

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

1.1 This report is about administrative and support staff experiences and expectations of higher education today. It is based on research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute for the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. The research involved focus group discussions with staff currently working in higher education institutions.

### *Background to the study*

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. It aims to address the issue of how to fund and organise what is becoming a mass higher education system.

1.3 Higher education has undergone considerable change in recent years. In particular, the size and characteristics of the student population has changed, as has the shape and structure of higher education as a whole. These developments are likely to have had an impact on both students' experiences of higher education and staff working in higher education. Yet, until now, their impact has not been systematically charted.

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

- students;<sup>2</sup>
- academic staff;<sup>3</sup>
- administrative and support staff.

1.5 This report contains the findings from the study of administrative and support staff currently working within the higher education sector. It examines how changes in higher education have affected staff roles, responsibilities, career opportunities, the quality of teaching and research, working conditions, job satisfaction, and whether staff expectations are being met.

1.6 These themes are also the focus of the study on academic staff. The study on students concentrates on their motives for entering higher education; the choices they made; and the quality of their university experience and the extent to which it met their expectations.

### *Aims and objectives of the study*

1.7 The overall aim of the study was to collect valid and reliable information on the attitudes, experiences and expectations of administrative and support staff currently working in higher education. Within this broad theme, the research had a number of specific objectives:

- to understand the impact of broader changes in higher education on the working lives of administrative and support staff and in particular on their roles and responsibilities;
- to examine the opportunities available to them for training, staff development and career progression;
- to assess levels and sources of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction; and
- to explore their ideas on the development of higher education over the next twenty years.

## ***Methodology***

1.8 The study consisted of four focus groups conducted with:

- technical support staff;
- central and departmental administrators;
- computing support staff;
- library staff.

1.9 Participants in the groups were drawn from eight higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup> They were selected against a set of criteria to ensure a mix of characteristics. A detailed breakdown of their characteristics can be found in [Appendix 1](#), while Chart 4.1 offers a broad overview of the composition of the sample.

1.10 Each group consisted of seven to nine members, all of whom were currently employed in higher education and had been working in the sector for at least three years.

1.11 The group discussions were undertaken in November 1996 and held in two locations - the South West and the Midlands. They were structured around a topic guide designed by PSI and contained in [Appendix 2](#). They were tape-recorded and the full transcripts were analysed at PSI using thematic grids.

1.12 Full details of the methodology and of the selection criteria and recruitment procedures can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

## ***The structure of this report***

1.13 The report begins ([Chapter 2](#)) by introducing a typology of staff which provides a structure for discussion in subsequent chapters. [Chapter 3](#) examines the impact of the changes in higher education on administrative and support staffs' working lives and especially their workloads while [Chapter 4](#) focuses on the effect of the changes on their roles and responsibilities. [Chapter 5](#) covers issues relating to training, staff development and career progression while [Chapter 6](#) discusses sources and levels of job satisfaction. The report closes by outlining staff ideas and recommendations for the future development of higher education in the UK over the next twenty years ([Chapter 7](#)).

**Chart 4.1** – Overview of sample characteristics

CHARACTERISTICS				
Gender	Male: 14		Female: 19	
Length of service	3–5 years: 12	6–10 years: 8	11–15 years: 1	16+ years: 11
Function	Central: 19		Departmental: 14	
Subject*	Science: 8		Arts/humanities: 6	
Institution <sup>†</sup> type	Pre-1992 university <sup>†</sup> : 21		'1992 university' <sup>†</sup> : 12	

\*Only applies to staff with high departmental roles