

Chapter 6

Job satisfaction and plans for the future

Key points

Job satisfaction was the factor most strongly related to staff motives for entering higher education described in [Chapter 2](#), which clearly shaped expectations and attitudes to work. Most staff gained satisfaction from their work, feeling that their involvement in the education process was making an important contribution to society.

Job satisfaction: different types of staff gained satisfaction from different aspects of their jobs.

- The *niche-finders* felt that higher education offered a more attractive working environment than the private sector.
- The *subject specialists* valued the opportunity to pursue their interests in a stimulating and intellectual setting.
- *New professionals* enjoyed the dynamism and autonomy of their jobs. Some also felt valued and well paid.

Dissatisfaction: however, levels of dissatisfaction were also high for most staff and arose from:

- lack of opportunities for progression;
- lack of recognition;
- poor pay;
- insufficient resources;
- lack of representation.

Future prospects: despite these levels of dissatisfaction, *niche-finders* and *subject specialists* were unlikely to leave higher education because they perceived their opportunities outside higher education to be restricted. *The new professionals*, despite having the highest levels of job satisfaction, were the most likely to leave the higher education sector because they did not perceive themselves as being able to progress and did not view higher education as a career per se.

Job satisfaction and plans for the future

Introduction

6.1 This chapter identifies sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction among administrative and support staff and describes their impact. It examines staff plans for the future, and the likelihood of them remaining within the higher education sector.¹³

General sources of job satisfaction

6.2 Most of the administrative staff who took part in the focus groups gained satisfaction from the role they played in higher education. They were less satisfied with developments in higher education which had eroded the rewards gained from working in the sector.

6.3 Staff expressed a strong commitment to higher education and the contribution they were making to the 'greater good'. Most staff derived greater job satisfaction from this than they would from a job offering only monetary rewards. One explained:

'Doing the job I'm doing... it's almost a moral work, you know... I could go selling... Pantene ProV [shampoo], earning another couple of grand. But for the rest of my life I couldn't justify [it].'

6.4 Most important, however, was the satisfaction which staff gained from the role they played in the education process. One remarked:

'It's nice to go into a class and actually teach and come away thinking, you know, I've taught all these students how to do this, and they all understand it.'

They perceived their work as both useful and important.

6.5 Staff also felt that working in higher education was socially rewarding. Several identified the friendly and supportive relationships they had developed with students and colleagues as being something which gave them great satisfaction. One said '*... I work with students all the time... they are very enthusiastic and that rubs off on you*'. This was particularly the case for staff based in departments with opportunities to build relationships with students. They had gained considerable satisfaction from watching students move through the higher education system and complete their courses. These tangible outcomes were highly valued by some staff.

6.6 Many staff appreciated the fact that the structure of higher education enabled them to work in small enough units to develop close working relationships with their colleagues. One commented '*Because there's only a limited number of people, you get to know people from all across the library... You actually really like your own staff... that's a nice feeling*'. They also valued the opportunities which working in higher education offered to meet other

people working in different departments.

Specific sources of job satisfaction

6.7 In addition to these strong general themes of satisfaction, more specific sources of job satisfaction were linked to how staff entered higher education.

The niche-finders

6.8 This group of staff gained job satisfaction from the factors which had initially attracted them to higher education. They liked the variety offered by their work in higher education. They found their jobs interesting and stimulating. More important, they expressed the belief that, despite the increasing pressure of their jobs, higher education remained a less stressful working environment than the private sector and still compared favourably to the private sector. Yet many felt that the gap between the two sectors was closing:

'[The job is] interesting, but unfortunately that interest is becoming a pressure now. I mean I still enjoy my job [but there's no time to] sit back and enjoy it.'

The subject specialists

6.9 Staff in this group also derived most of their job satisfaction from the factors which had originally attracted them to higher education. They still appreciated the opportunity to work in a stimulating and interesting environment. Most also felt that they had developed intellectually from contact with academics and students.

6.10 The *subject specialists* often displayed higher levels of job satisfaction than the *niche-finders* because of their commitment to their subject and the satisfaction they derived from pursuing their interest or specialism. One explained: '*... my passion in life is careers education... that's all I think about. [I] absolutely love it!*

6.11 An administrator elaborated further:

'It's the subject, not the job, I enjoy. I'm actually earning money out of doing something that I enjoy... it's purely because I'm actually earning money doing something that I enjoy doing. It is the subject, not the system.'

6.12 This group of staff gained particular satisfaction from their involvement with academic staff and students who were working in their subject area.

The new professionals

6.13 This was clearly the group of staff who were getting the most satisfaction from working in higher education, at the time of the group discussions. Rather than being threatened or undermined by recent developments in higher education, they were products of the change. They benefited from the direction and pace of change and valued the dynamism of a rapidly changing environment. One explained:

'I like my work. I was interested in [the subject] and I saw a job advertised, but it's... improved. You know ... I've grown into the job.'

6.14 These staff, more than any other group of administrative and support staff, believed that they received recognition for the role they played within higher education. They were also the only group who said that they felt valued and appreciated by the new management culture. Some of the younger members of this group also perceived themselves to be relatively well paid for the work that they did. One said:

'I came in fairly recently to the university. I came in at the bottom of the admin grades... and I think I'm being paid quite a reasonable amount of money... I'm working hard, I'm working an extra couple of hours at night... take work home. But I think I'm being paid a reasonable sum to do that.'

6.15 Another young, *new professional* agreed:

'When I started I was talking to my friends who had gone into the private sector, who graduated the same time as me, and you tell them we get an increment each year and so on, and they fall over! They don't get any of those, so really, for a new administrator, it's pretty good.'

6.16 *New professionals* displayed a strong belief that they were able to achieve something in their work and were able to do a good job. One remarked:

'I do have quite a stressful time, because systems are always going to be stressful, because they're never good enough. But I go home normally three days a week thinking I've achieved something, whereas in my previous job that was once every six months.'

6.17 In addition, they were afforded independence and autonomy to 'create their own job'. They found this deeply satisfying. One explained:

'I give my own direction. I'm given the chance to try some things. I'm given the chance to go out and try [things]... I can see a chance of doing more and more of that...'

6.18 More than one *new professional* recognised that the job satisfaction they gained at the time of the group discussions may not be sustainable. *'I'm sure that will change. I'm very much feeling it's a honeymoon period.'* This was particularly likely to be the case as their posts became more established and lost their *'novelty value'*.

General sources of job dissatisfaction

6.19 Unlike job satisfaction sources of job dissatisfaction were not strongly related to individual's original motivations for working in higher education. This was because:

- general levels of dissatisfaction were high among all staff; and
- the factors causing dissatisfaction related more to the context within which staff worked, rather than their specific individual circumstances.

Several important, recurring themes were raised in all of the group discussions.

Lack of opportunities for progression

6.20 The biggest single source of job dissatisfaction identified by staff was the nature of the career structure for administrative and support staff. The experiences of the high proportion of staff who were stuck at the top of their grade with no possibility of progression have already been discussed in [Chapter 5](#), as have the general feelings about the lack of career prospects. Dissatisfaction was intensified by the perception that regrading decisions were motivated by financial concerns rather than judgements about individuals' performance or the demands of their job.

Lack of recognition

6.21 Dissatisfaction of staff around lack of recognition was not simply related to an inability to make progress in their careers. Most of the anger and frustration staff expressed focused on their perception that their lack of opportunities result from a general low regard for administrative and support functions within higher education. This lack of recognition has probably always existed in higher education. Yet [Chapter 4](#) traced significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of administrative and support functions within higher education and the increasingly important central role these staff now play. Despite these changes, staff believed that their contribution was still neither recognised nor valued. A member of computing support commented:

'The biggest obstacle is their attitude towards individuals' skills and talent... They don't value it, it doesn't matter how hard you work. Doesn't matter how well you work. It matters not.'

6.22 A librarian agreed, saying: *'It's like... librarian, nurse, teacher..underclass somehow.'* This was perceived to be the case even where, as did librarians, staff had professional qualifications and were represented by a professional association.

6.23 Administrative and support staff who worked closely with academics were particularly likely to feel undervalued. They found that academics either dismissed their views or did not consult them at all. Many felt that the academics they worked with did not recognise the importance of the service they provided. A central administrator said: *' I don't like dealing with [academics]... they don't think [my job's] important and they think it's a waste of time. I don't like dealing with [them].'* A departmental administrator agreed: *'I do think they sometimes think they are above the admin.'* As a result, administrative and support staff often felt their work was undermined by academic staff.

6.24 Staff attributed the undervaluing of administrative and support staff, at least in part, to the fact that their work went largely unnoticed. For many of them, the most important indicator of success was that systems ran smoothly and efficiently without giving other people cause for complaint. In this sense, they were only visible when systems broke down or went wrong. One said:

'... if you're doing wrong it's clearly shown "This is wrong". But if you do something right it's never told 'You've done right'. So you always are in the repeat state of [thinking] "This might be wrong".'

6.25 A computer officer explained:

'... with the advent of the new technologies and advances of IT... more has been able to go wrong. And when they go wrong, they go wrong in a slightly more spectacular manner. And academics always pick up on this... even when no member of the university is at fault, we are the first people into the nest, because... we should know about these things.'

6.26 This lack of recognition and reward for good performance was common to all staff and contributed considerably to negative feelings about their job. One said:

'It would be nice if it's recognised elsewhere, from the management and staff... saying "Yes, you have done a good job. You are achieving. You are somebody who we are lucky to have".'

6.27 Another expressed a similar sentiment, saying: *'You do need those pats on the back. You do need those.'*

Pay

6.28 The issue of financial rewards was a further source of job dissatisfaction for most administrative and support staff and was strongly related to concerns about progression and recognition. The basis for staff dissatisfaction, however, was not simply low pay. Most of them had knowingly entered a relatively low-paid sector. Their dissatisfaction stemmed from their belief that their pay levels did not recognise the increasingly central role played by administrative and support staff within higher education. Nor had their pay scales kept up with the growing level of responsibility that administrative and support staff were taking on. An administrator explained:

'I'm... on a secretarial grade and secretarial pay but I'm... actually doing the administration that academics should be doing but are too busy...'

6.29 They were also acutely aware of inequities in the pay scales for different types of staff. One senior administrator commented:

'Before we amalgamated... in each department an academic

would have to look after finances, and another would have to look after the research. I now look after all the research and all the finance and I still earn a fraction of any lecturer. The person who was doing the job, of a sort... with just one of the departments, when I had the job, they dropped the salary from what she had been earning. And yet she'd only been looking after one department and I had four.'

6.30 A technician commented:

'I would go one further. I would say... some technical staff, non-academic staff are worth more commercially than some academic staff. There's no reason why the pay scale can't show that.'

6.31 Moreover, financial rewards had become increasingly important to staff as other sources of job satisfaction had been eroded. A senior computing officer, who had found his job increasingly constrained by the demands of the new management culture said:

'... my own feelings, and some of my colleagues, I know, would trade, to some extent, our pay if we had more scope to, well, do our own thing... There was a time when... most of the time you would be sorting out other problems, getting things up [and running] but then there would be a gap when you could look at what was going on in the world in computing. Do some speculative things... And that was enjoyable for its own right. And... at least when I started, that was what made the university attractive.'

Insufficient resources

6.32 The pressures of working within ever-tightening resource constraints was also an important element of job dissatisfaction for all staff. They found coping with a constant lack of resources both difficult and draining.

6.33 They were especially concerned about reductions in the quality of the service they were providing. One said: 'It's becoming a burden now because... I feel I can't provide the same service that I did ten years ago.' This, in particular, eroded the satisfaction they derived from their work. A computing support officer remarked:

'I feel frustrated because I can't... I used to enjoy helping people. I would say ten years ago it was different. I just haven't got the time to give the same sort of support, level of support. And I find that frustrating because I do get a buzz out of, you know, solving someone's problems...'

6.34 Some staff also felt guilty that they were no longer able to provide the level of help and support that they believed students required.

6.35 Staff also found that the effort of trying to maintain service quality within ever-tightening resource constraints demoralised them and had resulted in a general feeling of apathy. Two technical support staff raised this issue, saying:

T1 *'It's a general feeling that no matter how hard you work, it doesn't make any difference.'*

T2 *'Just take the easy approach. Just do what you've got to do. Get it out of the way. There's no point working your socks off.'*

6.36 Others, particularly the longer-servers, found working within severe resource constraints profoundly deskilling. A systems manager remarked:

'I'm certainly doing very little of what I perceive my job ought to be, or used to be about. In other words, not taking any strategic or management role... I'm acting as a jack of all trades, master of none.'

6.37 Resource constraints were particularly frustrating for computing and technical support staff. A relatively high level of investment was essential to their jobs and their job satisfaction. A technician said:

'In my experience, in every job that I've done, it's lack of resources that caused me to leave that job. Not lack of money, not lack of salary [but] lack of resources for the job that you're asked to do.'

Lack of representation

6.38 The apparent lack of recognition of the increasing significance of administrative and support staff meant that they believed that they were largely ignored in institutional and management decision-making. They claimed that they were unrepresented on working groups and committees within their institutions. As a result, they were not consulted over decision-making, even where decisions would have a profound impact on their work. They lacked a 'voice' which could represent their views and protect their interests. A library assistant and a subject librarian raised this point:

L1 *'It is getting worse, but who is there to fight for us?'*

L2 *'Let me know where there's a speaker for the support staff. But you know, my grade, I mean I'm... clerical support staff. There's nobody even to speak for us... Nobody actually speaks up for the library assistants.'*

6.39 Staff even perceived the trade unions which represented them to pay little attention to staff at the lower ends of the grades. One said:

'AUT [Association for University Teachers] fight for the academic-related staff. But UNISON don't fight for the rest of us.'

A future in higher education?

6.40 The likelihood of staff remaining in higher education was strongly

associated with their reasons for joining the sector, and their experiences of working in higher education.

The niche-finders

6.41 Overall, *niche-finders* are likely to stay working in higher education for the foreseeable future. Few of them were planning to seek work outside the sector. They had developed a strong commitment to their work and to higher education. Even those considering leaving were unlikely to move outside the sector because they did not perceive their alternatives to be particularly attractive.

6.42 Several of them thought they were 'too old' to find other jobs. This applied to staff as young as 35, who believed that they would be unable to compete with new graduates in the job market.

6.43 In addition, despite the growing pressure on administrative and support staff working in higher education, they still viewed private-sector employment as more stressful. One technician said: *'I fancy a change, certainly, so I wouldn't mind a change from the institution that I'm in now. I'm not sure whether I want to go back into industry.'* Several of the *niche-finders* expressed a fear of the private sector and did not think they would be able to cope with it. A central administrator remarked: *'Management by character assassination isn't really my style.'* Some also believed that they were unlikely to find work in the private sector because of the low opinion that private employers held of people who had worked in higher education. A technician said: *'I think some people in business don't like to touch people from the academic world because they think you don't work.'*

The subject specialists

6.44 The staff who had joined higher education out of a commitment to their subject interest or specialism were even less likely to consider leaving higher education than the *niche finders*. Often their options were even more restricted than those of the *niche-finders*, leaving them little choice but to remain in higher education. They still derived a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from their work. Many could not imagine doing anything else. A computer officer who had worked at his institution for almost thirty years said that if he left his job he would simply: *'...buy myself a computer and do virtually exactly the same thing that I'm doing anyway, at home.'*

6.45 Some of this group, having spent most of their working lives pursuing their subject interest within a higher education setting, were not staying for wholly positive reasons. They believed they were too old and had been in higher education too long to find other work. One explained: *'I don't think I'm of the age, I don't think I can now change to another career, or a different career. All my experience is there.'* Another joked wryly: *'Yep, I'm a stayer. I'm unemployable!'* These staff were often simply biding their time until retirement.

The new professionals

6.46 This was the group who were least likely to stay in higher education, despite reporting the highest levels of job satisfaction. These staff believed in the service they were providing but were not strongly committed to higher education. They considered their jobs in higher education as just one stage in their career, rather than a career per se. They had significantly better prospects of finding work outside higher education than had the other groups of staff. As a result, their decision-making around their future was part of a continual process of assessing the benefits of higher education in comparison

with other work opportunities. A systems manager said:

'No, I don't foresee me staying in higher education... I'm at a point now where I'm making some fairly big decisions, or will be. Do I want to go back into commerce? Do I want to stay here for another two years? I might do, two years from now I might think, "I don't want to go back to that hell-hole that is commerce, I don't want it" or I might think, "I'm desperate to get back".'

6.47 Most of them said that they would remain in higher education for as long as they were reaping benefits from their jobs. A couple of new professionals expected to move within the next few years. This was usually in order to increase their salary or improve their long-term prospects. One remarked: *'I'll stay a couple of years... You get in there and [the money's] reasonable but it doesn't go up.'*

6.48 A central administrator expressed a more pragmatic view:

'I'll stay there for a few years, get the training... I'm enjoying it at the moment and they're offering higher degrees for free. So it's... get that and then see who will pay me more. I've done my sort-of "moral" bit. [Now I need to] pay for the kids to be brought up and everything, and buy a house.'

6.49 Other *new professionals* were simply keeping their options open.