

Executive Summary

Introduction

Background to the research

1 The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education was set up to make recommendations on the future of higher education. It commissioned the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) to conduct a series of studies of the attitudes, experiences and expectations of students and staff in higher education today. This report focuses on students' expectations and experiences of higher education.¹

Aim of the research

2 The research aimed to examine the views of students on the quality of their university experience and the extent to which it meets their expectations.

Methodology

3 The research consisted of a postal survey of a nationally representative sample of full and part-time students attending higher education institutions during the 1996/97 academic year. Only students in their second year and above were surveyed.

4 The survey was conducted between November 1996 and January 1997. A total of 1,270 usable questionnaires were received and the response rate was 63 per cent.

The students surveyed

5 There were some striking differences between students doing full-time and part-time courses in terms of their personal characteristics, the institutions they were attending and the courses they were following. Together, these differences form an important context for understanding the findings of this study.

6 The key differences in students' personal characteristics were:

- age - the majority (76%) of full-time students were under 21 years old when they started their course while the majority (79%) of part-timers were over 25 years old;
- marital status and children - far more full-time than part-time students were single and had no children;
- employment - 90 per cent of part-timers were working while studying and nearly all were in full-time jobs ([Table 1.1](#)).

7 The key differences in the type of institution and courses attended were:

- institution and qualification - full-time students were more likely than part-time students to be attending 'pre-1992 universities' and pursuing a degree course;
- subject studied - slightly higher proportions of full-time than part-time students were studying sciences, social sciences, and the creative arts. The converse was true for all other major disciplines ([Table 1.2](#)).

Students' motives, aspirations and choices

8 Full and part-time students had similar motives for entering higher education and similar aspirations. They both wanted the benefits of a 'university/college education'. However, the younger, full-time students also valued highly the 'university/college experience' and the social life, their independence, and the activities associated with higher education which encouraged their personal development and their transition into adulthood and into employment.

9 Students' motives and aspirations influenced their choice of both educational institution and course, choices which were driven by very different concerns for full-time and part-time students.

The reasons students entered higher education, and their hopes

10 The strongest reasons given by students for entering higher education were instrumental - they wanted to improve their progress in the labour market and fulfil their career aspirations ([Table 2.1](#)) although they could combine this with an intellectual interest in a course (see 'The reasons students chose their course' below).

11 Approaching half the students referred to future employment as their most 'important reason' for entering higher education. In particular, their most important reasons were:

- to help get a job or better job (28%);
- to pursue a particular career which needed a particular qualification (18%).

12 Students hoped for a mix of opportunities and experiences whilst at university/college. The three they most frequently mentioned were:

- to develop new or existing skills (90%);
- to broaden their horizons (80%);
- to experience intellectual growth and stimulation (79%).

13 Full and part-time students had similar aspirations but the former put a much greater emphasis on the social side of university/college life, especially meeting new people (87% compared to 48%) and having a good time (77% compared to 18%). Clearly these younger, full-time students had a wider agenda than that of the older, part-time students ([Table 2.2](#)).

The reasons students chose their educational institution

14 Full and part-time students' reasons for choosing their particular university/college were very different. Full-timers' reasoning reflected the wider choices open to them and featured academic-related motives. Part-timers' choices were narrower, dictated by practical concerns, and were heavily constrained by their existing work and family commitments ([Table 2.3](#)).

15 Full-time students' main reasons for choosing their institution were:

- it was the best one for the subject they wanted to study (18%);
- they liked what they saw at the institution when they attended an interview or open day (16%);
- it had a good academic reputation (14%).

16 Part-time students overwhelmingly chose their institution because:

- they could do the courses they wanted part-time (48%);
- it was near their home (15%).

17 The majority of students were attending the institution of their first choice. And there was an element of regionalism in their choice which was most pronounced amongst Scottish students.

The features attracting individuals to their institution

18 Overall, students were not very well informed about their institution before they started. The majority (65%) knew about only one aspect - its academic reputation ([Table 2.4](#)). Hence, information about the institution did not generally play an important role in informing the majority of students' choice of institution.

19 Those who knew about their institution in advance were particularly attracted by features traditionally highly prized by academics, namely:

- its academic reputation (76%);
- its teaching record (75%).

20 Full-time students were more attracted than part-time students by these attributes, and especially the extra-curricular opportunities and the accommodation available - reflecting their desire for 'university/college' experience ([Table 2.5](#)).

The reasons students chose their course

21 Full and part-time students' reasons for choosing their course were also very different. The majority (72%) of full-time students opted for their course predominantly for intellectual reasons which were related to their intrinsic interest in the course, the subjects covered, and the academic standing of the course and institution. Part-time students' reasons were more mixed but mostly pragmatic, 36 per cent relating to the part-time structure of the course, which allowed them to continue full-time employment, and its proximity to their home ([Table 2.6](#), [Figure 2.2](#)).

The features attracting students to their course

22 The features students found most attractive of all about their courses were:

- the subjects covered (74%);
- the job-related nature of the course (71%);
- the non-academic skills included (64%).

23 Students on full and part-time courses found these first two features equally attractive. Part-time students, however, were drawn less by their course's non-academic skills (54% compared to 69%), but were twice as likely as to be attracted by the time of day when teaching took place (72% compared with 35%) ([Table 2.8](#)).

The role of employers in helping part-time students

24 The vast majority of part-time students were employed (90%) and they were doing their course part-time because of their work commitments.

25 Overall, their employers were both encouraging (58%) and supportive

(51%), especially amongst the minority (20%) who were taking their qualification because it was a job requirement. The majority had their fees paid by their employer (79%) and had paid time off work (64%) ([Table 2.9](#)).

Students' experiences and views of teaching, learning and assessment

26 The most significant differences in students' experiences of teaching, learning, assessment and the skills they learnt, were associated with the subjects studied. Despite these differences, students generally had similar and positive attitudes towards both their teaching and its quality, their assessment and its fairness, and their course in general. They were critical of certain aspects of their educational experience which could be associated with resource constraints and the resulting changes in teaching methods. In particular, they wanted more opportunities to learn in small groups and more feedback on their work from staff.

Students' views on teaching

27 The majority of students were exposed to a mixture of the following teaching methods:

- lectures (98%);
- seminars and tutorials (91%);
- essays (82%);
- projects and dissertations (82%).

28 The subjects they studied largely determined both the type of teaching and learning methods they were exposed to and how they spent their time studying ([Tables 3.1](#) and [3.2](#)).

29 They had the following feelings about their teaching:

- most were content with the mix of teaching methods used on their course (73%); but
- a sizeable minority (40%) wanted more opportunities to learn in small groups.

Students' experiences of teaching and their views on academic staff

30 Teaching was predominantly conducted by lecturers including professorial staff. Postgraduates were used mostly to take undergraduate seminars and tutorials, especially in 'pre-1992 universities' ([Table 3.3](#)).

31 Students appeared fairly content with these arrangements although:

- 10 per cent thought that postgraduates were used too often for teaching;
- 15 per cent felt that staff were more interested in their research than their teaching.

32 Students were more critical of their contact with staff and the support they received from them:

- 28 per cent wanted more contact with senior staff;
- 26 per cent were dissatisfied with the feedback on their work ([Table 3.4](#)) - this dissatisfaction was more acutely felt by full-time than part-time students and by

those students who were least likely to have individual teaching sessions with staff.

Students' ratings of the quality teaching

33 Students' overall levels of satisfaction with the quality of their teaching were high (70%) irrespective of the type of course and subject they were taking, the institution they attended, and the type of staff who taught them. They rated between 'half' and 'most' of all the different teaching methods they experienced as well prepared, well structured and well presented. Lectures were the mostly highly rated and computer- based learning packages the lowest rated ([Figure 3.1](#)).

Students' views about assessment

34 The majority of students were assessed by:

- essays (87%);
- written examinations (86%);
- projects/dissertations (81%);
- oral presentations (73%).

35 Students were most often assessed at the end of their course/module or term/semester (60%) rather than at the end of the academic year (37%) or in the final year (37%), a pattern which reflects a trend towards continuous assessment and modularisation. Both the assessment methods used and the frequency of assessment were most heavily influenced by the subjects studied ([Table 3.5](#)).

36 The majority, particularly part-time students, believed that all but one of their assessment methods fairly assessed both their knowledge and understanding and their intellectual and other skills. However, multiple-choice questions, written examinations and oral presentations were less likely to be rated as 'fair'. Seventeen per cent of all students felt that written examinations were unfair ([Tables 3.6](#) and [3.7](#)).

37 Students' differing exposure to methods of assessment had no impact on their perceptions of its fairness. However, the more often they were assessed, the greater the likelihood of them believing that they were assessed too frequently. And although the majority (58%) of students understood clearly the requirements to achieve a high grade, a sizeable minority - a quarter of all students - did not.

The skills students had acquired since starting their course

38 The majority of all students felt that all their academic, personal development, and enterprise skills had improved since starting their course, especially their analytical (81%) and communication skills (69%) ([Table 3.8](#)). The one exception was numeracy skills; students' evaluation of their development of this skill, along with their computing and writing skills, was heavily influenced by the subject they had studied.

39 More full-time students than either part-time or non-degree students reported improvements in all their skills. The highest levels of improvement in the skills traditionally highly valued by employers took place among those students most in need of them - the new labour market entrants. Thus, students' human resourcefulness, which will equip them not only for the

workplace but for life generally, had improved as a result of their experiences in higher education.

Students' views on higher education facilities

40 Library, computing, and laboratory facilities, along with specialist equipment, have all been affected by resource constraints. Students, especially those at '1992 universities', had felt the effects. Most serious of all was the lack of books. Only a minority of students were satisfied with their institutions' non-academic support and facilities such as career guidance and the Students' Union. Indeed, high proportions of older and part-time students thought that these facilities were irrelevant to them. This was just one indicator of a recurrent theme - that higher education remains geared to the needs of school-leavers despite the growing numbers of mature students.

Students' views on academic-related facilities

41 Students' levels of satisfaction with their libraries were:

- 74 per cent for the opening times of their libraries;
- 66 per cent for the range of facilities they offered;
- 38 per cent for the availability of books.

42 Students were most critical about the lack of books; half of them were dissatisfied. Those most discontented with the availability of books were full-time students at '1992 universities' (59% were dissatisfied, [Table 4.1](#)).

43 The satisfaction levels students expressed with other facilities were:

- 58 per cent for the computing facilities available;
- 45 per cent for laboratory facilities;
- 43 per cent for access to specialist equipment needed for their course;
- 34 per cent for the amount of computing support available.

44 Once again, in all cases, full-time students at '1992 universities' were least satisfied ([Table 4.1](#)).

Students' views on non-academic support

45 Only a minority of students were satisfied with:

- the amount of non-academic support available (43%);
- the quality of the non-academic support (39%);
- career guidance and support (37%).

46 The key differences in students' views on these facilities depended on whether they were studying full- or part-time. Part-time students were the least likely to be satisfied, especially with career guidance, and the majority (60%) did not see this service as relevant to them, probably because they were already employed. Their experiences bring into question the role of the service which may be geared towards the needs of first-time entrants to the labour market rather than older, experienced students or job-changers ([Table 4.2](#)).

Students' views on non-academic facilities

47 Extra-curricular and social activities were an important part of younger students' 'university/college experience'; older students had other preoccupations. The majority of part-time students, therefore, did not think these facilities, or those at their Students' Union, were applicable to them. Of all those students who did ([Table 4.3](#)), their levels of satisfaction were:

- 51 per cent for the extra-curricula activities available;
- 43 per cent for the facilities in the Students' Union;
- 31 per cent for the support from the Students' Union.

48 Students at '1992 universities' were more likely to be dissatisfied with the facilities but the main differences in students' opinions were associated with their age and mode of study. Significantly, those students who reported that they were attracted to their educational institution because of the extra-curricular opportunities on offer were not disappointed - over four out of five were satisfied.

Students' views on how well the needs of mature students and those with children were met

49 Despite the growing numbers of mature students, higher education still appears to be catering for the traditional school-leaver intake. Most mature students, and particularly those with children, did not believe their needs were acknowledged. Lone parent students were particularly dissatisfied ([Table 4.4](#)).

- Of students aged 25 and over, 47 per cent did not believe adequate thought was given to mature students, compared with seven per cent of those under 21 years old.
- Sixty per cent of lone parents did not believe that enough support was given to mature students; they of all students felt most strongly about this issue. Family type was therefore even more significant than students' age in determining responses.
- Of lone parent students, 51 per cent were discontent with general levels of awareness of the needs of students with family responsibilities, compared with 28 per cent of married or cohabiting students with children, and 14 per cent of single, childless students.
- Of lone parents, 48 per cent were dissatisfied with childcare provision for students, compared with 40 per cent of couples with children and 12 per cent of single, childless students.

50 Although lone parents currently form only a small minority of the student population, constituting one fifth of the students with children, their numbers are likely to grow in the future. For them, education plays a particular role as the key route out of poverty and dependence on state benefits.

The future

51 Students, on the whole, did not feel very strongly about any single dimension of their institution or course that they wanted to be changed. Full and part-time students, and those at 'pre-1992' and '1992' universities had different agendas but their concerns echoed those already highlighted in this report about teaching methods, libraries, and access to part-time study. For

the vast majority of students, their very positive experiences of higher education had met their expectations and had given them a realistic assessment of their labour-market prospects. They had gained a great deal from their time in higher education and been exposed to a wide range of invaluable experiences.

What changes would students like to see introduced?

52 Students' answers to an open-ended question showed that they had very disparate views on what changes or improvements they would like to see made to their institution or their course. Full and part-time students had different priorities, reflecting their differing concerns.

53 The three most frequently cited changes wanted by full-time students were:

- more relevant, or a wider range of books, in the library (13%);
- more time devoted to tutorials and individual teaching (11%);
- more communication between staff/departments and students (11%)

54 Twice as many full-time students at '1992 universities' than at 'pre-1992 universities' sought improvements in their libraries (18% compared to 9%) and in technological and computing equipment (15% compared to 6%).

55 The three most frequently cited changes wanted by part-time students were:

- help and/or better courses for part-time and working students (10%);
- more relevant, or a wider range of, books in the library (9%);
- better organisation and greater flexibility of lectures and timetables (8%).

56 Not all of these changes necessarily require additional resources.

Have students' expectations of higher education been met?

57 Most students had gained a great deal from their time in higher education. They had been exposed to a wide range of experiences which they valued highly. For the vast majority - at least four out of five - their aspirations had been met. In addition, the majority (67%) said that their time at university/college had lived up to their expectations. Students felt this irrespective of their personal characteristics and factors associated with their course. And, for four out of ten students, their experiences had been better than expected. This was particularly true for full-time students and those at 'pre-1992' universities.

What do students intend to do once they have finished their course?

58 Full and part-time students had different plans. Half of full-time students intended to get a job and a further fifth wanted to continue studying. Over a third of part-timers planned to study for another qualification and a quarter intended to get a different job in a new type of work or were undecided ([Table 5.2](#)).

59 Only a minority of students had chosen their actual course because it would enhance their labour-market prospects, so it is not surprising that only a third believed that their course was equipping them for the demands of working life. Over half of all students thought that their qualification would get them a good job, especially degree students, those taking vocational subjects, and those with an instrumental orientation to their subject.

