Recruitment and Retention of Staff in Higher Education 2005

Summary of the main report
The Institute of Employment Studies (IES) was commissioned by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) to carry out the 6th research report of recruitment and retention in the UK higher education sector.

The Institute of Employment Studies is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in human resource studies. A catalogue of over 100 titles is available from IES, or on the IES website, www.employment-studies.ac.uk. UCEA would like to thank the authors of the report:

Marie Strebler
Emma Pollard
Linda Miller
Karen Akroyd.
Acknowledgements

UCEA would like to thank the ten institutions that participated in the survey as case studies.
A full version of this report is available to download from the following web-sites:

www.uea.ac.uk
www.hefce.ac.uk
www.scop.ac.uk
www.universitiesuk.ac.uk
Summary of the main report

Key findings

The key findings emerging from the research include:

Recruitment and retention issues

- The majority of institutions in the survey believed that the picture regarding recruitment and retention had largely remained the same over the past 12 months, although there do appear to have been some improvements since our last survey in 2002.

- Most institutions report that they experience recruitment and retention difficulties ‘sometimes’ for academic staff, but fewer say this is the case for other staff groups. The group where shortages were experienced most commonly was among manual workers.

- Subjects for which academic recruitment shortages occurred were the same as in previous surveys: law, business and management, economics, accounting, computing/IT and health subjects.

- Specific problems were also highlighted by the case study institutions for recruiting staff in education specialities such as early years and educational psychology.

- Interviewees believed that problems in recruiting academics arose in areas where there is strong demand for similar groups of professionals from outside HE (e.g. in business, health and education).

- While over half of the institutions say they ‘sometimes’ have difficulties in retaining academic, administrative and professional staff, only a minority report difficulties in retaining technical, clerical or manual staff.

- More severe recruitment and retention difficulties are reported for certain groups of support staff, particularly cleaning and catering staff. Some difficulties are also reported for recruiting personnel and maintenance staff.

- The case study institutions also emphasised issues regarding recruitment for senior posts in the professional and administrative field and some groups of specialists, such as academic registrars, financial accountants, business development and human resources staff.

- Most institutions are expecting the situation to remain the same over the next twelve months but a quarter expects the situation to worsen with regard to academic staff.

- The case study institutions saw further potential challenges for retention in the future arising from the end of the European project funding cycle affecting staff on fixed term contracts, and the age profile of academics in some fields.

- Nearly a third of HEIs felt that low turnover of academic staff was a problem, while fewer than a fifth said the same for support staff turnover. In general, more pre-1992 universities experienced problems with high turnover of support staff than post-92 institutions. For colleges, low turnover seemed to be more of an issue than high turnover.
Perceived causes and impact

- A third of institutions in the survey believed that both private and public sector pay levels are affecting their ability to recruit. Private sector pay, in particular, affects support staff recruitment.

- Aside from pay, challenges were perceived by institutions to include: a limited pool of applicants with the right skills; a mismatch between demand and supply of individuals with certain skills or specialisms; quantity and quality of applications; and, for some institutions, inaccessible or unattractive locations.

- The case study institutions cited a number of factors that served to attract applicants such as generous terms and conditions, pleasant locations (for some), being perceived as a fair employer, interesting jobs and, for research-rich institutions, their international research profile.

- Location and workload are seen by a sizeable proportion of institutions in the survey to impact on retention. Location and cost of living are particularly issues for HEIs in London and in the South.

- The run up to the forthcoming RAE has increased competition for research academics amongst HEIs. Interviewees referred to this as creating an active ‘transfer market’.

- Areas of dissatisfaction cited by employee interviewees included lack of career progression, an increasing workload, difficulties in gaining access to their managers and lack of support from their line managers.

- Increased workload and consequent burden on existing staff is perceived to be the main impact of recruitment and retention difficulties.

Measurement and monitoring

- The absence of any consistent monitoring and evaluation, apart from equal opportunities monitoring, presents the case study HEIs with challenges in identifying and measuring the extent of difficulties.

- Analyses of unfilled vacancies data provided by the survey respondents indicated that the highest proportions of posts remaining unfilled after three months are for academics and manual staff.

- However, the turnover rates for permanent staff from the HESA statistics show rates to be lowest for technical, academic and administrative staff. Rates are slightly higher for manual and clerical staff.

- Institutions adopt no consistent approach to calculating turnover rates. The types of leavers included in institutional calculations can include both involuntary (e.g. retirement) and voluntary (e.g. leaving to go to a new job). Three-quarters of institutions use exit surveys or interviews but few analyse the outcomes of these procedures.

- The case study institutions felt that there was no real problem with retention from a sector-wide perspective in that those who leave are mostly moving to another HEI, rather than to another sector.
Actions and initiatives taken

• There were few accounts in the survey of actions being taken to address recruitment or retention issues. A third of institutions reported upgrading posts for support staff and a third had introduced market supplements (for both academic and support staff).

• The case studies provided some more examples of strategies adopted by the case study institutions to address recruitment and retention difficulties. These included: attempting to be seen as an employer of choice; developing e-recruitment and websites; using informal networks and encouraging applications from overseas.

• Actions reported by the case study institutions included the use of Rewarding and Developing Staff funding to increase promotion opportunities and offer improved relocation allowances to potential recruits, as well as the introduction of more flexible working patterns and the use of more fractional posts.

• Non-financial rewards cited by the case study institutions in attempts to improve retention included increased time for research, the recognition of teaching contribution, better access to training and development (including induction), and improved communications.
The research project

As part of its continuing research into the Higher Education labour market, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake a research project to explore current patterns in the recruitment and retention of staff in HE. The research also examined the methods by which HE employers monitor and measure workforce changes and the solutions found by HEIs in dealing with any shortages. Previous surveys of recruitment and retention have been conducted on a regular basis by UCEA, the last being in 2002. The research was supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). The research covered HEIs throughout the UK.

The research used both quantitative and qualitative methods to build on previous research and to provide an up-to-date picture of the challenges facing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The first phase of the project was a survey of all HE institutions’ staff recruitment and retention difficulties via the HEFCE extranet. Conducted in early 2005, the survey asked institutions to provide information that related mainly to the calendar year 2004, with the exception of their number of vacancies, which related to the academic year 2003-04. One hundred and forty-five responses were received which is equivalent to a response rate of 87 per cent. This provides a very good representation of the sector. Survey respondents consist of 58 pre-1992 universities, 43 post-1992 universities and 44 colleges. Three replies were received from Northern Ireland, 15 from Scotland and 11 from Wales. This is a larger number of responses than was obtained in the previous survey, conducted in 2002, in which 126 returns were received.

The second phase of the research was a series of ten case studies to examine the experience of individual institutions. The ten universities and colleges visited represent a cross section of: geographic regions in the UK (one in Scotland, Wales, South West, East, Yorkshire and Humberside, West Midlands, and two each in the North West and in London); types of institutions (five pre-92 universities including a research intensive university, three post-92 institutions, one specialist college and one general college); and sizes, with student populations ranging from 2,000 to 30,000. Interviews were conducted with twenty one heads of academic departments, eight heads of support departments and fourteen representatives from the central HR/personnel function. Also, in six of the case studies, interviews or focus groups were held with newly-recruited staff (twenty-three in total).

The key messages emerging from the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research project were used as the basis for an assessment of the extent and nature of recruitment and retention challenges within HEIs. In addition, the factors that are contributing to these difficulties, the methods by which institutions measure and evaluate them, and possible solutions found by institutions, are reported.
The project set out to assess the extent and nature of recruitment and retention difficulties within HE institutions. Institutions were asked about the regularity with which they experience difficulties, and the academic areas and groups of staff most affected by recruitment and retention issues.

**Are there recruitment and retention issues?**

The majority of institutions in the survey believed that the picture regarding recruitment and retention had largely remained the same over the past 12 months, although there do appear to have been some improvements since 2002. As shown in Figure 1, only a minority of institutions reported that they ‘always’ or ‘usually’ had recruitment difficulties with any groups of staff. Most institutions experienced recruitment difficulties ‘sometimes’ for academic, administrative and professional staff, and manual staff. However, recruitment difficulties were ‘rarely’ reported for clerical and technical staff. The group with the highest incidence of employers experiencing problems ‘usually’ was manual workers.

Similar trends emerged for the retention of staff across the institutions responding to the survey. The exception was that more institutions reported ‘sometimes’ experiencing retention difficulties for clerical staff than they did for recruitment (see Figure 2). The majority of institutions felt that the situation with regard to recruitment and retention would remain the same over the coming twelve months for all groups of staff, except academics. With academic staff, a quarter of institutions (mainly pre-1992 HEIs) expected recruitment and retention to worsen.

**Figure 1: Regularity of recruitment difficulties, by staff group**

Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2005 (*Note: the survey does not include clinical academics*)
In the case study institutions, while there were some areas in which persistent difficulties were experienced as discussed below, there was a general view that recruitment problems occasionally arose but that these were not really systematic or consistent. In most cases, the problems were felt not to be insurmountable: ‘we always manage in the end’ as one interviewee remarked.

Amongst HR representatives and heads of department, there was generally felt to be no real problem with retention in that either people were not leaving, or those who did leave were mostly moving within the sector, (hence HE as a whole was not losing individuals), or there was a pool of recruits to replace those who left.

However, the case study institutions saw potential challenges for retention in the future. Amongst these were the ending of the European funding cycle, leading to the potential loss of staff on fixed-term contracts funded through the European Social Fund and other European funding streams, and the ageing profile of academics in some fields, particularly health sciences.

**Specific areas of challenge**

**Academic staff**

Some of the subject areas in which recruitment shortages were identified by the survey respondents was the same as in previous years: law, business and management, economics, accounting and computing/IT. Health subjects again were a reason of difficulty, in particular nursing and other health care professions. In general, these subjects appeared to be causing difficulties across all types of institution.

*Figure 2: Regularity of retention difficulties, by staff group*
In terms of grade of staff, the majority of reports of staff recruitment difficulties concerned the recruitment of lecturing staff with slightly fewer difficulties reported for recruiting professors. While not reporting consistent problems with recruitment, some HEIs noted regular difficulties in recruiting certain grades of staff. For example, electrical and electronic engineering were subject areas in which institutions were encountering some difficulties recruiting lecturers and, to a lesser extent, professors. Recruitment of lecturers in sport science and biology also caused difficulties for some institutions.

Given concerns about the ageing profile of their workforce, institutions were asked if they had any difficulties in recruiting young academic staff. A larger proportion of post-1992 universities in the survey (27 per cent) reported this to be a problem than did colleges (10 per cent) or pre-1992 universities (9 per cent).

Similar problem areas for recruitment were reported by the case study institutions. Specific problems were highlighted in recruiting staff for education. Specialities such as Early Years, Childhood Studies and Educational Psychology, were proving a particular challenge. Attracting individuals from the secondary school sector was problematic too.

HR staff and heads of department felt that difficulties in recruiting academic staff tended to arise in areas where there are equivalent needs for professionals in the private sector or wider public sector, and in areas seeing above average growth within the sector. This leads to HEIs having to compete with other employers as well as with other HEIs. This was a problem across all of the HEIs visited. Problems arose at all levels but appeared to be greater when recruiting to senior posts.

With retention, the survey data showed that difficulties were reported for the same main groups as those for which difficulties in recruitment were found: law, economics, business, nursing etc. In other areas, however, low turnover rates of academic staff were viewed as a problem by nearly a third of institutions.

HR staff interviewed in the case studies believed retention was not a real issue. However, in some geographical regions HEIs (mostly those in the South East) were experiencing some retention difficulties. This was particularly the case for areas in which there was both local and national competition and competition from within HE and outside the sector. These included academic research and teaching staff in areas of social work, finance and sociology.

**Support staff**

The two groups of support staff in which the largest numbers of reports of difficulties were seen in both recruiting and retaining staff were cleaning and catering. Fifty nine institutions reported difficulties recruiting, and 55 institutions difficulties retaining, cleaning staff. For catering staff, 55 institutions reported recruitment and 42 retention difficulties. A sizeable proportion of institutions in the survey also reported having difficulties in recruiting personnel and maintenance staff (33 and 31 institutions respectively) but fewer – around half as many – reported difficulty retaining these staff groups. Almost one-fifth of survey respondents (19 per cent) indicated that they had problems retaining young support staff in 2004. More of the pre- and post-1992 universities reported this to be an issue (23 and 22 per cent respectively) than did colleges (11 per cent). In addition, more of the pre-1992 universities (32 per cent) experienced a problem...
with high turnover of support staff in general compared with post-1992 universities (27 per cent) and colleges (15 per cent); while for colleges low turnover of support staff seemed to be more of an issue.

The case study institutions confirmed the survey findings for cleaners and caterers. Some of the comments made by interviewees concerning cleaners clearly illustrate the challenge: ‘[W]e couldn’t recruit cleaners at all, [it was] virtually impossible, as they can get more pay in the private sector’ (HR representative). Recruiting caterers is also a problem, particularly when there is a need to satisfy increased demand; ‘Catering is the main recruitment issue. It has always been difficult to recruit good general catering assistants and chefs and the department is growing so it is becoming more important to recruit a core of staff’ (head of department).

When compared with the survey findings, however, the case study institutions seemed to place more emphasis on issues experienced with the recruitment for senior support posts in the professional and administrative staff group. These included academic registrars and assistant registrars, financial accountants and finance staff in general, business development and project management, estates management, professional engineering staff and planning support. In addition, there were difficulties in recruiting HR staff, particularly project managers and consultants.

Similarly, HR staff reported difficulties in recruiting technical staff, particularly senior technical staff, IT technicians (e.g. web-designers and systems administrators), animal lab staff, and skilled trades such as electricians. While retention was not perceived to be a problem overall, HR staff in the South East reported some issues relating to the retention of support staff in secretarial posts, junior administrative roles, HR, web support and library clerical roles. Interviewees also reported there were difficulties retaining manual staff, particularly catering and cleaning staff.

But some improving areas

In the case study institutions, HR representatives also mentioned areas in which they had previously or traditionally experienced problems, but where those difficulties had largely been overcome, either due to changes in focus for the institution and/or wider market changes increasing the supply of suitably qualified individuals. These included computing (both in academic and support roles), and maths and physics academic staff. Interestingly, respondents in the survey still identified computing as an area where problems are encountered. On closer examination, this was mostly cited by pre-1992 universities (21 out of 58).
Perceived causes and impact

The factors that are contributing to these challenges and the impact of these difficulties on the institutions and the service they provide are discussed together for the survey and the case studies. Respondents in the survey were asked whether a set of suggested factors (private and public sector pay; workload; location; cost of living; and fixed-term contracts) impact on their ability to recruit and retain academic and support staff. Interviewees in the case study institutions generated a list of factors which served to attract recruits or challenged the institution’s ability to compete for staff.

Which factors influence recruitment?

As shown in Figure 3, a third of the institutions in the survey believed that both private and public sector pay levels were affecting their ability to recruit academic staff. This was particularly the case for post-1992 universities in the survey. Private sector pay was cited by over half of the institutions as impacting on their ability to recruit support staff.

Figure 3: Factors impacting on ability to recruit academic staff and support staff

Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2005
There is regional variation in the extent to which these factors are viewed as being important. Private sector pay was seen as an issue affecting academic staff recruitment by a majority of institutions in the East and West Midlands, the North East, South West and East of England, and in Northern Ireland. A majority of institutions in the East and West Midlands, North West and South East also identified public sector pay as a factor impacting on their ability to recruit academic staff. Cost of living was cited by a greater proportion of institutions in the South East as a factor in recruiting both academic and support staff.

The list of factors that helped to attract applicants identified by interviewees in the case study institutions is shown in Box 1.

**Box 1: Factors attracting applicants**
- offering generous terms and conditions
- located in a pleasant environment
- being a fair employer
- interesting and fulfilling jobs
- RAE profile

HEIs thought they could offer more generous terms and conditions than those in other industries and sectors (e.g. final salary pension, reasonable holidays, sick pay, subsidised refectories, sports facilities and parking). As one Head of Academic Services noted, people may be unaware of this aspect to working in HE: ‘perhaps we don’t make enough of these. Our salaries may not compete but we have other benefits’.

Those institutions based on campuses with green open spaces felt that a pleasant environment is an attraction. The sector is also building a reputation of being a fair employer offering good family friendly policies. The ability to offer interesting, fulfilling and worthwhile jobs together with institution-specific factors such as reputation (e.g. Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)) completed the list. These factors tended to be attractive to both academic and support staff.

The case study interviewees also identified challenges facing them in recruiting the right people as shown in Box 2.

**Box 2: Challenges in recruitment**
- limited pool of applicants
- finding the right skill mix
- mismatch between supply and demand
- quality and quantity of applications
- pay in HE
- unattractive and inaccessible location
For some senior academic posts and also some support posts, the institution is ‘fishing in a very small pool’. Across the UK and even internationally, there is a limited supply of suitably qualified and experienced individuals. The small size of the pool in some disciplines creates an intense competition amongst HEIs. This has recently been intensified in the run up to the forthcoming RAE in reducing the number of suitable candidates and inflating their value in the sector, creating what some interviewees referred to as an active ‘transfer market’.

Another issue identified was the mismatch between demand and supply in terms of the demand for subjects amongst students leading to increased demand for academic staff and the corresponding supply of these staff. In some disciplines, such as Psychology, the demand for academic staff is growing faster than supply. HR representatives and heads of department noted that, for some posts, the quality of applications they receive and the quality of applicants can be poor and quantity of applications small.

Pay in the HE sector is considered by some department heads to lag behind that offered in the public and the private sectors. Moving to work in HE from outside can sometimes result in a substantial drop in earnings. This is particularly an issue for education academics moving from senior level posts in the secondary school sector, due to recent improvements in school teachers’ pay. Some department heads also felt they could not afford to pay at the same rates as other more ‘research rich’ universities.

When recruiting support staff, an unattractive or inaccessible location was also a challenge: ‘we are slightly out of the way, in an inconvenient location for those on low incomes and working few hours. It is two bus rides… if you are working only 15 hours a week it can be a problem’. The recruitment process itself can be slow, which could mean that suitable candidates accepted other offers; alternatively, some institutions found their deadlines for applications too tight to allow time for people from overseas to apply.

**Which factors influence retention?**

Location and workload were seen by a sizeable proportion of institutions in the survey as impacting primarily on retention as seen in Figure 4. Institutions in the South West and Wales identified workload as an issue in retaining academic staff and Northern Ireland and the South West in retaining support staff. Location was primarily mentioned as an issue in retention for both groups of staff by institutions located in London and the South. Private sector pay levels are an important factor for support staff. Nearly half of institutions felt that private sector pay is a factor affecting their ability to retain support staff. Public sector pay levels were seen as more important for academic staff than support staff and short-term contracts were also seen as a more important factor for academic retention.
Figure 4: Factors impacting on ability to retain academic staff and support staff

![Bar Chart]

Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2005

Given that only a few of the case study institutions closely monitor reasons for leaving, most of the information relating to reasons for staff departing are based on the perceptions of HR representatives and heads of departments. These are supplemented by the comments regarding areas of dissatisfaction made by newly recruited staff in the focus groups.

Areas of dissatisfaction cited by interviewees as shown in Box 3 can be classified as extrinsic factors (such as pay) or intrinsic factors (such as career development).

Box 3: Areas of dissatisfaction*
- career progression
- increasing workload
- work pressure
- access to management
- lack of line manager support
- pay

* In no particular order

One of the key intrinsic factors identified by both HR representatives and heads of department as contributing to staff decisions to leave was to improve their careers. They felt that staff moved on to achieve higher responsibilities and more senior
positions. Indeed one newly recruited staff member noted: ‘we can undertake
further training and study for qualifications but this can mean that people become
overqualified for their jobs and have no real opportunities to apply their skills, so good
people leave’. A closely-related factor that increases the likelihood that individuals
would need to move out to progress is low turnover in senior positions: ‘there is
quite a big jump up from administrator to advisor grade, and they have to wait for
a post to become vacant to apply for upgrading’.

Increasing workload, particularly amongst academic staff, is also regarded as a
retention issue. Many staff reported dissatisfaction with this aspect of their jobs
during the staff focus groups. One member of staff said that he felt he had had no
real settling-in time: ‘it was just constant work. I had to come in hard and fast to
get things done, there was no space available, it was just all hands on deck’.
Increasing numbers of students, the amount of bureaucracy and paperwork and
under-resourced departments are amongst other related reasons cited by newly
recruited staff.

For some individuals, the move to HE from another sector can be something of a
culture shock when HE, in reality, proves to be a challenging environment.
Feedback from the staff focus groups indicated there were some issues with line
management that were causing job dissatisfaction. These included the perceived
poor management of under-performing colleagues and the lack of personal
supervision and guidance. A participant noted ‘getting concrete help and support
was really hard’, and another reported how difficult it was to see line managers.

Contrasted with this, some HR representatives acknowledged that a key reason for
leaving is the better salaries to be obtained elsewhere, often outside of the HE
sector. This is particularly the case in health sciences, as the pay in the NHS has
recently become much more attractive. Competition within the sector was referred
to by some heads of departments who feel unable to compete effectively in salary
terms with those universities with a strong research profile and funding.

**Impact on service provision**

Few institutions in the survey reported that their inability to recruit staff, rapid
turnover, or having to recruit lower quality staff than they ideally would like had
had any impact on the provision of services to date. Around a quarter of
institutions in the survey said that shortage of staff due to the inability to recruit
had impacted on teaching and a similar number said there had been an impact on
support services. This seems to be more of an issue for colleges and post-1992
universities than for pre-1992 universities.

The main impact of the difficulties in recruitment reported by the case study
institutions was increased workload. The pressure is felt both above and below the
vacant post and ripples can also be felt outside of the department directly affected:
‘there is a threshold below which people struggle to get the job done’. Other impacts
were seen in the costs of re-advertising; the use of agency staff; and the increased
use of visiting lecturers to cover teaching responsibilities. It is interesting to note,
though, that both focus groups with newly recruited staff and the interviews with
HR representatives also identified the latter as a potential route into a more
permanent position.
The impact of high turnover and difficulties retaining staff in the case study institutions was felt in the loss of investment in terms of recruitment time and expense, and investment in staff development. As one head of HR noted: ‘We have invested in them… it is a ‘lead time’ issue in terms of the new person acquiring sufficient knowledge to ‘get up to speed’, plus there is the manager’s time in developing the new person’. When academic staff leave, it can also impact on the student: staff ratio. However, one of the key effects of retention problems was an increase in the workload burden on existing staff: ‘if someone leaves we rely on other people to cover and be flexible’ (Head of HR). This can lead to staff dissatisfaction and, in turn, encourage more staff to leave. Indeed HR representatives and heads of department noted the importance of communication and managing expectations to try to avoid a vicious circle developing.
In order to gauge where problems are the most highly felt and target interventions, institutions need to monitor, measure and evaluate their recruitment and retention difficulties. The HESA data were used to analyse the degree of staff turnover in HE and the institutions in the survey provided data on their long-term vacancies. The case study institutions discussed their degree of monitoring and perceived turnover and reasons for leaving.

**Monitoring**

One of the key variations in HR recruitment and retention activities across the case studies is the extent of, and sophistication in, monitoring initiatives undertaken. In most of the HEIs visited, discussions indicated that, apart from equal opportunities monitoring, there is no real consistent monitoring of the recruitment process and of its outcomes, either through a lack of resources, capacity or focus.

Some institutions rely on a paper based system which makes it difficult to analyse or monitor recruitment activities in any great detail. For others, when figures are captured they are limited, uninformative or not used. Often the data gathered were limited to the number of applications received, the background of applicants, the number of posts vacant and the number of vacancies filled, with no real monitoring of the quality of applicants. In other cases, the data were not broken down in a way that would enable managers to identify problems and causes.

With no regular monitoring, this presents the case study HEIs with challenges in identifying and measuring the extent of any difficulties. HR has to rely on departments to provide such information. To facilitate this, many of the case study institutions had aligned HR services to departments. Indeed, one institution spoke of working closely with departments: 'we try to get schools to alert us to any problems in recruitment or retention so that we can trouble-shoot and work together to move forward'.

**Vacancies monitoring**

Another way of highlighting recruitment difficulties is to monitor the number of vacancies and to determine how many have remained unfilled over a period.

Institutions in the survey were asked to provide these data. Their interpretation, however, may be limited by the issues concerning monitoring highlighted above. There are other reasons too that make such data unreliable. Indeed, there is no common definition of what constitutes a ‘vacancy’. There are many reasons why posts remain unfilled: it may be because vacancies are proving hard to fill; because agreement to fill a post has not been reached within this time period; or because a strategic decision has been taken to delay recruitment in order to save money.

Nonetheless, institutions that responded to the survey gave information about the number of vacancies that had occurred during the academic year 2003-04, and how many of these had remained unfilled for more than three months. Not surprisingly, the largest number of vacancies is recorded for the academic staff group, which is also the largest group in the survey. After this, clerical and administrative posts are those in which the next highest numbers of vacancies are seen.
If posts unfilled after three months are considered as a proportion of all vacancies, the highest proportions of posts remaining unfilled after three months are seen for academic and manual staff (13 per cent respectively). Similar proportions of administrative and professional posts (12 per cent) and technical staff (10 per cent) remain unfilled after three months. The vacancies least likely to remain unfilled for long periods of time are those for clerical positions (6 per cent).

**Numbers of leavers and turnover rates**

The turnover rate for permanent staff in the institutions participating in the survey is based on their HESA returns for the calendar year 2004\(^1\). The turnover rate has been calculated as a percentage of the number of permanent staff on full-time, or full-time, term-time, contracts who leave from a particular staff group in the year. The groups for which the lowest proportion of leavers is seen are technical staff (6 per cent) and academic staff (7 per cent) followed by administrative and professional staff (8 per cent). For manual and clerical staff, the rate is slightly higher, at 10 per cent. Colleges have the highest leaving rates for administrative and professional and technical staff. There is little difference in the leaving rates for academic, clerical staff and manual staff between the different types of institution.

A meaningful comparison with turnover rates in the wider economy is notoriously difficult to achieve, given different methods of calculations and varied definitions of leaver categories so the following comparison is tentative at best. From a comparison with the latest data available from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)\(^2\), it can be seen that the median turnover rates for permanent staff in the universities generally fall below the median voluntary turnover rates in the wider economy. The highest median turnover rate, ten per cent for permanent manual staff, is considerably lower than the 26 per cent seen in the private sector services and the 15 per cent within the public sector services grouping.

Most of the HR representatives interviewed in the case study institutions were able to give turnover figures, but some have difficulties interpreting these in the most meaningful way. Although the research did not investigate the case study institution methods of calculating turnover rates in detail, discussions with HR staff suggest there to be no real consistent way in measuring turnover across the ten case studies. Indeed, one HR representative talked of the difficulties in removing the influence of retirement and of people finishing short term contracts in order to identify what he felt to be ‘true turnover or retention’.

Nonetheless, across the case studies, turnover is perceived to be low and falling year on year, with HR representatives quoting figures ranging from six to 12 per cent. As one HR representative noted: ‘Turnover is low, less than 12% and has reduced from about 20% in 2001. We must be doing something right’. Another noted how retention had been a problem in the past due to the institution suffering severe financial problems but turnover has improved: ‘we have turned things round and now turnover is low, we now have over retention as people tend to get too comfortable’.

---

\(^1\) Data taken from the HESA New Individualised Staff Record 2003/04 – amended by HEFCE following data provided on 1 April 2005.

The case study institutions tended to give a single turnover figure for the whole institution. One institution, however, was able to break down their turnover figures. This showed that although they had very low rates for permanent academic staff, clerical staff and technical staff, rates for manual staff were much higher.

**Destination of leavers**

Institutions in the survey were asked about their use of attitude and exit surveys. While only a third reported using attitude surveys, nearly three-quarters used some form of exit survey or interview.

Similarly, some of the universities participating in the case studies have moved beyond turnover figures to undertake exit surveys or interviews. They had done so with varying degrees of success. One reported low response rates to their exit survey but, as turnover is not perceived to be a real problem, the need to gather feedback on retention was not regarded as a priority. Another said that staff generally were willing to provide feedback on leaving and had found that exit interviews were more useful than surveys as ‘people say more than they write down’.

No real trends or patterns in leaver destinations emerged from the discussions with HR representatives. Indeed, interviewees typically could give examples of staff that have moved on to a range of various activities. However, heads of department felt that many of their leavers stayed within the HE sector. Possible destinations cited include retirement – causing some concerns for departments with ageing staff profiles (e.g. health sciences); other HEIs – there is movement within the sector, particularly for senior support posts and academic staff which has been referred to as a ‘transfer market’; outside of HE – staff can move into other public sector organisations (e.g. to local authorities, and the NHS) and those leaving from professional support (non-academic) roles can go into the private sector; and further study – some leavers return to education.
The solutions and strategies used by HEIs to remedy these problems were investigated, including financial or non-financial incentives used to recruit and retain, and the efficacy of these methods in resolving the problems.

**Recruitment strategies**

First, there appears to be much that HEIs can, and do, utilise to improve their recruitment process – to improve the field of candidates for vacancies, improve the quality of applications and the ease of selection, and enhance monitoring to identify areas before they become problems as shown in Box 4.

**Box 4: Improving recruitment strategies**

- become an employer of choice
- make full use of technology
- develop own recruitment website
- advertise vacancies on external websites
- introduce better HR systems
- use informal networks
- use recruitment agencies and head-hunters
- create an internal pool of labour
- widen the net overseas
- align selection process to skill needs

Most HR representatives and heads of departments in the case study institutions highlighted the need to raise the profile and improve the branding of their institution as an employer of choice and to better ‘sell’ the institution and the vacancies they have. In particular they believed that highlighting the benefits of working in the sector and at the specific institution would assist recruitment: ‘we need to help people understand what university life is like and the advantages and rewards of a career in HE’.

Additionally, institutions felt that efforts should be made to overcome any negative perceptions, particularly those relating to image or location. Several case study institutions are working on this aspect, for example tightening up and standardising their recruitment literature, improving information about posts and the institution itself and making adverts more ‘dynamic’; improving links with industry; using high profile ‘champions’ such as VCs to raise the institution’s image and profile; and working with their marketing departments to improve their profile in the region and across the UK.

Many HR representatives felt a need to make better use of technology in their recruitment activities, particularly in terms of enabling candidates to apply for jobs online, and to have their own recruitment website listing opportunities, providing
information about the institution and giving guidance to individuals on how to apply (e.g. next steps). Some of the case study institutions had made progress in this respect. One HR representative noted how the institution’s recruitment website provides case study examples of real staff, giving an account of their careers, their progress, and what they like about working at the institution. Another site gives potential applicants hints and tips on applying. Others have successfully used external recruitment websites to advertise their vacancies. For example, one institution used a recruitment website for advertising a vacancy in their IT services department. They found it was very effective in that they received a good response and saved money on advertising in the trade press, such as Computer Weekly.

HR representatives also spoke of a need for better HR systems that would allow closer monitoring of recruitment and retention, in order to identify problems and provide more accurate information. Introducing a new Management Information system provides opportunities to obtain more meaningful data. Another aspect to improving the recruitment process described by a few HR representatives is to rethink advertising strategy – looking at the most cost effective means of attracting the best candidates. One head of HR spoke of his target to reduce spend on advertising, which is leading the institution to question the ethos of externally advertising all vacancies, regardless of the suitability of internal candidates. He noted that external advertising can send negative signals to existing staff but acknowledged that there may be equal opportunities issues in not advertising widely.

Most of the case study institutions were using formal networks and particularly the informal networks of heads of department and senior staff, when recruiting to senior support or academic posts. This is used mainly to encourage applications from particular individuals and strengthen the quality of the applicant field rather than to side-step the selection process: ‘to get the vacancy out there, pass the word about and share ideas for potential candidates’. HR representatives also reported using recruitment agencies and head-hunters but this appears to be a strategy that they are reluctant to adopt, using it only occasionally when they encounter particular difficulties and often only with key posts.

Operating its own agency for temporary staff had worked successfully for one institution where it provides an internal pool to cover secretarial and admin posts, using returnees to work, re-deployed staff, people looking for work experience, and students on gap years. However, for another institution this had not been a successful venture, being too costly and raising concerns over quality.

The case study HEIs reported receiving an increasing number of applications from overseas. Sometimes this was as a result of a deliberate strategy to widen the search for candidates, particularly in academic specialities or for senior research posts with a limited candidate pool. In other cases it was as part of a strategy to achieve a better fit with student profiles. However, there were some concerns raised about the commitment to stay with the institution of these, often very geographically mobile, individuals. Other strategies in evidence included: the introduction of innovative selection techniques (e.g. presentation to a panel of students, giving a short lecture, in-tray exercises), working with other institutions for a local recruitment initiative to recruit technicians, and looking to reduce recruitment lead time.
Actions to tackle issues

A minority of institutions in the survey reported that they had taken action to tackle recruitment or retention difficulties. The action that the largest number of institutions (just over a third) reported introducing was upgraded posts for support staff, while about a third had introduced market supplements for academic and support staff. Slightly fewer had upgraded posts for academic staff.

The uptake of such initiatives was similar across all institutions, except for the upgrading of posts for support staff. Some 41 per cent of colleges and 40 per cent of post-1992 universities had taken this action, compared with just 24 per cent of pre-1992 universities. Many of these actions and activities were being used in combination to address both recruitment and retention difficulties.

The case study institutions were also making changes to contract terms to attract new staff, fill vacancies, and retain existing staff (see Box 5). However, from the case study evidence there appeared to be limited upgrading of posts, as this is regarded as a complex process that involves various committees, and could be a permanent change for an institution. As one HR manager noted: ‘some managers do not see the bigger picture and want to offer higher salaries or to regrade the post to help keep the person but the case has to be made and we do not have the flexibility’. Another described how they carefully evaluate each post before it is advertised to encourage recruitment or improve retention.

It is interesting to note that when asked about changes in the next 12 months, 17 institutions in the survey made reference either to job evaluation or movement towards the national framework ‘single spine’. The majority felt that these changes would enable them to improve rewards for some staff and help with retention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 5: Actions to tackle issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• use RDS money to increase promotion opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• create visible career paths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• change working hours for manual staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• introduce flexible working scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• use fractional or transitional posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• encourage secondments from other employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• match salary offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• offer relocation allowances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One HR representative described how the institution had used the Rewarding and Developing Staff (RDS) funding to continue and even exceed their current rate of promotion as a retention mechanism, so that there is now no real cap on the number of promotions per year. Another had used RDS money to fund promotion exercises. Other institutions were working to make progression routes more visible, to create improved career paths and to better manage career progression, especially in support roles.
Two universities reported that changing the working hours of manual staff had been a successful recruitment and retention mechanism. One institution has introduced a night shift for cleaners. They believed this worked well because it helps employees fit work in with their wider commitments. Another had introduced similar night shifts for cleaners but this had been done so that the institution could offer higher pay.

One smaller institution had successfully introduced a flexible working scheme. It was introduced in response to feedback from their staff survey, which indicated that staff favoured flexibility and also in response to feedback from applicants, who placed a greater focus on work life balance than on salary. Fractional or ‘transitional’ posts had been used to address difficulties attracting individuals into HE, particularly those currently working outside of the sector. This is a strategy welcomed by heads of departments needing to recruit academic staff with industry experience (e.g. media) or clinical practice (e.g. health sciences). Secondments to the institution from outside employment can allow individuals to ‘try before they buy’, gaining first-hand experience of working in HE and at the institution.

There was limited use of market supplements or of introductory rewards such as Golden hellos amongst the case study institutions, although most had looked into these as a mechanism for overcoming recruitment difficulties: ‘we are louche to go down that route, we would want to try other mates’; ‘Golden hellos for top people may be effective however, academics tend to favour other incentives like a cap on the number of teaching hours.’ HR representatives reported that changes to pay to attract or retain key people are restricted by pay structures and trade unions. Furthermore, they acknowledged that they can lead to imbalances within departments and an unclear pay system, with new staff being appointed on much better salaries than existing staff: ‘other staff ask “why am I not getting this?”’. There is a general feeling that tweaking pay is a short-term measure that would create problems in the longer term.

Some universities had tried to match salary offers in order to retain key individuals in senior academic or support roles. However, this often relies on heads of departments anticipating problems and spotting people thinking of leaving, but equally, rumours of impending departure may be used to improve an individual’s bargaining position.

Lastly, some HR representatives spoke of offering relocation allowances to attract individuals to move to the local area when relocating within the UK or from overseas. As one interviewee noted: ‘we have used our RDS money to increase the allowance considerably, it is good value for money because you only have to pay it once’.

To a large extent, these actions all come under the banner of extrinsic rewards and there is a limit regarding the extent to which this is under an institution’s control.

Non-financial benefits

A range of non-financial incentives was reported by the case study institutions. These act as intrinsic motivators/rewards to tackle difficulties in attracting new staff and in retaining key staff (see Box 6).

Many institutions were attempting to provide time for research and reduced teaching load through sabbaticals, time off and reduced teaching hours, along with better research facilities (including travel and conference budgets). However, as one interviewee highlighted, this is not cost neutral: ‘you can employ excellent tutors, purely to teach, but to retain people you need to give them career development
opportunities – but in order to progress to lecturer positions people need to undertake research and we don’t have the funding to support this.’

Box 6: Non-financial Rewards

- more time provided for research
- reduced teaching loads
- sabbaticals, time off etc.
- improved research facilities (e.g. via conference attendance etc)
- improved access to training and development
- making staff feel valued
- recognising teaching contribution
- improved communication and response to staff feedback
- induction to the HE sector as well as the job for new staff
- ‘buddy’ and mentoring systems for new staff

Offering training and development opportunities, encouragement and support (such as payment towards fees and time off to study) are regarded by both HR and heads of department as ways to attract and retain staff. This is something that staff appreciated, as indicated in the focus groups with newly recruited staff. HR representatives noted that helping staff to feel valued by providing recognition and support can help with retention. Several spoke of the importance of recognising the work of teaching staff which tends to be overlooked in formal structures such as promotion and progression (and therefore pay) which focus on research contributions, such as the number of publications. One head of HR described how they rewarded excellent teaching contribution through awards and teaching fellowships; another, predominantly a teaching institution, had recently moved to recognise teaching contribution in the academic promotion process.

Communication also appears to play a key role in staff perceptions of ‘value’. One institution had introduced a retention initiative in 2000 which had communication at its heart. A series of Staff Partnership Groups, operating across all sectors and grades, allows staff to feedback on issues that are important to them and help to ensure that staff feel listened to.

Supporting new staff to settle in is also reported as a way to improve retention and can mean providing clear guidance on what is expected of them. One HR representative reported that their institution has a formal induction with structured on-the-job training during a probationary period, regular meetings with line managers, formal induction to the institution and attendance on standard courses (e.g. first aid, how to be appraised, diversity awareness etc.). Another noted how they had improved their induction process after feedback from staff to include an introduction to the HE sector (including the jargon used, as this can be particularly confusing) and the institution’s position in the sector, which was found to be particularly useful to those new to HE. They also used a ‘buddy’ system for new staff (i.e. role models to help new recruits feel at home) and offered mentoring.
Next steps

The research findings clearly demonstrate that the efforts of HEIs to address recruitment and retention issues have been met with some success. Much of the initiatives have been focused on improving the recruitment process and on using financial incentives (e.g. RDS money) to recruit and retain quality staff. There are also some attempts to introduce non-financial benefits to tackle retention issues. While there is a perception that the quality of staff recruited has improved and that retention difficulties have eased, the challenge remains for HEIs to demonstrate that this is a reality rather than just a perception. There is also a need to sustain these improvements in the light of increased demand and competition from within and outside the sector. To this end, we believe the following should be considered:

1. While there is evidence that some HEIs are introducing HR management information systems, the lack of central and consistent information available in some institutions limits the analysis that can be done to monitor and evaluate recruitment and retention outcomes.

2. The sector as a whole, probably via HESA, needs to identify and agree the most meaningful way of defining leaver categories and calculating turnover rates. While retirement patterns are important for staffing reviews, looking at voluntary turnover is more meaningful and would enable wider and more accurate benchmarking to be undertaken both within and outside the sector. There are various ways of calculating rates and the most appropriate formula needs to be chosen.

3. Given the increased competition for talent at senior level, the competition with the private sector and wider public sector in some subjects, institutions should be encouraged to explore beyond overall turnover figures, which may be misleading and can mask more serious problems within an institution and/or subjects as well as groups of staff. It is difficult and costly to replace the best performers.

4. While promoting what HE can offer, there is also a need to avoid overselling the organisation which can lead to high turnover.

5. HEIs should also ensure that increased financial incentives lead to positive outcomes (e.g. excellent and retained performers).

6. Non-financial benefits are under the institution’s control and can be used successfully to tackle recruitment and retention issues. Discussions with newly recruited staff have highlighted the impact of intrinsic motivators and rewards (e.g. flexible working and induction) which are on the whole fairly easy to implement and can act as quick wins.

3 These findings are similar to those reported by the evaluation of Rewarding and Developing Staff initiative; see Evaluation of Rewarding and Developing Staff in HE initiative 2001-02 to 2003-04, May 2005, a report for HEFCE by KPMG LLP.

4 The evaluation of the Rewarding and Developing Staff initiative also commented that there was ‘no evidence of specific monitoring of quality of staff recruited and retained’. p8, op.cit.

5 Voluntary turnover is more meaningful as it is under the institution’s control. Calculating turnover at least should be: number of leavers in a given period/average staff in post over the same period x100. This means that numbers of staff at the beginning and at the end of the year have to be obtained, see Bevan, Barber and Robinson (1997) Keeping the Best: a Practical Guide to Retaining Key Employees, IES Report 337.