction levels also varied by the subject students studied. But most important of all, there was no evidence to suggest that students particularly reliant on computing were less content than students studying other subjects, in fact, quite the contrary. Those students most satisfied with both the computing facilities and the support available were studying maths and computing (68% and 52% respectively). These findings suggest that, on the whole, computing resources were prioritised to those students most dependent on IT to pursue their studies.

4.9 Students attending Scottish universities were slightly more critical of the library and computing facilities available, despite the more generous funding Scottish universities attract.

What did students think about laboratory facilities and access to specialist equipment needed for their course?

4.10 Not surprisingly, a sizeable minority of students did not consider questions about such facilities as relevant to them. Of those who did, only a minority (45%) were satisfied with their laboratory facilities while 12% were

not. In addition, a similar proportion (43%) were content with their access to specialist equipment needed for their course but over one in five (22%) were discontent. Once again, students at '1992 universities' were more troubled by these than those at 'pre-1992 universities'. Hence, around six in ten full-time students studying at 'pre-1992 universities' were satisfied both with their laboratory facilities and their access to specialist equipment compared with over a third of full-time students at '1992 universities'.

What did students think about various types of non-academic support available?

What did students think about their non-academic support?

4.11 Students were asked a range of questions to gauge their level of satisfaction with the non-academic support available (Table 4.2). Around a fifth of all students, particularly part-time students, did not believe that these questions were relevant to them. Of those who did, around two out of five were satisfied with both the amount of non-academic support available (43%) and the quality of the support they received (39%) while a sixth were dissatisfied with both. Part-time students were more likely than their full-time colleagues to be neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and this may be because they were not interested in these services. There were no significant differences, however, by the type of institution students were attending.

Table 4.2 – Students' attitudes towards their non-academic support

Issue	Row percentages								
	Very satisfied and satisfied			Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied			Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied		
	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All	Full-time	Part-time	All
Amount of non-academic support available	45	36	36	39	49	42	16	15	15
Quality of non-academic support received	41	33	39	48	45	47	15	13	15
Career guidance and support	48	16	37	37	59	42	20	24	21

Row total for each type of support.
Source: F3 Survey of Students, 1997

What did students think about career guidance and support?

4.12 Just over a third of all students were satisfied with the career guidance and support, and one fifth were dissatisfied. However, there were important differences between full- and part-time students. Unlike most full-time students, nearly a half of part-time students did not perceive the question as relevant. This may be because they were employed and so saw little need for such services. In turn, this brings into question the traditional role of the service which may be geared towards labour-market entrants and job seekers rather than job changers. Moreover, full-time students at '1992 universities' were less satisfied with the career guidance than those at 'pre-1992 universities' (36% of the former were satisfied compared to 50% of the latter). The differences were associated with the age profiles of students at these different types of universities. They also suggest that these services may not be particularly attuned to the needs of older students and focus primarily on new labour-market entrants.

What did students think about the non-academic facilities at

their institution?

What did students think about the extra-curricular activities available?

4.13 As we have seen, extra-curricular activities were an important part of younger students' 'university/college experience', but not so for older students. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority (60%) of part-time students did not think that this issue was applicable to them. Of all those students who did, a half (51%) were satisfied with the extra-curricular activities available and one in ten were dissatisfied ([Table 4.3](#)).

4.14 Full-time students were more content than part-time students (59% compared with 16%) but over three-quarters of part-timers were neither content nor discontent compared with three in ten full-time students. And full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities' were particularly satisfied (72% compared with 43% at 'pre-1992 universities') - a difference which can only be partly explained by the respective age profiles of the students at these institutions. Most significant of all, those students who reported that they were attracted to their educational institution because of the extra-curricular opportunities on offer were not disappointed - over four out of five (82%) were satisfied.

Table 4.3 – Students' attitudes towards academic-related facilities at their institution

Method	Row percentages								
	Very satisfied and satisfied			Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied			Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied		
	Age of students		All (under and over 21 yrs)	Age students		All (under and over 21 yrs)	Age students		All (under and over 21 yrs)
	Under 21 yrs	Over 21 yrs		Under 21 yrs	Over 21 yrs		Under 21 yrs	Over 21 yrs	
Extra-curricular activities	62	28	51	28	62	39	9	10	10
Facilities in the Students' Union	51	30	48	26	55	37	13	16	20
Support from the Students' Union	36	21	31	50	62	55	14	16	14

Row total for each facility
Source: FES Survey of Students, 1997

What did students think about their Students' Union?

4.15 Students' Unions have traditionally played an educational, advisory, and representative role and are often the focus of much social activity. Both the services and facilities they provide vary substantially and in recent years have expanded. For example, with their shrinking public funding, some Students' Unions now engage in trading and entrepreneurial activities in addition to their more traditional roles. Despite this, about half of part-time students considered these questions as of no relevance, suggesting once again that the preoccupations of these older students were very different to those of the younger full-time students.

4.16 Of those students who thought that questions on the Students' Union were relevant, just over two out of five were satisfied with the facilities available and a third with the support available. A sixth were dissatisfied with both the facilities and the support ([Table 4.3](#)).

4.17 Again, full-time students at '1992 universities' were less likely to be satisfied than those at 'pre-1992 universities'. Only 36% of the former were

satisfied with the facilities and 28% with the support, compared to 56% and 39% respectively at 'pre-1992 universities'. These differences were associated with the age profiles of students at '1992' and 'pre-1992' universities, which were significantly different, whereby younger students were more satisfied than older ones.

What did students think about how well the needs of mature students and those with children were met?

4.18 A key change in the student population has been the increasing number of mature- student entrants. Yet higher education traditionally has been orientated towards the needs of school leavers in terms of its structure, organisation, and delivery. It is, however, well documented that mature students have a range of needs which differ from their younger colleagues. Indeed, this research has shown how older students tend to have different expectations of higher education, as do those who are pursuing part-time courses, the majority of whom are mature. In addition, older students were also less satisfied with the non-academic facilities available (Table 4.3). It is important, therefore, to explore how well universities and colleges were serving the needs of mature students.

4.19 Students were asked whether they believed that enough thought was given to the needs of mature students. Not surprisingly, older students had very different opinions from younger ones. Nearly a half (47%) of students aged 25 and over did not believe that adequate thought was given to them compared to over a third (36%) of students aged 21-24 years and less than one in ten under 21 years old. Even more significant than age, in determining their attitudes, was students' family type. The students who felt most strongly that not enough thought was given to mature students' needs were lone parents - six out of ten students who were lone parents believed this compared to just over one in ten single, childless students.

Table 4.4 – Students' attitudes toward facilities for students with children

	Column percentages				
	Lone parent	Couple with children	Couple without children	Single childless	All
Awareness of needs of students with family responsibilities					
Very satisfied and satisfied	35	26	27	30	27
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	16	39	45	56	47
Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied	51	35	28	14	24
Childcare provision for students with children					
Very satisfied and satisfied	16	4	16	21	16
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	36	56	57	67	61
Dissatisfied and very dissatisfied	48	40	27	12	23

Source: Higher Education Research Centre, 1997

4.20 Lone parents were also the most dissatisfied, both with general levels of awareness of the needs of students with family responsibilities and with childcare provision for students (Table 4.4). Over half of all lone-parent students were discontent with the levels of awareness compared with over a third of married or cohabiting students with children, and one in ten single

childless students. Just under a half of lone parents were dissatisfied with childcare provision, compared to two-fifths of couples with children, and one in twenty-five single childless students. Not surprisingly, given the type of students traditionally attracted to '1992' and 'pre-1992' universities, the latter were more discontent overall, despite the fact that '1992 universities' have a larger intake of 'non-traditional' students. Moreover, the majority of students (66%) did not think the question of childcare was applicable to them. This in turn, could be interpreted as yet more evidence that the needs of students with children, not surprisingly, are not given priority by most students.

Students with disabilities

4.21 Another group of students whose needs seem to be overlooked were students with health problems or disabilities. Again, the majority of students did not feel the question was of relevance to them. Of those who did, most were indifferent (53%) to the issue of access while a third were satisfied.

Conclusion

4.22 It would appear that resource constraints have affected the range and quality of the facilities available to students and, in turn, the nature of students' experiences of higher education. Moreover, it is within this context that the old binary divide becomes apparent. Consequently, on the whole, students studying at 'pre-1992 universities' were more satisfied with both the academic and non-academic facilities and support available than were those at '1992 universities'.

4.23 The constraints and differing resources were highly apparent in relation to libraries. Most serious of all was the poor availability of books followed by the range of facilities available, and those particularly affected were full-time students at '1992 universities'.

4.24 Students' access to computing facilities and support were similarly likely to be affected by resources. Students were more disenchanted with the support available than the facilities per se. Their discontent may be associated with their institution's IT policies which appeared to favour those students pursuing subjects traditionally highly reliant on computing. Only a minority of all students were satisfied with laboratory facilities and the specialist equipment they needed for their course. Students at '1992 universities' found all these facilities particularly lacking; those in this group, above all, were possibly missing out on certain opportunities.

4.25 The differing aspirations and concerns of full- and part-time students were very apparent in students' attitudes towards their institutions' career guidance services, the extra-curricular facilities available, and the Students' Union. At least a half of part-time students did not think any of these facilities were of relevance to them, compared to a handful of full-time students. This brings into question the overall orientation of these services and whether they should change to try and attract a growing part of the student body. For those students who considered the provisions relevant, the overall levels of satisfaction were not particularly high, with only between a third and a half of all students reporting that they were satisfied.

4.26 Despite the growing numbers of mature students, higher education still

appears to be catering for the traditional school-leaver intake. Most mature students, and particularly those with children, did not believe that their needs, especially in relation to non-academic support, were acknowledged or met. Lone parent students were particularly dissatisfied. Although they are currently only a small minority of the student population, and constituted only a fifth of the students with children, their numbers are likely to grow in the future. For some lone parents, education plays a particular role as the key route out of poverty and dependence on state benefits.