

Chapter 5

The future

Introduction

5.1 This chapter discusses what changes students would like to see in their courses and institutions, what they personally have gained from their university experience, and what they intend to do once they have completed their course.

What changes would students like to see introduced to their course or institution?

5.2 All students were asked, in an open-ended question, what changes or improvements they would like to see made to their institution or their course. Their views were very diverse, with no more than 12 per cent of the student body as a whole identifying any one issue. This is an interesting finding in itself, suggesting not only very disparate concerns, but also a general level of satisfaction. It is also perhaps surprising given some of the findings of the previous chapter.

5.3 The three most frequently cited changes students wanted to see were:

- more relevant/wider range of books in the library (12%);
- more time devoted to tutorials and individual teaching (9%);
- more communication between staff or departments and students (9%).

5.4 Full- and part-time students had both different agendas and sets of priorities. Full-time students, most of all, wished for changes in the three areas listed above while those at '1992 universities' particularly sought improvements in their libraries (18%, compared with 9% at 'pre-1992 universities'). Full-time students also wanted better technological and computing equipment (10%), especially those attending '1992 universities' (15%, compared with 6% at '1992 universities'). Their wishes, therefore, were a reflection of the issues discussed in the previous chapter which had caused dissatisfaction.

5.5 In contrast, at the top of part-time students' agenda was a desire for more help and/or better courses for part-time and working students (10%), followed by more relevant or a wider range of books in the library (9%), better organisation and greater flexibility of lectures and timetables (8%), and better-quality lectures (8%).

5.6 Not all of the changes which the students would like necessarily require additional resources, but those related to the library, equipment and individual tuition do so. Moreover, as noted above, libraries have been particularly affected by reductions in resources while coping with the increasing number of students using them. Tutorials and individual teaching sessions with students

have often been abandoned because they are so resource-intensive.

Have students' expectations of higher education been met?

5.7 What students believed they had gained since starting their course is outlined in [Table 5.1](#). Clearly, a large majority of students had had a range of positive experiences, all which contributed to their personal, intellectual, and social development.

Table 5.1 – What students have gained since starting their course

Experience	Column percentages ^a		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All Students
Personal development			
To develop new or existing skills	87	80	84
To broaden my horizons	82	64	75
To increase my self-esteem/confidence	73	57	68
Intellectual development			
To experience intellectual growth and stimulation	82	83	82
To learn about and discuss new ideas	80	79	79
Social development			
To meet new people	96	82	91
To have a good time	81	27	62
Weighted base (n=)	692	386	1,078

^aMultiple responses are than one answer
Source: P3 Survey of Students, 1997

5.8 When the students' experiences are compared with those they aspired to when they were thinking about going to university or college ([Table 2.2](#)), the extent to which their aspirations had been met can be gauged. In over four out of five cases, aspirations have been fulfilled, suggesting extremely positive outcomes for a very high proportion of the student population.

5.9 Students' university/college experiences were most likely to have given them opportunities to: meet new people (98%); experience intellectual growth and stimulation (91%); and learn about and discuss new ideas. Their time at university/college was least likely to have increased their self-esteem or self-confidence. Even so, the vast majority (84%) of students who had hoped for this outcome felt that their confidence had been boosted since starting their course.

5.10 In addition, over two-thirds of all students said that their time at university/college had lived up to their expectations; for one in eight it had not, while one in five were undecided. Full-time students at 'pre-1992 universities' (74%) were more likely to believe this than full-timers at '1992 universities' (62%) or part-time students overall (63%).

5.11 Moreover, for four out of ten students their experiences at university/college had been better than expected. This was particularly true for full-time students (43%) in comparison to part-time students (27%). This difference was associated less with the type of course they were taking, than with where they were pursuing their course. Students at 'pre-1992 universities' consistently had better experiences than they anticipated compared to those at '1992 universities'. For instance, over a half (53%) of full-time students at 'pre-

1992 universities' had had this positive outcome in contrast to a third of full-time students at '1992 universities'.

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

What were students' plans for the future?

5.12 Full- and part-time students had very different plans once they had completed their studies ([Table 5.2](#)). The majority of full-time students intended to get a job immediately after finishing their course and a further fifth wanted to continue studying. Over a third of part-timers planned to study for another qualification, and over a quarter intended to get a different job in a new type of work, or were undecided. Part-time students' indecision on what to do on completing their course suggests that there is a potential demand for good career guidance which at the moment appears to be unmet by the services on campus ([Table 4.2](#)).

5.13 There were some significant differences in students' intentions by the subjects they were studying. For instance, students studying education were much more likely to say they were going to get a job straight after completing higher education than those pursuing a humanities or science course (49% compared with 26%). Multidisciplinary students were the most likely to say that they were going to continue studying, while science students were the most likely to be undecided about their future plans.

Table 5.2 – What students hope to do when they finish their course

Students' intentions	Column percentages ^a		
	Full-time students	Part-time students	All students
Get a job	49	6	34
Get a different job in a new type of work	6	27	13
Gain another qualification or continue studying	20	37	26
Take time out or go travelling	16	5	12
Don't know yet	16	26	20
Weighted base (n)	697	390	1,087

^aMultiple responses are then one answer
Source: F3 Survey of Students, 1997

How optimistic are students about their future plans?

5.14 As we have seen, most full-time students wanted paid employment once they left university or college. Indeed, one of the key reasons which all students gave for entering higher education was to improve their labour-market prospects. Yet, only a third of all students believed that their particular course was equipping them for the demands of working life while a quarter did not believe this. This is perhaps not surprising given students' reasons for choosing their particular course ([Chapter 2](#)). It will be recalled that only a minority of students opted for their course because it would enhance their long-term job and career prospects ([Figure 2.2](#)). Most had chosen their course for intellectual reasons. This indicates that students can study what they are interested in and still believe that it will improve their job prospects. Nor is it surprising that those students pursuing vocational subjects such as medicine, engineering, maths and computing, and education were more optimistic. Around half of these students believed their course was equipping them for

working life.²⁴

5.15 In addition, over half (54%) of all students thought that their qualification would get them a good job while one in ten did not believe this. Full-time students were more confident than part-time students (61% compared with 42%). So too were those following a degree rather than a non-degree course (56% compared with 39%), which probably reflected a realistic assessment of the respective values of their qualifications in the labour market. The type of institution which full-time students attended made no difference to their views. This is perhaps surprising, given the evidence from existing research which suggests that the labour-market prospects of students graduating from 'pre-1992 universities' tend to be better than for those graduating from '1992 universities'.

5.16 The greatest differences in students' levels of optimism related to their initial reasons for entering higher education and for choosing their course. Nearly three-quarters of students who had entered higher education because they wanted to pursue a particular career and needed a particular qualification believed that their qualification would get them a good job, as did nearly two-thirds who entered because they thought higher education would help them get a job or better job. In addition, students with an instrumental orientation, who had opted for their course because it would enhance their labour-market prospects, were the more likely to believe that their qualification would lead to a good job than those with a fatalistic or negative approach (65% compared to 40%).

5.17 Another important factor influencing students' optimism was what they intended to do once they had completed their course. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of students who intended to get a job thought that their qualification would get them a good job compared to under a half (47%) who were planning to gain another qualification.

5.18 Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that employment-orientated students strongly believed that their qualification would meet their labour-market aspirations.

Conclusion

5.19 The students surveyed did not feel very strongly about any single dimension of their institution or course which they wanted to see changed. Their views were disparate, and full- and part-time students had differing agendas. Most important for full-time students was a desire for more books in the library, echoing their dissatisfaction with the availability of books. Those at '1992 universities' wanted better equipment, again echoing earlier discontent. By contrast, part-time students wanted more choice over the sort of courses available, reflecting the very real constraints which currently exist and which have been reported in this study. Not all the changes wanted by students necessarily require additional resources.

5.20 For the majority of students, their experience of higher education had met their aspirations and had lived up to their expectations, especially students

at 'pre-1992 universities'. They were less optimistic, however, that their course was equipping them for the demands of working life but those taking vocationally orientated courses were more positive about this. Overall, most believed that their qualification would get them a good job, especially those with particular career aspirations and labour-market ambitions.