

Chapter 5

Training, staff development and opportunities for career progression

Key points

In general staff felt that although there was in theory a commitment to training in higher education, the institutions they worked for had very little to offer in terms of staff development and career progression.

Training policies: 'pre-1992 universities', in particular, lacked progressive training policies which staff felt were sensitive to their needs, but '1992 universities' were more progressive.

- Few staff had received formal training despite the changes to their work roles.
- New professional staff were more likely to feel that their training needs were taken seriously than other staff. But this tended to be an advantage only in the short term.
- Most staff experienced practical obstacles to obtaining the training they felt they needed.
- The biggest obstacles were reduced funding for training, spending priorities and the lack of time to undertake training.

Further qualifications: several members of staff were studying for further qualifications which they did largely in their own time and at their own expense.

- The majority were working towards an academic rather than a vocational qualification although they were not working in academic-related posts.
- They did this because they felt that academics lacked respect for vocational qualifications and would not take them seriously without academic qualifications.

Staff development: most administrative and support staff did not feel that their institutions were committed to staff development.

- 'Pre-1992 universities' often did not have appraisal procedures for administrative and support staff.
- Staff in '1992 universities', where appraisal procedures were more advanced, often experienced a tension between the increased expectations generated by appraisal and the opportunities available to fulfil them.
- Again, new professionals had more positive experiences of appraisal and

opportunities for staff development.

Career progression: staff expressed most frustration over their opportunities for career progression within higher education.

- The majority felt that they had no opportunities for progression at all.
- They identified the structure of higher education and lack of funding as the major constraints on their career progression.
- Many believed that the only way to progress was to move between higher education institutions or to look outside the sector.

Training, staff development and opportunities for career progression

Introduction

5.1 This chapter explores administrative and support staff perceptions of their opportunities for training, development and career progression within higher education, and examines the obstacles they experienced in obtaining them. Where appropriate, it highlights the different opportunities available to different groups of staff.

Opportunities for training¹¹

5.2 The administrative and support staff reported markedly similar experiences in terms of their opportunities for training. However, some distinctions between staff were apparent. The new professionals reported slightly more favourable experiences of training provision than the niche-finders or subject specialists. The new professionals had experienced a stronger commitment to their training than other staff. None of them had actually been offered training but when they had identified their training needs, their managers had been very supportive. One explained:

'... when I was appointed... I was offered no training at all through the university, so it was up to me to go and find it, which I did. But then they paid for it... they were fine.'

5.3 Overall new professionals had encountered fewer obstacles to obtaining training and were less likely than other staff to have had requests for training refused. This was probably because they were working in newly created or rapidly expanding posts which were viewed favourably and were perceived as making an important contribution to higher education. As a consequence, managers viewed the provision of training for these posts as a sensible investment rather than a drain on resources.

5.4 Nevertheless, this distinction did not work across the board. Better access

to training was short-lived, even for new professionals. One or two new professionals who had been in post for more than two or three years and whose posts were more firmly established, clearly found themselves facing similar obstacles to the niche-finders and subject specialists. It is likely that providing a favourable training environment for some new professionals was a pragmatic response to ensure that the new growth areas of higher education, which were generally the focus of management scrutiny, could be developed to their fullest capacity. Once this had been achieved and the preoccupation of managers had shifted, new professionals faced the same training environment as other administrative and support staff.

Training policies

5.5 Administrative and support staff considered '1992 universities' more advanced than 'pre-1992' in terms of their training policies. Those working in 'pre-1992 universities' believed that their institutions were committed to training in theory. Their institutions had set up and ran a wide range of training courses. However, these courses tended to focus on areas such as management skills, time management and stress management rather than on the practical or specialist skills which administrative and support staff felt they most needed.

5.6 '1992 universities' tended to have a more progressive and comprehensive approach to training. Staff from these universities thought that there was a recognition of a wide range of training needs, including those of administrative and support staff. For example, one '1992 university' offered an incentive to both individuals and their departments to undertake training which had a very positive impact on training provision and take-up.

Obstacles in training provision

5.7 The majority of the administrative and support staff, however, reported a number of practical obstacles in relation to training. Most had received little training in recent years. More important, very few felt they had received the amount of training they needed to keep on top of their work. They perceived this lack of training to be particularly problematic given the rate of change they were experiencing in their jobs and the increased responsibilities many had taken on. These problems affected the vast majority of staff regardless of their area of work or institution type.

5.8 Funding for training had become increasingly constrained and was reportedly the biggest obstacle in accessing training. A junior member of technical support staff said:

'... we are encouraged to go, but I want to do a computer technicians' course, and the cost is so high for the department... There is encouragement to do it provided it doesn't cost too much.'

5.9 Staff were finding it more and more difficult to attend externally run

training courses which were usually more expensive than university-run courses. They were unable to attend external courses where equivalent internal courses were available. Yet, they felt that internal courses were often not run to the same standard as training courses in the private sector. In addition, some staff had to wait for long periods for cheaper alternatives to become available. And several staff had experienced problems in gaining access to oversubscribed internal training courses.

5.10 This was especially problematic for technical and computing support staff. Many of the courses they wanted to attend were particularly expensive because of the IT-intensive nature of their training needs. A member of computing support staff explained:

'I think it's very difficult for us to justify commercial courses, costing over a thousand [pounds] for a few days, [even though they're better courses]..It's mainly when there's a university running them which are nice and cheap.'

5.11 Yet the training needs of computing and support staff were often so specialised that it was not cost-effective to organise internal courses. These staff were acutely aware that they had lost touch with many developments in their field.

5.12 Several staff expressed the view that the training needs of administrative and support staff lacked recognition compared to other staff working in higher education. They believed that when training budgets were tight, training in management, research and academic skills was given priority over training in administrative and support functions. This was a particular problem for staff who worked in institutions where training budgets have been devolved to department level. These staff spoke of a 'Cinderella effect', whereby they came at the bottom of the list when training budgets were allocated and so were often forgotten. They also believed that their managers knew too little about their area of work to make informed decisions about their training needs.

5.13 However, money was not the only obstacle which administrative and support staff faced in trying to obtain training. Several believed that their managers faced a disincentive to encourage training because it would raise staff expectations:

'I think departments are scared to send you on training courses, because it means you're going to want new technology, you're going to want new services, that are going on in that training course.'

5.14 Many also identified a lack of time to attend training courses as an important obstacle. Few felt that they could take the time to attend courses even where funding was available. A computer services officer explained that having identified her basic training needs: *'... the facilities are available, there are courses put on... but I have not got the time. I do not have the time to go.'* This was a familiar story for staff in the focus groups. As a result, many found themselves struggling to learn *'on the job'*. They tried to make up for this by reading trade journals and magazines and familiarising themselves with new developments outside working hours. A member of computer support

staff said: '*... you're basically expected to take on that responsibility on your own, in your own private time.*'

5.15 There was a general feeling among staff that the pressures of money and time meant that any new skills that they had picked up had been developed by default, rather than as a direct result of their institutions' training policies. In addition, many training needs were left unmet.

Training for qualifications

5.16 Given that the staff who took part in the group discussions were working in educational institutions it is not surprising that a large proportion of them were studying towards further qualifications. This group largely comprised technical support staff or administrators who came into most contact with academic staff. Computing support staff and librarians tended to be more concerned with keeping up with technological developments in their fields.

5.17 The staff studying for a qualification reported that they received financial or intellectual support from their institutions only if their courses were considered to be directly of benefit to their department. As a result, most were self-financing and were studying outside their workplace. Some administrative and support staff, particularly the longer-serving staff, expressed surprise and discontent over the requirement for value for money in supporting training for qualifications. They expressed a general belief that universities should support 'learning for its own sake'. They felt that supporting training purely on a value-for-money basis was contrary to the aims and objectives of higher education.

5.18 One factor was particularly striking. The majority of staff taking a further qualification were working towards academic qualifications, occasionally up to PhD level, despite the fact that few were working in academic-related posts. Many felt that they were pushed towards academic as opposed to vocational qualifications because academics had so little respect for vocational qualifications. Staff working closely with academic staff explained that gaining academic qualifications was the only way they would be taken seriously. An administrator who had joined higher education without a degree and had since studied to Masters degree level explained:

'When I came into academia I didn't have any qualifications. I felt I had to have them, you know, to be on a level... to justify my existence I had to have qualifications, and... I actually feel it makes me able to do my job on a one to one with [academics] when I know I'm as well if not better qualified than they are.'

Commitment to staff development

5.19 Unlike training provision, most administrative and support staff did not feel that their institutions were committed to staff development even in theory. Some of the new professionals working in new posts or in the growth areas of higher education had slightly more favourable experiences of staff development than did other groups of staff, probably because of their institution's desire to develop and fully utilise their skills. These new

professionals also had a more positive experience of appraisal which in turn fed into their development. One who had never worked in an organisation that undertook appraisals was very impressed:

'I've just come through the appraisal process... and basically that's wonderful, you know, I'm not being led into this training course or that training course [but] suggestions are beginning to come through.'

5.20 Yet the same short-termism that emerged in relation to training for new professionals also happened with staff development. New professionals who had been in post for a few years seemed to have witnessed a declining commitment to their development as their jobs stabilised.

Formal procedures for staff development

5.21 The absence of both an institutional commitment to staff development and coherent institute-wide policies for staff development was widely noted by all of the administrative and support staff in the groups.

'I would quite like to be part of a great plan. Where the manager sort-of-says, "Do this, because... it would be good for your career prospects, if you do it".'

5.22 As a result, some felt very unsupported. Staff development was widely perceived to be 'down to them' rather than something driven by their institution.

5.23 '1992 universities' tended to give a higher priority to staff development than 'pre-1992 universities'. Despite this, few formal procedures for staff development operated in any of the universities represented in the focus groups. Most staff were unaware that there were staff development officers and training units within their institutions. A member of technical support staff commented:

'At [my institution] there is a Staff Development and Training Centre. But the only reason I knew that was because they asked me to design a cover for them!'

5.24 None of the staff had had contact with the training or staff development unit in their institution. They certainly did not feel that these units were playing any role in promoting or coordinating staff development.

5.25 In addition, some 'pre-1992 universities' still did not have formal appraisal procedures in place for support staff, although they did for academic-related staff. Others had laid out procedures for appraisal but they had not been put into practice among administrative and support staff. Staff in these institutions were offered an 'informal chat' with their line managers. Many valued this opportunity to discuss their development, yet they found this informal system frustrating and unfulfilling. A department administrator explained:

'Lack of obligation is the problem... you can have... people recognise what you say... but that's as far as it goes. There's no real point in having it, it doesn't solve anything. It doesn't lead anywhere other than somebody else taking on board that you have a need.'

5.26 Even in '1992 universities', where appraisal procedures were better established, the process still created tensions. An assistant subject librarian explained: ' ... *they've recently introduced a formal appraisal scheme. So you've got all these people identifying training and you get knocked back year after year. It can be demoralising.*' Consequently, some administrative and support staff in both '1992' and 'pre-1992' universities questioned the value of appraisals.

5.27 The absence of effective appraisal procedures in most institutions meant that administrative and support staff felt that they received no assessment of their strengths and weaknesses or recognition of their achievements. A systems manager described the experience of a colleague who had worked in higher education for eight years without promotion:

'He hadn't got promoted and he didn't understand why... if they'd been a [private] company... they would just have said "Well, this is why you haven't been promoted, but this is what you can do about it"... But that doesn't happen in education, you know, because..you're given no sort of management guidance about what you're doing wrong as well as what you're doing right.'

For some staff, this generated feelings of insecurity about their performance.

Obstacles to staff development

5.28 In addition to a general absence of procedures for staff development, staff also identified some specific obstacles. Most spoke of a 'gap' between training and staff development. They were rarely able to utilise any new skills learnt through training, either because they did not have access to the new equipment or software packages they had learned to use, or because their managers were resistant to the introduction of new techniques. A member of technical support explained:

'... they do a very good managerial course they send technicians on... but when it came to implementing what you're doing in the department, it was impossible because the academics don't go along with any kind of management.'

5.29 Some of them felt that this seriously undermined the value of their training and blocked their professional development.

Opportunities for career progression ¹²

5.30 When the issue of career progression was raised in the discussions, it was

met with laughter among staff in all four groups. They frequently added derisory comments such as 'what progression?'. Clearly, very few administrative and support staff perceived their opportunities for progression within higher education to be good. Many noted that their situation was not particular either to administrative and support staff or to higher education. Nor was it related to changes in higher education but reflected a historical situation. This did not, however, ease their frustration or reduce their level of demoralisation.

5.31 New professionals had better opportunities for progression in the short term compared with niche-finders and subject specialists. In the longer term, however, they clearly faced similar constraints to other staff working in higher education. Unlike other groups of staff, they could make some progress very quickly because of the expansion of their areas of work. Yet they were still clearly aware that there was a limit to how far they could move and that once they reached that point, they would have as little room for manoeuvre as other staff.

Obstacles to career progression

5.32 A high proportion of the staff who took part in the focus groups felt that they had 'nowhere to go' within higher education. They described themselves as 'bouncing along at the top of the grade' and perceived their chances of being regraded as minimal or non-existent. This was particularly pronounced among long-servers who had already progressed as far as they could in higher education. A technician with over twenty years' service described his prospects:

'... no prospects whatsoever. I'm at the top of my grade, I'm pushing... when I started ... I got from junior to senior fairly easily and I got stuck on that and I had to fight tooth and nail to get [promoted] on the strength of so-called teaching and research and stuff that I do, but that's it. That's absolutely it.'

5.33 This type of situation had been exacerbated for some administrative and support staff by recent structural changes in higher education. For example, mergers between departments had resulted in redundancies and the downgradings of some posts. In turn, this reduced staff opportunities for progression even further, while generating feelings of insecurity.

5.34 Yet even newer and younger staff working in lower grades felt that their career opportunities were heavily constrained. One explained:

'It's just according to your age, whatever age you are when you get to the top of that road, that's it, you've got no chance of getting anywhere.'

5.35 Several of the staff realised that their career progression within higher education would be limited. They attributed this largely to the pyramid structure of higher education. As a result, staff frequently had to wait for a

vacancy in the level above them before they could be promoted. Furthermore, the steepness of the pyramid meant that there was intense competition among internal candidates for each post. A librarian described the impact of this on more junior library staff:

'I think the way the structure is built up is wrong in a sense. There's no middle tier that you could move up to slowly, climb up and climb up... It's a very steep pyramid. You've got from... five or six subject librarians, to one subject librarian for each subject area, and you've got the deputy and then you've got the head librarian. So you're always looking at those five or six people [on the same tier as you] and facing the fact that, you know, they're not all going up to that level.'

5.36 Some felt that opportunities to progress were so severely restricted as they moved up the grading structure that they were simply waiting to step into 'dead mens' shoes'.

5.37 In addition, some staff were further constrained because their present jobs did not equip them with the skills needed to progress. For example, several commented on their lack of opportunity to develop the supervisory skills essential for promotion. One explained:

'... we realised that with the subject librarian level we'd not received any kind of training to supervise other staff... and then the next level up from us..you're responsible for direct management of the teams. If you want to be promoted and you don't have those skills...'

5.38 More important, many perceived the major obstacle they faced to be financial. The majority were able to cite cases where staff had been publicly acknowledged to be working beyond their grade but had been told that regrading was impossible due to financial constraints. One librarian said:

'There is no money, so when you approach management and say, "Look I've got all these [tasks] on my table, they were not there a couple of years ago... Can you think about doing something to my grade?" he or she will turn back and say, "Apply for it, but there's no funding".'

5.39 A technician agreed, saying:

'Technicians are... funded from within the department, so there's no real incentive for the head of department really ... to upgrade you because it's just less money for them.'

5.40 This widely held perception that decisions about regrading were made on the basis of financial concerns rather than merit was a source of great discontent for most staff.

5.41 Staff were also aware that even where an application for regrading was supported by a head of department, the outcomes were still negative. An

administrator explained:

'The head of department can make recommendations but then they go before a committee and they can get accepted or turned down, or whatever, it's not in the... gift of your head of department.'

5.42 Staff found it very depressing that even the person who knew their work best was unable to ensure that they were rewarded for good performance. Consequently, progression within higher education was perceived to be available only to people who were willing and able to move between institutions. Others believed their only chances to progress in their career were outside higher education.