

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Background

The Higher Education sector has undergone considerable change in recent years and is likely to continue to do so in the years to come. The Government is committed to raising participation in Higher Education substantially amongst those aged 18 to 30 years old by 2010. Achieving this will require sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled staff. The increasing prominence of recruitment and retention problems combined with a long-standing concern that the sector faces a 'retirement bulge' - as academics from the 1960s expansion reach retirement - has led to concern about the adequacy of the future supply of academics. This study was designed to identify the factors which lead to individuals entering and leaving academic employment in the English Higher Education sector.

Key Findings

- The study did not find evidence of severe recruitment and retention problems in the sector as a whole. However, there was evidence of some difficulties as:
 - Vacancies sometimes remain unfilled
 - There was some reported decline in the quality of applicants.
 Problems occur throughout the sector, but are more common in some subjects and at higher grades.
- Academic pay is low relative to that in other highly qualified jobs in the UK, but lies somewhat in the middle of the sample of eight countries to which it was compared. Overall, UK academics:
 - earn less in real terms than academics in the US (the difference with the US is particularly marked at the top-end of the earnings distribution)
 - earn a similar amount to academics in Denmark, France and Canada, and
 - earn more than academics Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Sweden
 Thus pay is likely to be a factor encouraging outflow of academics from the UK to the US, but also a factor easing recruitment from Sweden, Japan, Australia and New Zealand
- The main sources of entrants to academia are students and employees in other sectors, with forty per cent being foreign (i.e. non-UK nationals)
- Entrants to academia tend to be recruited to fixed-term contracts in research
- Almost 40 per cent of research students are keen to have an academic career, although many research students and academics did not seriously consider alternative careers
- Motivations for people who changed careers to enter academia include a better lifestyle or the desire for change, stress and other problems with their previous job
- About two-thirds of academics expected to remain in UK academia until retirement
- Research is a major source of satisfaction for academics and many staff would prefer to spend more of their time on research
- Academics from ethnic minorities were less satisfied with the hours they work, their relations with their colleagues and the opportunities they have to use their own initiative
- Although, there was a commitment to equal opportunities in the case study universities at the level of policy, many of the staff believed that disability, age, religion and ethnicity as well as gender affected progression within Higher Education
- Factors which increase the likelihood of expecting to leave academia are:
 - being a foreign national
 - being on a fixed-term contract
 - dissatisfaction with the non-pecuniary elements of the job
 - working longer hours (particularly on administration)
 - spending fewer hours on research
 - feeling that the workload was excessive
 - believing that decisions on either individual pay, recruitment to senior posts or promotion at their current university were not at all fair
 - being dissatisfied with pay and the level of pay (but not estimated relative pay).

Introduction

Demand for academic staff in Higher Education has been increasing and may be expected to continue to increase if the Government's target of 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds in Higher Education by 2010 is to be met. At the same time, recruitment and retention problems have been growing in prominence and there has been a long-standing concern that the sector faces a 'retirement bulge', as academics from the 1960s expansion reach retirement. Consequently, there is concern about the adequacy of the future supply of academics.

Other substantial changes in Higher Education in the past 10 to 20 years are likely to have contributed to the tightness of the academic labour market. Polytechnics were granted university status in 1992, changing their funding regime, their focus and the demands on staff. The number of students has grown substantially, a growth which has not been matched by staff increases resulting in a large increase in the student:staff ratio. Changes in funding have led to much greater emphasis on research output (through the Research Assessment Exercise, the RAE), teaching quality (through the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency, the QAA) and on academics raising research and consultancy funds. Other changes include tighter contractual terms (affecting holidays and hours worked), an increase in the use of short-term and hourly-paid contracts and the loss of tenure. Overall, these changes have tended to alter the nature of the job, reducing autonomy and increasing the workload, including that of administrative and teaching tasks. At the same time, both the salaries and status of academics are perceived to have deteriorated relative to alternative careers.

Substantial change in the nature of any job is likely to increase turnover, as a mismatch develops between the nature of the job to which people were recruited and the actual job. If these changes tend to reduce the quality of the job, rather than just change it, and if the applicant requirements are not altered (and, probably, lowered), recruitment will also become more difficult. Both turnover and recruitment difficulties will be exacerbated by a relative decline in pay.

Against this background, the study was designed to identify the factors which led to individuals entering and leaving academic employment in the English Higher Education sector. Although the main focus was entry and exit from the *sector*, recruitment to and retention by *individual institutions* can shed light on this and was also investigated.

For the purposes of the study academic employment was defined as jobs in Higher Education institutions (Universities and Colleges of Higher Education) whose main function was academic teaching or academic research, irrespective of the contractual terms of the job holder. Thus lecturing (e.g. professors and lecturers)

and research staff (e.g. research assistants, post-docs and senior research fellows) are included, but academic-related staff (e.g. technicians) are not. Full-time, part-time, permanent and temporary staff within these groups are included. However, the coverage of hourly staff by the study was severely limited.

Two main groups of academics were excluded from the study: those in Further Education Institutions and those on clinical rates of pay. The resources of the study precluded inclusion of these two groups. The study relates to English academia and data are for England, except for HESA research student data and the analysis of international comparisons of pay, which both use UK data.

Methodology

The study had five, inter-related, strands:

- a literature review to establish the nature of the recruitment and retention problems and to identify previous evidence on the factors affecting recruitment and retention; this concentrated mainly on the last twenty years although it did include earlier work where relevant;
- analysis of HESA staff and student data, 2001/02, to provide a descriptive analysis of turnover in academia, to identify the basic characteristics of employment in the sector and to identify the student supply into academia;
- a comparative analysis of pay, using 2001 data, both for comparable employment nationally and for academics in Higher Education internationally, in order to establish the competitiveness of academic pay;
- qualitative research within thirteen case study universities exploring human resource policies and practices and factors affecting entry and exit from the sector; the fieldwork was conducted between July 2003 and July 2004;
- quantitative surveys of academic staff and of research students to identify factors which affect recruitment into academia and retention; the fieldwork was conducted between May and July 2004.

Findings

a. Recruitment and retention problems

The study did not identify severe recruitment and retention problems in the sector. However, some problems were apparent: vacancies sometimes remained unfilled and there was some reported decline in the quality of applicants. Reported difficulties were greater for more senior posts. The extent of difficulty varied by subject and fluctuated over time.

b. Pay

Pay is one of the important factors in career and job choice, affecting both recruitment and retention. The study compared the pay of UK academics with highly qualified people in the rest of the economy and also compared the pay of UK academics with academics in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, France and Japan. Differences in data definitions, differences in the nature of academic jobs and differences in cost of living between countries prevent exact cross country comparisons. However, the findings identify the broad scale of differences.

Academic pay is low relative to that in other highly qualified jobs in the UK, which is likely to reduce entry to the sector. (Retention is likely to be less responsive to pay differentials as careers progress, due, in many subjects, to a divergence in the skills developed in academia and those needed for senior jobs in other sectors.)

UK academic pay¹ compares favourably with academic pay in Sweden, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. UK academic pay is similar to that of Denmark, France and Canada. Pay in the US is higher for comparable academic staff and the difference is particularly marked at the top-end of the earnings distribution. Thus pay is likely to be a factor encouraging outflow of academics from the UK to the US, but also a factor easing recruitment from Sweden, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.

Whilst lower paying countries may prove a fruitful source of recruits, foreign recruitment should be viewed with some caution. Recruits from other EU (and EEA) countries, Australia, New Zealand and the US were identified as more likely to expect to leave UK academia and so reliance on foreign recruitment may lead to future retention problems.

c. Recruitment to the sector

■ *Pattern of recruitment*

The main sources of entrants to academia are students and employees in other sectors:

- employees in other sectors (63 per cent, comprising 42 per cent employed in the UK; 21 per cent employed abroad, including 11 per cent in academia abroad)
- students (34 per cent, comprising: 19 per cent UK domiciled students studying in the UK; 10 per cent foreign students studying in the UK; and five per cent students studying abroad)

Many make a career change to enter academia, normally from higher level occupations (managerial, professional, associate professional and technical), rather than from lower level jobs (via being a mature student). Career changers were particularly common in new universities and in Business and administrative studies, Computing, Subjects Allied to Medicine, Education, Social studies and Engineering.

Forty per cent of recruits are foreign (i.e. non-UK nationals). Amongst research students, non-British EU nationals were more likely to want to work in UK academia than other nationals (including British).

Entrants to academia tend to be recruited to fixed-term contracts in research, although the percentage entering to permanent contracts rises with age, suggesting that previous skills are relevant and recognised. It appeared that the tendency to recruit to research jobs and to fixed-term contracts had grown over time.

■ *Reasons for entering academia*

Almost 40 per cent of research students were keen to have an academic career and a further 21 per cent saw this of equal interest to some other career. Amongst existing academics just over one half had been keen to have an academic career. However, many research students and academics did not seriously consider alternative careers and, for those progressing from a research degree, entering academia appears often to be a form of drift, to a job which is known. A significant minority of research students saw academia as providing a stepping stone to another career (12 per cent), which is likely to reduce retention.

The study examined what research students wanted from a career and which attributes they thought academia offered. The main attraction of academic jobs to research students is doing research and setting one's own research agenda. A career offering research was very important to 63 per cent of research students. Only 30 per cent were strongly attracted by teaching. Only one-third of research students saw a high salary as very important in their career choice. Non-pecuniary aspects were more often important: most often a good working environment, variety, freedom to use initiative and seeing tangible outcomes from their job. Close behind these factors are autonomy in the job, control of their research, career prospects, collaboration and flexibility of working hours. Also important were good physical work conditions, helping people and job security.

Broadly speaking, research students believed that an academic career offered the attributes they wanted from a career. However, there are three important exceptions to this: career prospects, job security and high salary, none of which tended to be seen as good in academia. Slow career progression, lack of job security (particularly at the start of an academic career) and

¹ This refers to real pay, i.e. having taken into account differences in cost of living.

relatively low pay are likely to reduce the supply from this source. Research students appeared to be well-informed about the nature of academic employment. However, they tended to underestimate academic pay and not to be aware of the additional financial benefits of university pensions. This is likely to reduce entry to academia (but also reduce turnover) and so more information on pay may be useful in promoting academic careers among research students.

For career changers, other motivations included a better lifestyle (36 per cent) or the desire for change (34 per cent). Few were driven through lack of further progression in their previous career outside of Higher Education (or being made redundant or retiring). Some of the factors prompting change to a career in Higher Education included stress in previous job, shift work, routine working and wanting variety at work, academia being 'more relaxed and informal', career progression requiring movement into management (and wanting to stay with one's profession). For art and design lecturers one factor appears to be to fund artistic practice.

d. Satisfaction of academic staff

Academic staff are somewhat less satisfied with their jobs than those in the workforce as a whole. Academics appear to be considering three separate sets of elements of their jobs, namely the pecuniary factors (both the salary and the ability to earn money from additional work), non-pecuniary factors relating to the qualitative dimensions of the job and longer-term factors such as promotions and job security. The factors affecting satisfaction are discussed below.

- Research, particularly self-determined research, is a major source of satisfaction for academics and many academic staff would prefer to spend more of their time on research. The demand for research output and the RAE in particular are seen rather negatively. Hours spent on research increase staff satisfaction with the actual work itself.
- Whilst teaching is not the most important reason for becoming an academic, most academics prefer a job that involves teaching. Teaching bright students and seeing their students develop are the positive aspects of teaching. The negative aspects relate to assessment, both of students and of staff themselves.
- Administrative tasks and organisational change tend to be viewed as negative aspects of the job by most academics. Hours of work spent on administration have a negative effect on satisfaction with almost all dimensions of academics' job satisfaction.
- Academic staff tend to value more subtle elements of their jobs, such as the support of their peers and the ability to participate in the wider academic community.
- Being on a fixed-term contract significantly reduces

satisfaction.

There was no difference between women and men in satisfaction (once one takes into account differences in other characteristics), except that women were more satisfied with salary. This may be due to women having lower expectations of salary, due to discrimination in the labour market as a whole.

Academics from ethnic minorities tended to be less satisfied than their white colleagues with the hours they work, their relations with their colleagues and the opportunities they have to use their own initiative. This is likely to indicate that academics from ethnic minorities find themselves in less satisfactory jobs.

e. Retention

About two-thirds of academics expected to remain in UK academia until retirement. This was higher in new universities. We would estimate that between three and six per cent would leave the sector in the year following interview. This comprised two to three per cent of those on permanent contracts and five to 11 per cent of those on fixed-term contracts.

Forty-three per cent of those who thought they might leave the sector in the following year expected to move to another job (outside academia). This was most commonly to a UK job outside research and teaching, to an academic job abroad or for fixed-term contracts staff, to a UK research job (outside academia). Contract staff could be seen as being driven out of the sector due to insecurity: they tended to leave due to their contract ending, the desire for a permanent job or pessimism about job opportunities in UK academia.

■ Factors affecting leaving the sector

The study was unable to examine directly the factors affecting leaving the sector. Instead, it examined individuals' expectations of leaving. The following factors increased the likelihood of expecting to leave the sector:

- dissatisfaction with non-pecuniary elements (the work itself, relations with managers, being able to use one's own initiative, hours, relations with colleagues and physical work conditions)
- being a non-British EU (and EEA) national, Australian, New Zealander or US national
- having had a break in one's academic career
- being on a non-permanent contract
- being closer to the end of a fixed-term contract
- hours worked
- hours spent on administrative tasks
- the fewer hours spent on research
- perception of excessive workload
- belief that decisions on either individual pay, recruitment to senior posts or promotion at their

- current university are not at all fair
- dissatisfaction with pay and the level of pay (but not estimated relative pay).

A number of aspects of academic employment that staff feel are important for their satisfaction did not affect their likelihood of leaving. Those who said that the RAE, QAA requirements and the general direction of Higher Education policy lowers their satisfaction by a lot are no more likely to expect to leave UK Higher Education than those who do not. The likelihood of leaving was no different between those who had changed career to enter academia and those who had not. Nor did it differ by gender, ethnicity, or having children. Part-timers were no more likely to expect to leave the sector than full-timers.

f. Discrimination and equal opportunities

Discrimination, if worse relative to other employment, may exacerbate recruitment and retention difficulties amongst the discriminated against groups. The sparse, previous, evidence found differences in pay between ethnic minorities and whites and in promotion between women and men. This study found that, compared with whites, academics from ethnic minorities were less satisfied with a number of aspects of their job (see Section f above). This may suggest that ethnic minority academics find themselves in less satisfactory jobs. Whilst a number of factors may be advanced for these differences, discrimination (whether direct or indirect) cannot be ruled out and further research is required in this area.

There was a commitment to equal opportunities in the case study universities at the level of policy, and many heads of department believed that men and women had the same opportunities for advancement, or at least that these were improving. However, many of the staff believed that disability, age, religion and ethnicity, as well as gender, affected progression within Higher Education. Indeed, the percentage of staff who believed that these factors affected progression were 64 per cent (age), 44 per cent (gender), 38 per cent (disability) 26 per cent (ethnicity) and 10 per cent (religious affiliation). The qualitative research identified a number of possible reasons for women being disadvantaged, including unfair work allocation, sexism and a disproportionate impact on career progression of part-time working. It was apparent, both from the survey and qualitative research that many staff had not considered the position and opportunities for other under-represented groups, which suggests that the diversity debate does not have a high profile amongst academics in UK universities.

g. Management and human resource practices

Management and human resource practices differ across

universities and can affect satisfaction. Most of the case study universities had mixed practices (good and bad) and seemed to be trying to address some of the problem areas.

There appears to be a lack of communication and understanding between the academics and the university administration (including the human resource specialists), which probably increases the burden of administrative demands on academics.

Implementation of human resource practices tends to be devolved. In old universities the post of head of department tends to be rotated every few years. Academics' management and administrative responsibilities tend to be accorded little status. All these factors lead to lower expertise and some poor practice.

■ *Recruitment practice and recruitment difficulties*

Replacement of staff tended to be slow (sometimes taking more than a year), due to the common practice of reviewing the need for each vacant post. This led to additional work demands on remaining staff.

It was common to down-grade vacated posts.

Due to difficulties attracting good candidates, especially at senior levels and to some specialisms, active search methods had become common (using search committees and networks). Case study universities tended to overlook their own PhD students for recruitment.

In the research-intensive old case study universities, due to the RAE, there was an increased emphasis on recruiting 'stars' and poaching. This was expected to increase in the run up to the next RAE.

The case study universities were practising flexibility over the pay offered to new recruits, but were uncomfortable with the idea of market supplements because of the discrepancies they can create. Pay was seen as only one of the means to attract new recruits. Other incentives included facilities, equipment and start-up funding. There were indications that these did not always meet recruits' expectations, and it is possible that this could result in early turnover.

■ *Promotion and retention practices*

The criteria and transparency of promotion practices was found to vary between the case study universities. Universities were concerned that the criteria used should take account of the range of academic activity, including research, teaching, administration and enterprise. However, research continued to be the pre-eminent criterion, and in new universities was of greater importance than in the past. The allocation of teaching and administrative responsibilities within university

schools or departments was therefore becoming more important than in the past, because individuals with heavy teaching or administration loads were less able to carry out research and therefore achieve promotion. This was found to lead to considerable resentment. In some cases, to retain a member of staff, the formal process was bypassed, leading to strong dissatisfaction amongst other staff.

Below professorial level, pay scales are set nationally. However, case study universities were increasingly using pay incentives to keep valued staff, particularly those in hard to recruit subjects or senior research-productive staff. In some cases, this was formalised. In others the formal system was bypassed to award additional increments, for example, when a member of staff received another job offer. This was not normally seen (or found) to be effective and was thought to affect the morale of other staff.

Although the case study universities had appraisal systems, these were sometimes of recent origin and were not linked directly to the promotions process. Neither were they linked to training and development. Many staff were not aware of the procedures and criteria for promotion. There was evidence of bypassing the formal promotions process. Such practices are likely to be perceived as unfair and to lead to dissatisfaction. In response to retention difficulties, case study universities were looking at progression and promotion, to make criteria more transparent and to ease the process of progression. Their main concern was to identify and reward strong performers and to encourage them to stay. Transparent systems to enable such progression are likely to be more acceptable to the academic workforce than practising covert deals with individuals.

Although training is usually regarded as key to workforce retention, it was acknowledged that heads of department do not always have the skills needed to develop staff. The prevailing view was that academic staff are responsible for their own training and development. However, there was evidence of an increase in attention to such issues, including management training for heads of department to assist them in identifying staff development needs.

Conclusions

■ *Raising the supply to the sector*

The key messages from the research about how supply to the sector could be increased are:

- increasing the supply of UK-domiciled students achieving a PhD;
- shifting the balance of academic job content towards research;
- increasing pay;

- targeting foreign recruitment (with the caveat that this may increase retention problems);
- increasing the job security of researchers;
- improving career progression for both lecturing and for research-only staff.

These findings suggest there are a number of ways in which individual universities and the Government could raise retention of academics in the sector. Many, but not all of these would have financial implications.

■ *Improving retention*

Throughout the study the message that academics were driven by the desire to do research and neither enjoyed administrative tasks nor always could see benefits of these was repeated. Changing the relative time spent on research and administration (without increasing total hours) and reducing administrative demands would be likely to increase retention, as would reducing the total time spent working. Approaches to this might include increasing the staff/student ratio, reducing structural change, reducing change in administrative demands and reducing the demands of quality reviews and inspections.

Since turnover is higher among foreign academics, encouraging British students to undertake research degrees and so expanding the supply of British people with PhDs entering the sector is likely to increase retention. This might be achieved through more funding for PhD students or addressing the debt built up during earlier degrees.

Turnover is high amongst researchers largely due to the use of temporary contracts for most and the lack of career opportunities (in research). Addressing these two issues is likely to have a major effect on the loss of researchers from the sector. It may require imaginative approaches to deployment of both researchers and lecturers.

Ensuring pay and promotion decisions are fair and seen to be fair is likely to reduce loss of staff from the sector. Certainly, enhancing pay of recruits (above comparable levels for existing staff) and of valued staff expected to leave are regarded as 'unfair' and excite strong feelings. Market supplements and Golden Handshakes also tend to be seen as unfair. Performance pay must be implemented well to avoid perceptions of unfairness. However, even so, the problem of the average employee tending to believe their performance is above average and so deserving a higher than average pay rise, means that more employees are likely to be dissatisfied by performance pay than satisfied.

Perceptions of the fairness of promotion decisions are likely to be influenced by the extent of opportunities for promotion: the more opportunity, the less important fairness becomes (and the more likely each individual will have experienced promotion). Thus expanding the

opportunities for promotion is likely to increase retention, irrespective of other changes. It is also possible that the emphasis on promotion is, in part, a result of relatively low pay levels. If so, increasing the pay of academics is likely to increase retention also.

Additional Information

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