

# Chapter 2

## The staff

### *Key points*

**Staff functions:** the staff in the focus groups were drawn from four administrative and support types within higher education:

- technical support;
- computing support;
- administrators;
- librarians.

**Staff groupings:** three distinct groups of staff can clearly be identified within the overall sample in terms of their motives for working in higher education:

- a The *niche-finders* were mostly long-servers who were not particularly highly qualified.
  - i They 'fell into' higher education by chance rather than chose it specifically as a career.
  - ii They were attracted to higher education because it offered more favourable working conditions than the private sector.
  - iii When they started working in higher education, they were not particularly committed to the sector.
- b The *subject specialists* were more highly qualified and were a mix of long-servers and newer recruits.
  - i They entered higher education because it offered them the best, and often the only, opportunity to pursue their subject interest or specialism.
  - ii They had few opportunities to work outside higher education and, even where alternatives were available, higher education offered the most prestigious jobs.
  - iii They were attracted to the stimulating, intellectual environment offered by higher education and valued their involvement in educating others in their subject area.
  - iv They were deeply committed to higher education.
- c The *new professionals* were the smallest group, comprised entirely of newer recruits to higher education.
  - i They had taken jobs in the growth areas of higher education - student services, marketing, information services - and had often 'created their own jobs' in their new posts.
  - ii They were attracted by the variety and challenge offered by their posts.
  - iii They were committed to their jobs, but not necessarily to the higher education sector per se.

## The staff

### ***Motives for entering higher education: a typology***

2.1 The staff in the focus groups worked in four main administrative and support functions within higher education: technical support; computing support; as administrators; and as library staff. They shared a number of common characteristics and experiences of working within higher education. Yet their reasons for entering higher education were different and can be grouped as follows:

- those who entered higher education by chance or default (the *niche-finders*);
- those who joined higher education as a result of pursuing a particular subject interest or specialism (the *subject specialists*); and
- the new professionals who entered one of the growth areas of higher education to provide a particular service (the *new professionals*).

### ***The niche-finders***

2.2 This group mostly comprised computing and technical support staff, although there were also a few administrators and one or two librarians. They had encountered higher education by chance as part of a wider job search. Most had been employed in the private sector prior to joining higher education and could have undertaken similar jobs outside higher education. However, once they had encountered the possibility of working in higher education, they found that it closely matched their needs and requirements. Therefore, although they displayed very favourable attitudes to working in higher education, they had not been motivated by a particularly strong commitment to higher education when they entered the sector.

2.3 Most of these respondents were long-servers. Very few had spent less than five years working in higher education, some had worked in the same institution for up to 25 years. They tended not to be highly qualified. Most had qualifications of some kind which tended to be vocational and below degree level.

2.4 None of this group had been specifically looking for a job within higher education at the time when they took up their current posts. They often described themselves as having 'fallen into higher education' by chance rather than by design. One explained:

*'It was pure chance that got me into employment with a university... I'd just finished my apprenticeship and I just happened to be reading a copy of the New Scientist and there was a job which wanted ONC [Ordinary National Certificate] which is what I had when I left so I applied for it. And that was it, I've worked for the universities ever since. It wasn't something I thought of... it was something that just happened. I wasn't*

*aware that I actually made a choice about it.'*

2.5 However, niche-finders became particularly attracted to higher education and especially to those aspects of work which they perceived to be more favourable than in the private sector. For example, many had joined higher education believing that it would offer a more interesting and varied working environment and greater job security than the private sector. Above all, however, they expected higher education to offer a less pressured working environment and a better quality of life. One said:

*'... it seemed much more enjoyable than the [private sector] which is very one-tracked, pressurised. That's the reason why... I didn't say "Oh, I must go and work in academia"...'*

2.6 Some were particularly impressed by the facilities available to them. Others remarked on the nicer physical environments of universities. Those who worked on campus universities appreciated the pleasant and peaceful settings in which they worked. One remarked:

*'It's such a wonderful environment to work in. I've got rabbits outside the window!'*

2.7 One or two members of this group had taken pay cuts when they moved from the private sector, believing the benefits of working in HE would offset the drop in income. One explained:

*'Before I came to the university I worked in the finance sector, and the pay and benefits were really superb. But the pressure and the back-stabbing and everything that goes with it, it's just..you can quite easily walk away from that and take a £10K drop.'*

2.8 Their enjoyment of working in higher education meant that once they had discovered universities as employers, they tended to stay there. A member of staff who had worked in his current post for 18 years remarked:

*'I wanted something that would tide me over the winter. The job came up and I've been here ever since!'*

### ***The subject specialists***

2.9 This group of staff consisted largely of librarians and administrators who were often employed in posts which were linked to particular subject areas. They worked in higher education because they wanted to pursue an interest or subject specialism.

2.10 The group contained a relatively high proportion of long-servers, but also had some newer recruits. They had a very strong commitment to both higher education and the subject in which they specialised. They were usually highly

educated, at least to degree level, and often beyond.

2.11 Unlike the *niche-finders*, this group of staff had very few chances of finding similar work in the private sector or outside the higher education sector and few had worked outside higher education. In addition, higher education was often the best and most prestigious place for them to pursue their subject interest or specialism. A careers adviser explained how her career path had brought her into higher education:

*'For me higher education's a promotion. You do your time [elsewhere], work with 16-year-olds, you go into further education, which is what I did, and then you go into higher education. And when I joined higher education it was the place to be.'*

2.12 For a few, higher education offered the only opportunity to work in their subject area. An archaeology assistant explained:

*'I was interested in archaeology, an opportunity to work within archaeology came up and I'm still there. That's my main motivation. I'm an archaeologist, I enjoy the subject... I'm lucky to be able to have a job in archaeology.'*

2.13 These staff were also attracted to the opportunities that employment in higher education offered for intellectual stimulation and development. Their commitment to their subject area also meant that they valued the fact that they supported an 'educating' role which allowed others to enjoy their subject. These factors were more important to them than financial rewards and it was not unusual for staff in this group to have turned down more highly paid jobs which would not have allowed them to pursue their interests.

### ***The new professionals***

2.14 This was by far the smallest category but one or two *new professionals* were in evidence in each of the four focus groups. These staff were mostly under 35 years old and had recently joined higher education; most had worked in the sector for five years or less. They were educated at least to degree level, although their qualifications were not always related to the post they held.

2.15 Their entry into higher education had been largely opportunistic. They had moved into new growth areas of higher education such as marketing, student support and information science. They were attracted to the variety and challenge the posts offered. Often they had taken new posts and relished the opportunity to '*create their own posts*'. They viewed their jobs in higher education as just one step in their career paths. However, they did not demonstrate a particularly strong commitment to higher education. Their primary commitment was to the service they provided.