

# Chapter 7

## Recommendations for change

### *Key points*

**Staff recommendations for change:** these focused on three areas:

- resource management;
- the career structure; and
- the need for a strategic approach.

**Resource management:** staff felt that poor resource management caused more problems than resource constraints and could be avoided. They believed more efficient resource management was needed in:

- money and equipment;
- human resources.

**Career structures:** staff recommended a better career structure which recognised the development in the role of administrative and support staff.

**Strategic approach:** staff stressed the need for a strategy within which higher education could develop. This strategy needed to include:

- a commitment to a more commercial orientation in higher education;
- agreement on the role and function of administrative and support staff;
- decision-making on the structure and infrastructure of higher education;
- an institutional plan of action for all staff.

## Recommendations for change

### *Introduction*

7.1 This chapter briefly outlines the recommendations that administrative and support staff made to improve or maintain the quality and efficiency of the service they provided. They were strongly discouraged by the focus-group moderator from simply requesting additional resources, although the provision of more money, people and equipment tended to be their first response.<sup>14</sup>

7.2 Their recommendations arose directly from the issues discussed in the focus groups, and spanned the following areas:

- resource management;

- career structure;
- the need for a strategic approach to resource allocation.

## ***Resource management***

7.3 The vast majority of respondents believed that most of the problems faced at work could be mitigated, or solved completely, if additional funds were available for investment. More money would enable:

- the employment of additional staff to relieve administrative and support staff of the problems associated with their growing workloads ([Chapter 3](#));
- sufficient training and support to alleviate their concerns about some of the new responsibilities they were undertaking ([Chapter 4](#)) and to ensure that they were functioning efficiently and effectively in their new roles ([Chapter 5](#)); and
- adjustments to the grading structure and pay scales so that the increasingly important contribution made by administrative and support staff could be formally recognised ([Chapter 6](#)).

7.4 Resource constraints clearly caused problems for staff on a daily basis but they fully acknowledged that these problems stemmed from wider resourcing problems throughout higher education. They knew it was unrealistic to hope for additional funding. As a result, there was a fairly widespread acceptance of resource constraints and a willingness to work within them.

7.5 Staff were far less prepared, however, to accept the burdens they faced as a result of poor resource *management*. They perceived these problems to be far more serious than an overall lack of resources. Moreover, poor resource management was considered wholly avoidable and largely responsible for making an already difficult situation much worse.

7.6 Staff believed that a more efficient and effective use of existing resources could make a significant contribution to reducing the impact of resource constraints. Their recommendations for changes in resource management centred around two areas:

- use of money and equipment;
- use of human resources.

### ***Inefficient use of money and equipment***

7.7 These problems were largely attributed to a lack of liaison and planning. Many staff felt that decisions about spending were made by managers without discussion or consultation with the people affected. They felt that managers frequently did not have sufficient understanding of their work to make informed decisions. As a result, they reported that money was spent unnecessarily and inappropriately. A systems manager said:

*'Decisions are made sometimes, they have to be made at that level, but they don't ask the right people... They read something in a book or in magazines and [think] "Oh, we'll have that", ... They don't ask "Well, is this a good idea? Can we do this? What would be better?''*

7.8 Several staff felt that poor use of money and equipment also occurred due to a lack of planning or attempts to predict needs. Moreover, they believed that many managers were unaware of the need for this type of planning. This resulted in a perception that managers were inclined simply to '*throw money at the problem*' without considering the nature of the problem. A librarian gave as an example the amount of money that universities spent on temporary and part-time staff to cover extended library opening hours. Library staff questioned the value of keeping libraries open for extended hours, and clearly felt that other resource needs should take priority.

*'We see... a waste of money where we have to be open until ten o'clock at night, we don't have professional staff to cover the information desk... so we have casual professionals, highly paid people coming in for maybe one or two hours a week. And when you add that up, that's thousands of pounds in overtime.'*

7.9 Staff thought that inefficient use of money and equipment resulted in duplication and fragmentation in the service they provided, and in unrealistic expectations of service delivery. They felt strongly that these issues need to be addressed if higher education is to operate efficiently with the resources available.

#### *Ineffective use of human resources*

7.10 Problems in the use of human resources were considered to result from a combination of two related factors: the lack of recognition of the increasingly central role of administrative and support staff and the lack of investment in these staff to ensure that they had the skills and expertise to work efficiently and effectively.

7.11 Several staff felt that there was a mismatch in higher education between the administrative and support staff available, and the skills and expertise needed. This situation was perceived to have a number of contributory factors.

- Staff thought that there was a shortage of academic and support staff in higher education. As a result, administrative and support staff were often working very long hours without any form of payment or time off in lieu. More important, they constantly felt that they were unable to provide a high enough quality of service.
- They viewed the distribution of existing staff within institutions as inefficient. Many staff were working beyond their job descriptions to 'fill the gaps' because of staff shortages. Often they were not qualified to undertake this work and were concerned about the standard of their work. In addition, they had to cope with expanding workloads while trying to compensate for the lack of time and availability of other staff.
- They believed that higher education suffered from a lack of investment in the training and development needs of administrative and support staff. They also felt that unsuitable staff were being recruited to administrative and support posts because of the poor terms and conditions of employment offered. Few staff believed that administrative or support jobs in higher education were sufficiently attractive to the calibre of staff required.

## ***A better career structure***

7.12 Recommendations on career structure were related, to some extent, to pay scales but financial remuneration was not the central feature. Staff recommended:

- a longer and wider career structure whereby staff could progress without getting stuck;
- a grading structure which recognised the convergence of administrative and academic functions;
- a more sensitive structure which would ensure that good performance was rewarded and underachievement was addressed.

7.13 Staff believed that these changes would help to acknowledge the new roles of administrative and support staff, sustain personal motivation and commitment among existing staff; and make higher education more attractive to new recruits.

## ***The need for a strategic approach***

7.14 Many staff expressed concern about the lack of a plan or strategy to ensure that limited resources were used most effectively. Their recommendations in this area related to the wider organisation of higher education. They felt that this was paramount to address the structural inefficiencies they have identified, and as a basis for decision-making. One said:

*'... quite often there isn't a plan, things just happen in odd places, and then you have to marry them up. Because... there doesn't seem to be any overall strategy or plan for where they're going to go. They have to write reports and... strategy reports for various government bodies, but they're just marketing things. They're using the right words, they're putting the right words together... because they know they have to say them to get the money. But they're not actually doing any of it.'*

7.15 It was this absence of a coherent and considered strategy that staff believed was the most significant problem in higher education. They suggested that a plan should address the following four points:

- A strategic plan should recognise and embrace the need for a more commercial orientation. It was recognised that it was difficult for longer-serving staff, particularly in the 'pre-1992 universities', to adapt to a more commercial orientation. The majority of administrative and support staff believed, however, that developments in higher education meant that institutions had to be prepared to *'start treating students as clients rather than just returns'*.
- A plan was needed to agree on the role and function of administrative and support staff, and recognise and support them. This agreement needed to acknowledge expertise and experience, and include staff in consultation and liaison at all levels in higher education institutions.
- The plan should decide on the structure and infrastructure needed in higher

education. Staff believed that decisions were urgently needed on the structural balance within higher education institutions. Administrators, in particular, felt that '*... universities can't decide whether to be centralised or not. They seem to be centralising everything and then there's a move to decentralise everything*'. Most believed, in general, that '*... there are some things you can decentralise and some that you shouldn't*'. Yet that understanding did not appear to be reflected in management decision-making. Moreover, once decisions have been made on the structure and infrastructure of higher education, they need to be supported with sustained investment.

- Finally, and most importantly, a strategic plan is needed to reduce duplication of effort and allow all staff to collaborate in improving the quality of service provision. The general view was that decisions were needed as to '*... what it's for... what it's meant to achieve... it doesn't matter what the terms are, just have a plan and stick to it*'.