

Executive Summary

Background to the research

1 The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education was established 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 exclusively on administrative and support staff.¹

Aims and objectives of the study

2 The study aimed to collect information on the attitudes, experiences and expectations of administrative and support staff currently working in higher education (HE). The objectives were:

- to understand the impact of changes in higher education on the working lives of these staff;
- in particular, to assess impacts on staff roles and responsibilities;
- to examine their opportunities for training, staff development and career progression;
- to assess levels and sources of job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction; and
- to explore their ideas on the development of higher education over the next twenty years.

Methodology

3 The study consisted of four focus groups conducted with:

- technical support staff;
- central and departmental administrators;
- computing support staff; and
- library staff.

The group discussions were conducted in November 1996.

Staff groups

4 Three distinct groups of administrative and support staff could clearly be identified from the sample of staff who took part in the research. The main distinction between them related to their motives for entering higher education.

5 The *niche-finders* were mostly long-servers who were not particularly highly qualified. These staff members 'fell into' higher education rather

than chose it specifically as a career path. They were attracted to higher education because it compared favourably with employment in the private sector.

6 The *subject specialists* were more highly qualified and were a mix of long-servers and newer recruits. These people entered higher education because it offered them the best, and often the only, opportunity to pursue their subject interest or specialism. They had few opportunities to work outside higher education and, even where alternatives were available, higher education offered the most prestigious jobs. These staff were attracted to the stimulating intellectual environment offered by higher education and valued their involvement in educating others in their subject area.

7 The *new professionals* comprised the smallest group, being newer recruits to higher education. They had taken jobs in the growth areas of higher education - student services, marketing, information services - and had often 'created their own jobs' out of new posts. They were attracted by the variety and challenge offered by their posts.

Changes in the workload

8 All of the administrative and support staff had experienced a significant increase in the volume of their work. This was largely the result of a combination of growing student numbers, resource constraints and static, or falling, staffing levels.

9 Staff recognised the need for changes in higher education and were not opposed to taking on additional responsibility. Yet many expressed concerns about the impact which recent developments had made on their working lives. Many were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the amount of work they were expected to undertake. Some were also worried that the pressure created by the volume of work was having an adverse affect on the quality of the service they could provide.

The changing roles and responsibilities of administrative and support staff

10 Administrative and support staff believed that they were playing an increasingly central role in higher education. They attributed this to three key developments:

- the growth of information technology (IT);
- changes in the delivery of higher education; and
- the development of an 'enterprise culture' within higher education.

11 The growth in IT had involved administrative and support staff in a wider range and a higher level of functions than they had previously undertaken. Changes in the delivery of higher education had impacted on staff in a number of ways:

- modularisation and semesterisation had drawn staff into the planning and management of courses;
- academic staff had begun to delegate more tasks to administrative staff;
- a shift towards an 'independent learning' environment required some staff to play a greater role in teaching students.

12 The enterprise culture meant that staff were involved in work relating to 'value for money' and fundraising. They had to adapt to a new 'management culture'. Most staff welcomed the opportunity to undertake additional responsibilities but were concerned that they did not receive enough support or back-up in their new roles.

Training, staff development and opportunities for career progression

13 In general, staff believed there was a commitment to training, in theory, in higher education. Yet they felt that their institutions had very little to offer them in terms of staff development and career progression. 'Pre-1992 universities', in particular, lacked progressive training policies which met the needs of administrative and support staff. '1992 universities' tended to have more progressive approaches to training.

14 Experiences of training provision were different for some staff. *New professional* staff were more likely than other staff to feel that their training needs were taken seriously but this tended to be an advantage only in the short term. Longer-serving *new professionals* reported similar restrictions on their training opportunities as did niche- *finders and subject specialists*.

15 Most staff working in both '1992' and 'pre-1992' universities experienced practical obstacles to obtaining the training they felt they needed. The biggest obstacle was money - most had been unable to attend a training course on the grounds of cost. Some staff believed that they suffered because their training needs were given a very low priority. Staff who worked in institutions which devolved training budgets to department level were particularly likely to report experiencing a 'Cinderella effect'.

16 Staff reported that a lack of time was another major obstacle to accessing training. Few felt able to take time away from their work in order to attend training courses. This constraint had become more severe as the volume and level of responsibility of their jobs had grown.

17 Several members of staff were training for further academic qualifications. Most were doing so on a self-funded basis outside working hours. The tendency towards academic as opposed to vocational qualifications was striking, particularly as these staff did not have academic-related posts. Staff felt that academics lacked respect for vocational qualifications and would not take them seriously without academic qualifications.

18 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, although such procedures were in place for academic-related posts. Again, *new professionals* had slightly more positive experiences of appraisal and opportunities for staff development.

19 Staff in '1992 universities', where appraisal procedures were more advanced, often experienced a tension between the increased expectations generated by appraisals and the opportunities available to fulfil them. This led them to question the value of appraisals.

20 Staff expressed most frustration over their opportunities for career progression with higher education. The majority felt that they had no opportunities for progression at all. They perceived that the major constraint on opportunities for career progression was financial.

Job satisfaction and plans for the future

21 Staff motives for entering higher education clearly shaped their expectations and attitudes to work and, in turn, job satisfaction. Most gained satisfaction from their work, feeling that their involvement in the education process was making an important contribution to society.

22 Different staff gained satisfaction from different aspects of their jobs. The *niche-finders* felt that higher education offered a more attractive 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 of these staff also felt that they were valued and well paid.

23 However, levels of dissatisfaction were also high for most staff and focused on a number of areas:

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

24 Despite these high 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. By contrast, 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 think they would be able to progress in their careers if they remained in higher education.

Recommendations for change

25 Staff recommendations for change focused on three areas:

- resource management;

- the career structure;
- the need for a strategic approach.

26 Staff felt that poor resource management caused more problems than resource constraints and could be avoided. They believed that more efficient resource management was needed in:

- money and equipment;
- human resources.

27 A better career structure, which recognised the developments in the role of administrative and support staff, was also an important recommendation for change.

28 Most important, staff stressed the need for an overall strategy for higher education within which institutions could develop. This strategy needed to include:

- a commitment to a more commercial orientation in higher education;
- agreement on the role and function of administrative and support staff;
- decision-making on the structure and infrastructure of higher education;
- an institutional plan of action for all staff.