



Recruitment and Retention of Staff in Higher Education 2008

Preface

This survey of recruitment and retention in higher education is the latest in a series conducted over the last 20 years. Staff turnover and recruitment and retention measures are important indicators of the attractiveness of higher education (HE) jobs and staff satisfaction within the sector. For this reason, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) conducts surveys of recruitment and retention on a regular basis to provide the sector with an up-to-date picture of the state of the HE labour market.

This year, unlike the previous surveys in 2002 and 2005, we did not conduct any case study research but we did add new questions to the survey questionnaire. We are very grateful to our supporters – the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE – and especially to the Analytical Services Group within HEFCE for collecting the data on our behalf via their web facility.

The survey results indicate that higher education institutions (HEIs) generally have relatively low labour turnover and that recruitment and retention difficulties are limited to particular occupations and academic disciplines. It also indicates that retention is less of a problem than recruitment, so that once staff are recruited they tend to stay. The survey also suggests that, since 2005, the employment situation has improved slightly with fewer HEIs reporting difficulties. Nonetheless, there remain some specific problem areas which HEIs are addressing through market supplements.

UCEA is pleased that the survey results show such a positive picture of the HE labour market overall. The combination of the Framework Agreement changes and the 2006 three-year pay agreement have clearly helped to make HE a very attractive sector in which to work.

Jocelyn Prudence,

Chief Executive,

UCEA

Key findings

The key findings emerging from the research include:

Recruitment and retention issues

- On the whole recruitment and retention is not a major problem for the majority of HEIs. This appears to be the case for pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and colleges of higher education.
- Problems do exist but tend to be confined to specific occupational groups or academic subject areas.
- The majority of HEIs in the survey believed that the picture regarding recruitment and retention had largely remained the same over the past 12 months. The findings were similar in the last survey in 2005 but conditions overall seem to have improved slightly since then.
- Most HEIs report that they 'sometimes' experience recruitment difficulties for academic, administrative/professional and technical staff, but for clerical and manual staff groups the majority of respondents reported that they never have recruitment difficulties.
- Most subject areas for which academic recruitment shortages occurred were the same as in previous surveys; these included business/management, accounting/finance and law. Differences this year include an increase in difficulty for biological sciences staff and a decline in difficulty for IT/computing staff.
- While just over half of the HEIs say they 'sometimes' have difficulties in retaining academic staff, for all other staff groups the majority of respondents reported never having retention difficulties. Overall retention difficulties seem to have eased since the last survey in 2005.
- The vast majority of HEIs are expecting the situation to remain the same over the next 12 months and, of those who do not, more expect the situation to ease rather than worsen.
- There were relatively few problems relating to turnover. Only 1.8% of respondents saw high turnover rates for academic staff as a problem, while 17.7% saw low turnover rates as a problem.
- The average number of vacancies that have been filled by non-UK citizens over the last three years (2005/06 to 2007/08) was reported as 14% for academic staff and 7% for professional and support staff.

Perceived causes and impact

- Over a fifth of respondents to the survey believed that pay levels in the private sector were affecting the recruitment of academic staff, but this was down from a third of respondents in the 2005 survey. Over a third felt that the recruitment of professional/support staff was affected by private sector pay levels but again this was down from three fifths in the 2005 survey.
- Aside from pay, the main challenge perceived by HEIs was their geographical location. This affected the recruitment of academics and professional/support staff.

Recruitment and selection methods

- The most common method used to attract applicants across all staff groups was reported as online advertising.
- The most common selection technique for all staff groups was a face to face interview. Assessment centres are rarely used within the sector but are most commonly used for administrative and professional staff.

Measurement and monitoring

- Four fifths of respondents reported that their institution conducts exit interviews or surveys and just under two thirds carry out staff attitude surveys.
- In marked contrast to the 2005 survey, the vast majority of HEIs analyse the results of these surveys and three quarters disseminate to and/or discuss the results with senior management.
- Analysis of unfilled vacancies data provided by the survey respondents indicated that the highest proportions of posts remaining unfilled after three months were for academic staff.
- The proportions of permanent staff leaving institutions (from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics) are lowest for academic, technical and administrative staff. Rates are slightly higher for manual and clerical staff.
- When compared with turnover rates in the wider economy, the proportion of leavers from the HE sector appears relatively low.

Actions and initiatives taken

- Since the 2005 survey there appears to have been increased action being taken to address recruitment and/or retention issues. A quarter of HEIs reported upgrading posts for support staff.
- The most common technique to tackle recruitment and retention issues was the introduction of market supplements. More HEIs reported providing these for support staff than for academic staff. Approximately three in ten had introduced market supplements for academic staff, and four in ten for support staff.
- Where retention difficulties had been identified during the year, the most popular technique to combat these was increased learning and development opportunities, followed by improving HR/line management skills. Interestingly an improved remuneration/benefits package lagged behind both of these other options.

The research project

As part of its continuing research into the HE labour market, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) conducted a new recruitment and retention survey during July and August 2008. The survey was supported by HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE. Respondents were asked to complete an online questionnaire via the HEFCE Extranet, an encrypted and authenticated web-site. The total number of respondents was 114 out of a potential 162 UK HEIs – a response rate of 70%. This compares with a response rate of 87% in the previous survey in 2005. The survey covered all countries of the UK and there were 97 responses from England, seven from Scotland, seven from Wales and three from Northern Ireland. The research also included responses from the full range of different types of HEI. Responses were received from 48 pre-1992 universities, 44 post-1992 universities and 22 HE colleges. Unless otherwise stated, the data presented in this report refers to the academic year 2007/08.

The research explored current patterns in the recruitment and retention of staff in HE, examined the methods by which HE employers monitor and measure workforce changes and investigated how HEIs deal with any shortages. Previous surveys of recruitment and retention have been conducted on a regular basis by UCEA, the most recent being in 2005.

We are very grateful to HEFCE for collecting the survey data on our behalf and producing the final published report. We are also grateful to those UCEA members who responded to the survey.

Current recruitment and retention issues

The project set out to assess the extent and nature of recruitment and retention difficulties within HEIs. 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 difficulties.

This year some extra questions were asked, aimed at reflecting the changing nature of the HE labour market. There is growing evidence that HEIs are recruiting more frequently from outside the UK, particularly for academic positions, and so new questions about this issue were included for the first time. New questions were added to include the actual methods used by HEIs to recruit and select staff, and the initiatives taken to improve both recruitment and retention at an institutional level were explored in greater depth.

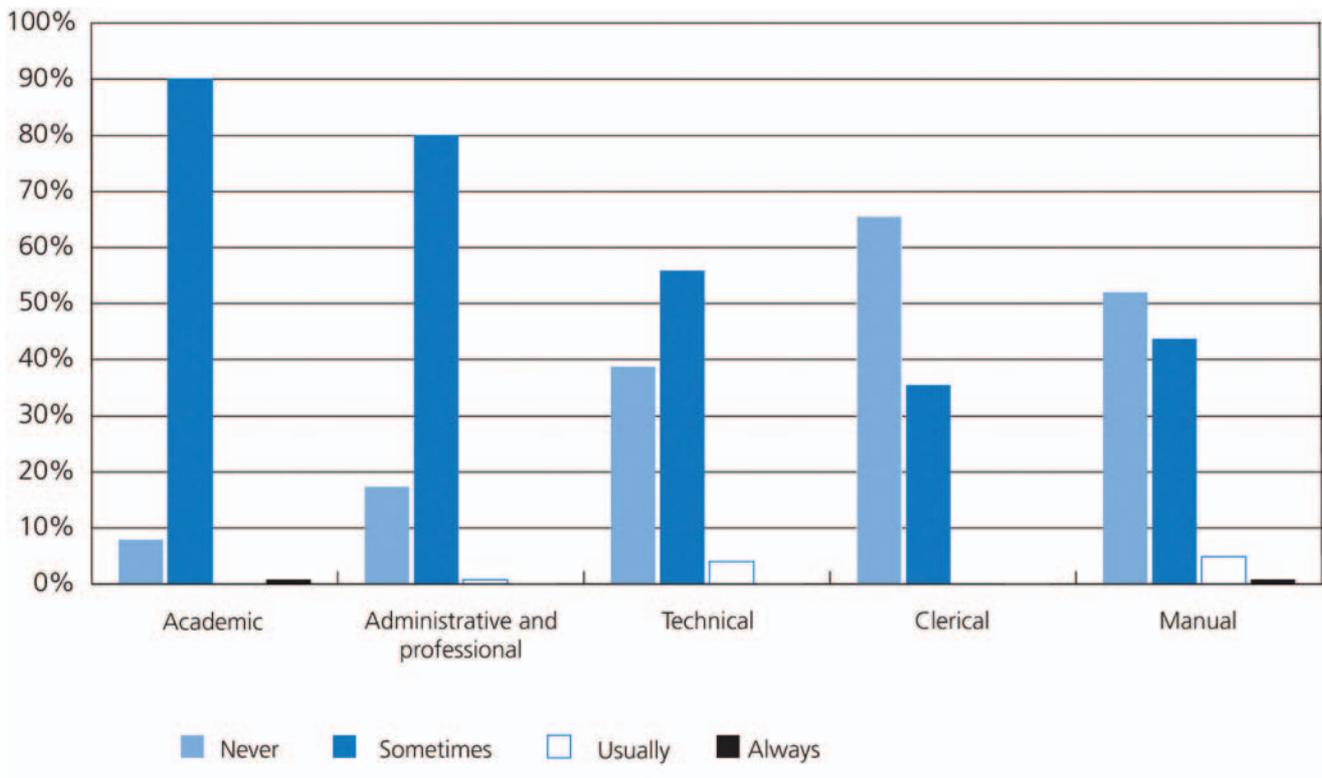
Are there recruitment and retention issues?

The survey results suggest that, overall, HE is experiencing relatively few recruitment and retention related problems. This is not to suggest that there are no problems at all – rather they tend to be concentrated in particular areas. These areas may be related to certain grades of staff, academic subject areas or particular occupational groups.

The majority of HEIs in the survey believed that the picture regarding recruitment and retention had largely remained the same over the past 12 months. However, the situation seems to have improved steadily since previous surveys in 2002 and 2005. As shown in Figure 1, a very small minority of HEIs 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 more than half of institutions for technical staff. However, recruitment difficulties were less of a problem for clerical and technical staff, with more than half of HEIs reporting that they 'never' have difficulties recruiting these staff. The group with the highest incidence where employers experienced problems 'usually' was manual workers, but this was still rare at only 5.5% of respondents.

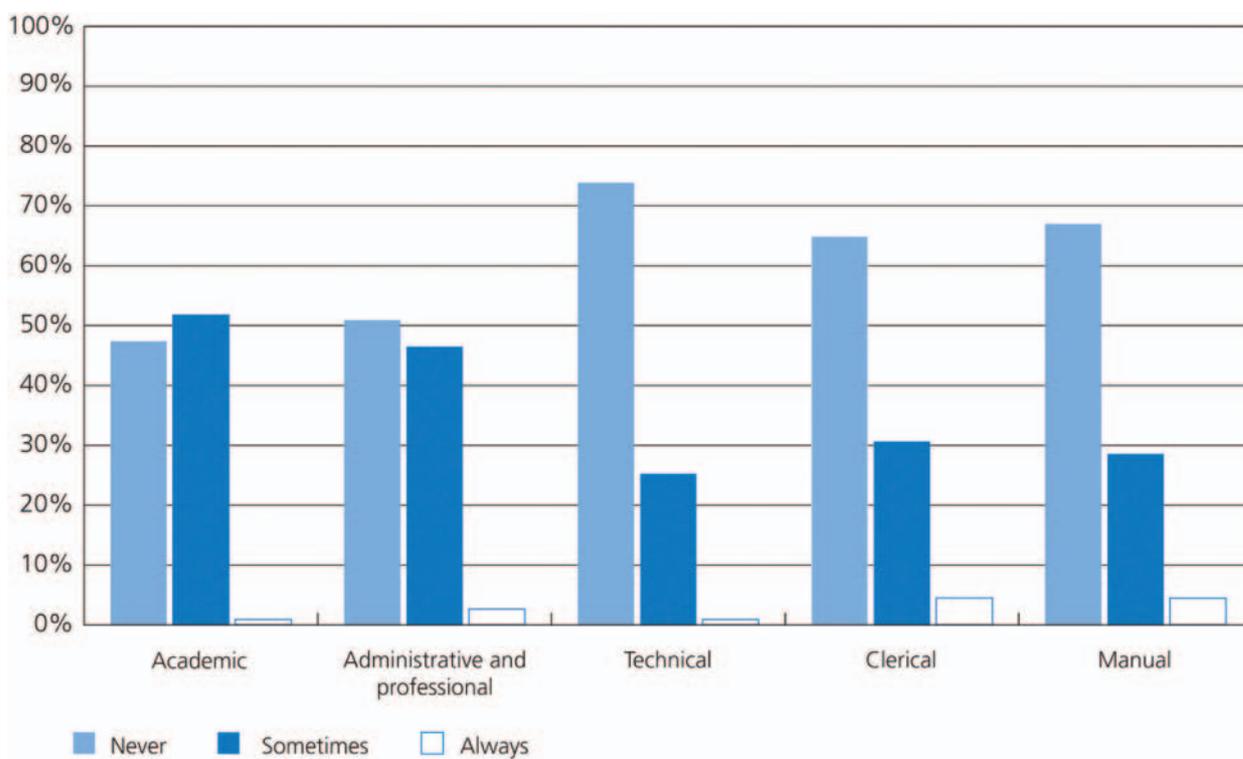
Figure 1: Regularity of recruitment difficulties, by staff group



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008
 (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

Similar trends emerged for the retention of staff across the HEIs responding to the survey. The majority of HEIs felt that the situation with regard to recruitment and retention would remain the same over the coming 12 months for all groups of staff.

Figure 2: Regularity of retention difficulties, by staff group



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008

(Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

Academic staff

Respondents were asked to give further details about recruitment problems with academic staff, specifically around the academic subject areas in which any problems occurred. There was a range of 17 academic subject areas to choose from.

Most subjects for which academic recruitment shortages occurred were the same as in previous surveys, such as business/management, accounting/finance and law. In contrast to previous surveys, this one included an increase in difficulty with the recruitment of biological sciences staff and a decline in difficulty for IT/computing staff. In general, these subjects appeared to be causing difficulties across all types of institution.

In terms of academic staff grade, the majority of difficulties concerned lecturing staff with slightly fewer difficulties reported for professors or researchers – this is consistent with previous survey findings. While not reporting consistent problems with recruitment, some HEIs noted regular difficulties in recruiting certain grades of staff.

Given concerns in some quarters about the age profile of the HE academic workforce, HEIs were asked if they had any difficulties in recruiting early career academic staff. This proved to be something of a non-issue and certainly less problematic than was reported in the 2005 survey.

There were fewer difficulties with retention than for recruitment and rates were very low across all 17 of the subject areas. In fact, in eight subject areas for professorial grades and ten subject areas for research grades there were no retention difficulties reported at all. However, as with recruitment, there were relatively more problems at lecturer level and where retention difficulties were reported they tended to be in the same areas as for recruitment e.g. accounting/finance and business/management.

Professional support staff

Few recruitment difficulties were reported for most support staff roles. Most problems were reported in the administrative/professional staff category with more than one in five respondents having problems recruiting accountants, finance professionals and 'other' administrative/professional staff. The only other area to exhibit these levels of recruitment difficulty was IT technicians.

As with academic staff, retention difficulties were proportionally fewer than recruitment difficulties. The two roles which were most problematic were both in the manual staff category – for cleaning and catering staff. Respondents also reported higher than average recruitment difficulties with both of these roles.

Very few problems were reported for the recruitment or retention of clerical staff. The most 'problematic' area was in the retention of secretarial staff but even this was reported by fewer than one in ten respondents.

Perceived causes and impact

The survey also explored the factors that are contributing to any recruitment and retention challenges and the impact of these difficulties on the HEIs and the services they provide. Respondents to the survey were asked whether any of a set of suggested factors (private and public sector pay; workload; location; cost of living; and fixed-term contracts) had impacted on their ability to recruit and retain academic and support staff. These were the same factors used in previous surveys.

Which factors influence recruitment?

There was a reduction in the proportion of respondents citing private sector pay levels as a factor in recruitment from the 2005 survey. As shown in Figure 3, one in five of the HEIs in the survey believed that private sector pay levels were affecting their ability to recruit academic staff. This is a marked reduction on the previous survey where it was approximately one in three. Similarly for support staff the level has dropped from almost three in five in 2005 to just over a third this year, although for support staff this was still rated as the most important factor affecting recruitment. Public sector pay levels were less important than private sector pay levels for both academic and support staff but were more an issue for academic staff than support staff, possibly because for some academic disciplines there is competition with the public sector (e.g. health and education). The most important factor in the recruitment of academics in this survey was seen as the location of institution, which was mentioned by a quarter of respondents. Again this is a marked change from the previous survey when this was deemed the second least important of the six factors.

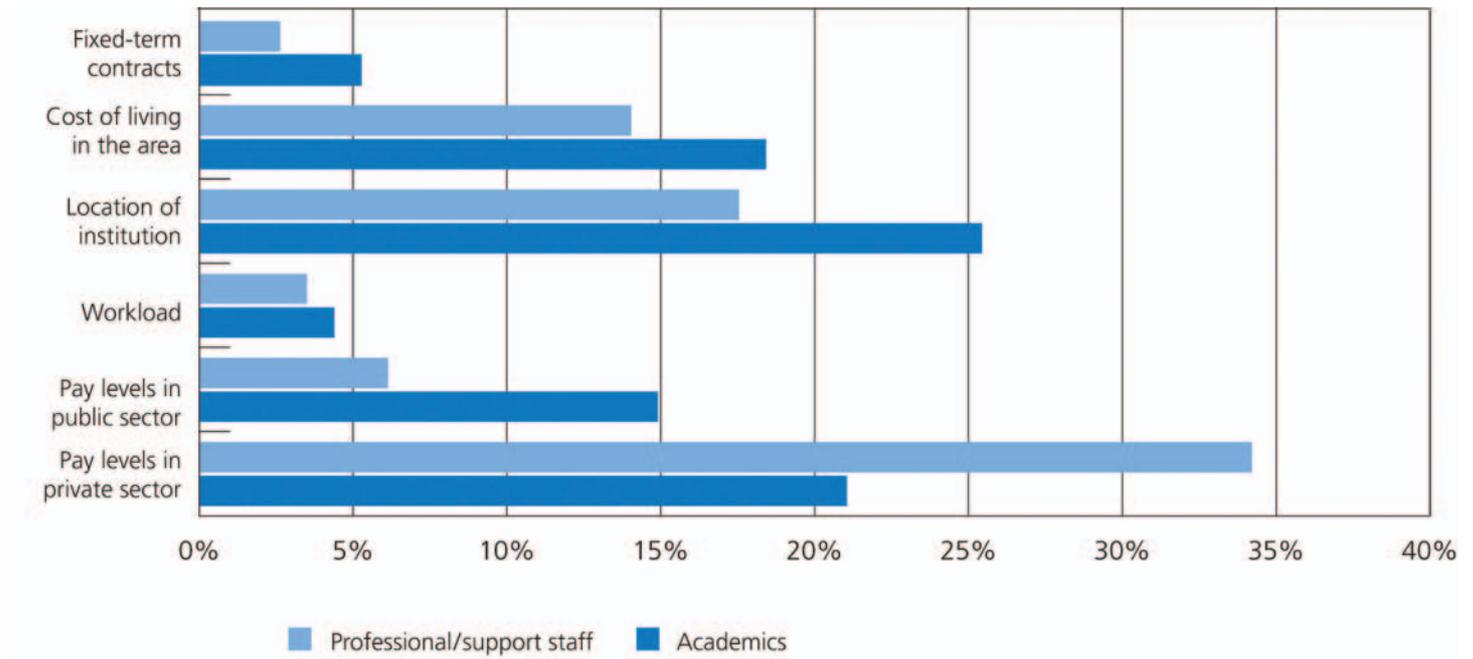
Again it seems clear that whilst overall recruitment problems seem relatively few, they do exist in certain areas.

“Although pay is not the most important factor affecting recruitment and retention of academic, research and technical staff, those fields where salaries are significantly higher in the private sector (e.g. law, engineering) find it more difficult to attract and retain high quality people.” (Pre-1992 university)

Which factors influence retention?

In terms of retention, workload was seen as the most important factor for academic

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

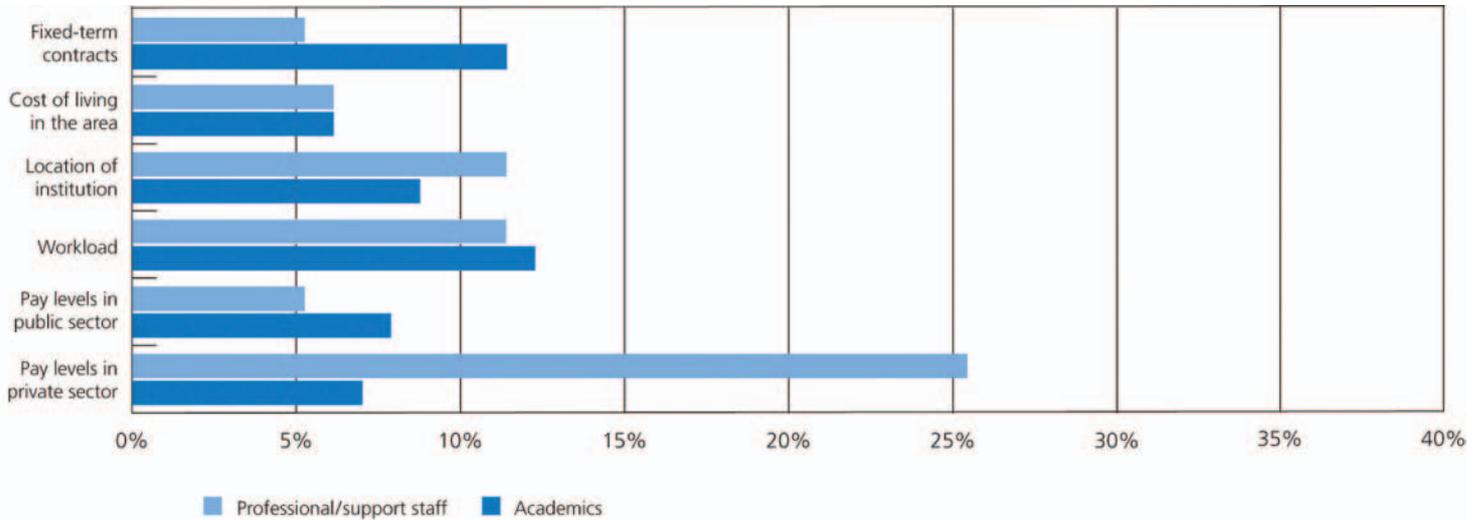


Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

staff and the second most important for support staff – mentioned by just over one in ten respondents in both cases. The second most important factor for academic staff was fixed term contracts – also mentioned by just over one in ten respondents. In the previous 2005 survey the location of the institution was seen as the most important factor affecting retention of academic staff, with workload second.

The most important factor affecting retention for support staff was pay levels in the private sector which was mentioned by a quarter of respondents. This was also the most important factor in the 2005 survey but then it was mentioned by almost half of respondents.

Figure 4: Factors impacting on ability to retain academic staff and support staff



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

Impact on service provision

Few HEIs 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. In the 2005 survey, 6% of HEIs reported that the inability to recruit had impacted on teaching. This year that figure had been reduced to only 3.5%.

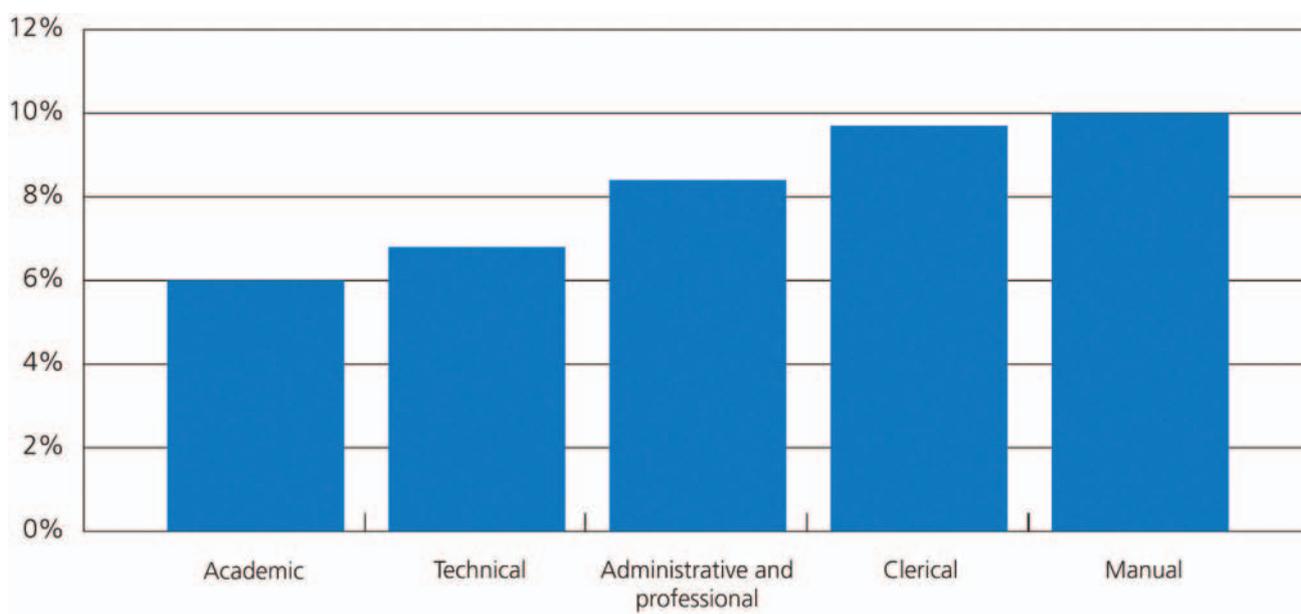
Numbers of leavers and ‘turnover’ rates

The ‘turnover’ rate for permanent staff in UK HEIs is based on their HESA returns for the academic year 2006/07. The ‘turnover’ rate has been calculated as a percentage of the number of permanent staff on full-time contracts who were employed at an institution on 1 August 2006 and who left between that date and 31 July 2007. The staff group for which the lowest proportion of leavers was recorded is academic staff at 6%, followed by technical staff at 7% and then administrative/professional staff at 8%. For manual and clerical staff, the rate is slightly higher at 10%. There is little difference in the leaving rates for the different staff groups between the different types of institution.

UCEA survey respondents saw relatively few problems relating to turnover. Only 1.8% saw high turnover rates for academic staff as a problem, while 17.7% saw low turnover rates as a problem.

These rates are almost identical to the 2005 survey and point towards a consistently low level of labour turnover in the HE sector. That said, a meaningful comparison with turnover rates in the wider economy is notoriously difficult to achieve, given

Figure 5: Full-time permanent staff 'turnover' rates 2006/07



Source: HESA staff return 2006/07 (Note: Clinical academics have been excluded from the 'Academic' staff group)

different methods of calculations and varied definitions of leaver categories. A number of commentators such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) suggest that both high and very low turnover rates have potentially negative effects.

The latest comparable data available comes from the CIPD Annual Survey Report, released in June 2008. This study reported that the overall turnover rate in the UK was 17.3%. The average was highest in the private sector at 20.4%, with a public sector average of 13.5%. Given that the highest turnover rate within the HE sector was 10% – for manual and clerical staff – it appears that higher education compares relatively well with the wider economy.

“There is hardly any turnover with academic staff; the recruitment that is carried out is as a result of either a fixed term replacement when an academic has been successful in obtaining research fellowship or retirement.” (Pre-1992 university)

Vacancies monitoring

One way of highlighting recruitment difficulties is to monitor the number of vacancies and to determine how many have remained unfilled over a period. HEIs in the survey were asked to provide these data. However these figures need to be treated with caution as 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, HEIs that responded to the survey gave information about the number of vacancies that had occurred during the academic year 2007/08, 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, administrative/professional posts are those in which the next highest numbers of vacancies are seen.

If posts that are unfilled after three months are considered as a proportion of all vacancies, the highest proportions of posts remaining unfilled are academic staff at 3.1%, followed by administrative/professional staff at 1.7%. Less than 1% of vacancies for clerical, technical and manual staff remained unfilled after three months.

The previous survey in 2005 saw vacancies more likely to remain unfilled for more than three months. For example 4.5% of academic posts remained unfilled and there were similar proportions for administrative, professional and technical staff posts.

International recruitment

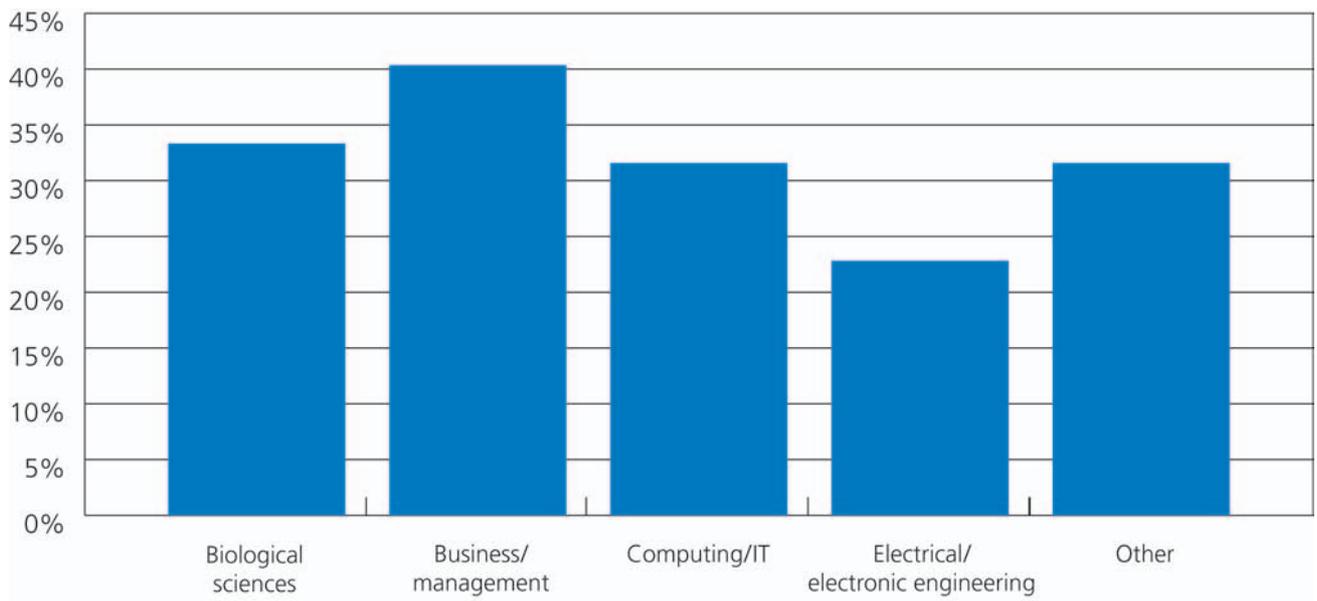
This year some extra questions were asked which were aimed at reflecting the changing nature of the HE labour market. There has been growing evidence of HEIs recruiting internationally, particularly for academic positions, and so questions were asked around this issue for the first time.

The average number of vacancies that had been filled by non-UK citizens over the last three years (2005/06 to 2007/08) was reported as 14% for academic staff and 7% for support staff. Just under 40% of respondents reported that they offered special inducements to recruit non-UK staff. The most commonly used special inducement policy was reported as enhanced relocation expenses; another example cited was the offer of a 'golden hello'.

The most common geographical region for the recruitment of all levels of academic staff was the EU. The next most common for professors and lecturing staff was North America and for researchers, East Asia.

The most common subject area for the recruitment of non-UK academic staff was business/management, followed by biological sciences and computing/IT. Certainly in the case of business/management and biological sciences the recruitment of overseas staff seems to correspond to areas of stated recruitment difficulty. This may suggest that the international labour market is used as a reserve source for when the national labour market for academic staff is tight. However, this link is not so obvious with computing/IT academic staff where recruitment difficulties are now relatively few so it is perhaps unwise to draw too many conclusions. The influx of overseas academic staff in recent years may also reflect both the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise on the professorial market, as research-intensive HEIs seek to improve their ratings, and shortages of qualified, home post-doctoral students in particular subjects to fill teaching posts.

Figure 6: Most popular subject areas for the recruitment of non-UK academic staff



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

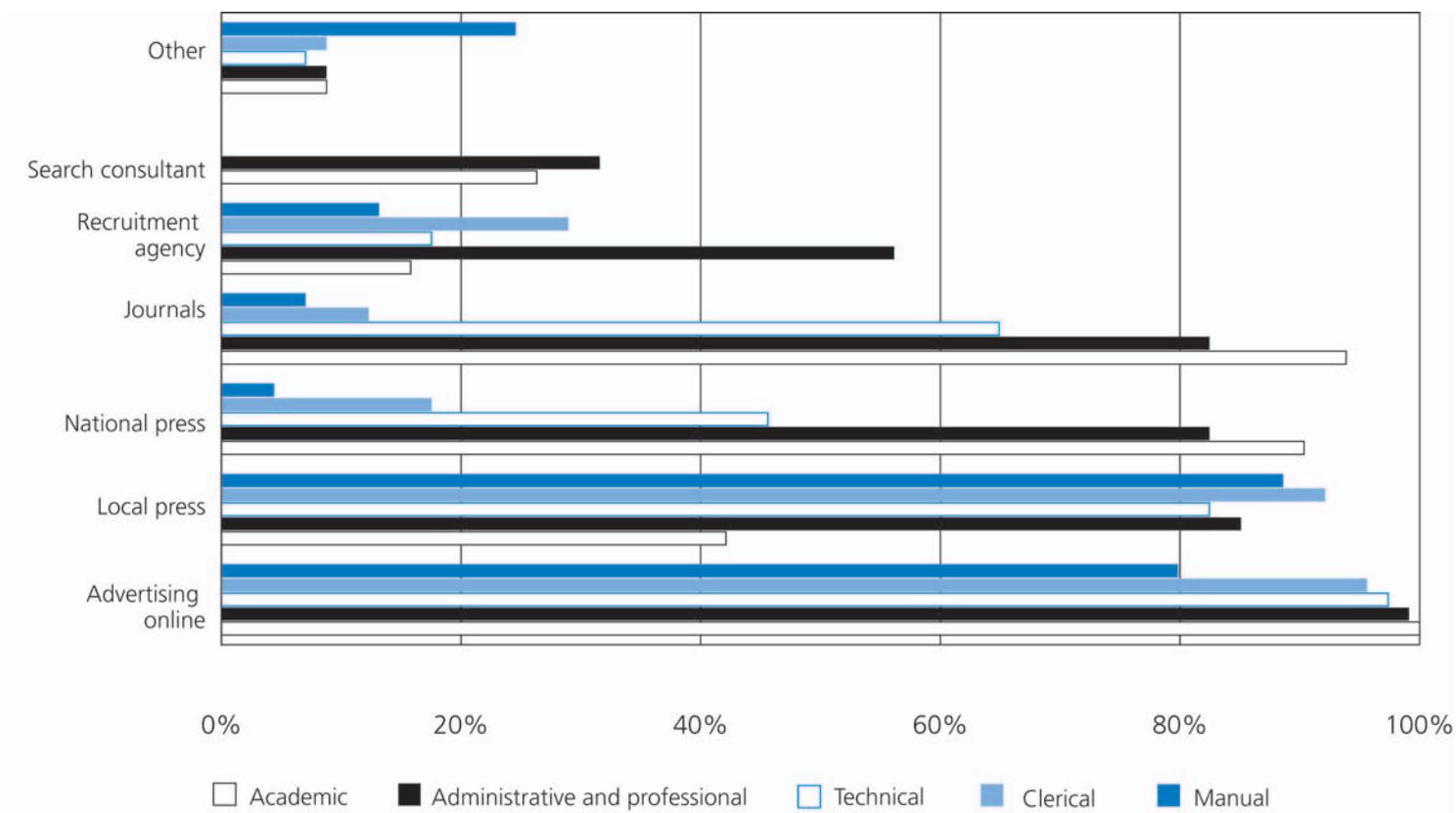
Methods of recruitment and selection

Recruitment

This year, for the first time, questions were included on the methods of recruitment and retention being used by HEIs.

The most common method used to attract applicants across all staff groups was reported as online advertising. Interestingly, search consultants are more commonly used for administrative staff (where almost a third of HEIs reported their usage) than for academic staff where the rate was just over a quarter. 'Other' methods that were mentioned included advertising in job centres for manual staff.

Figure 7: Methods of attracting applicants



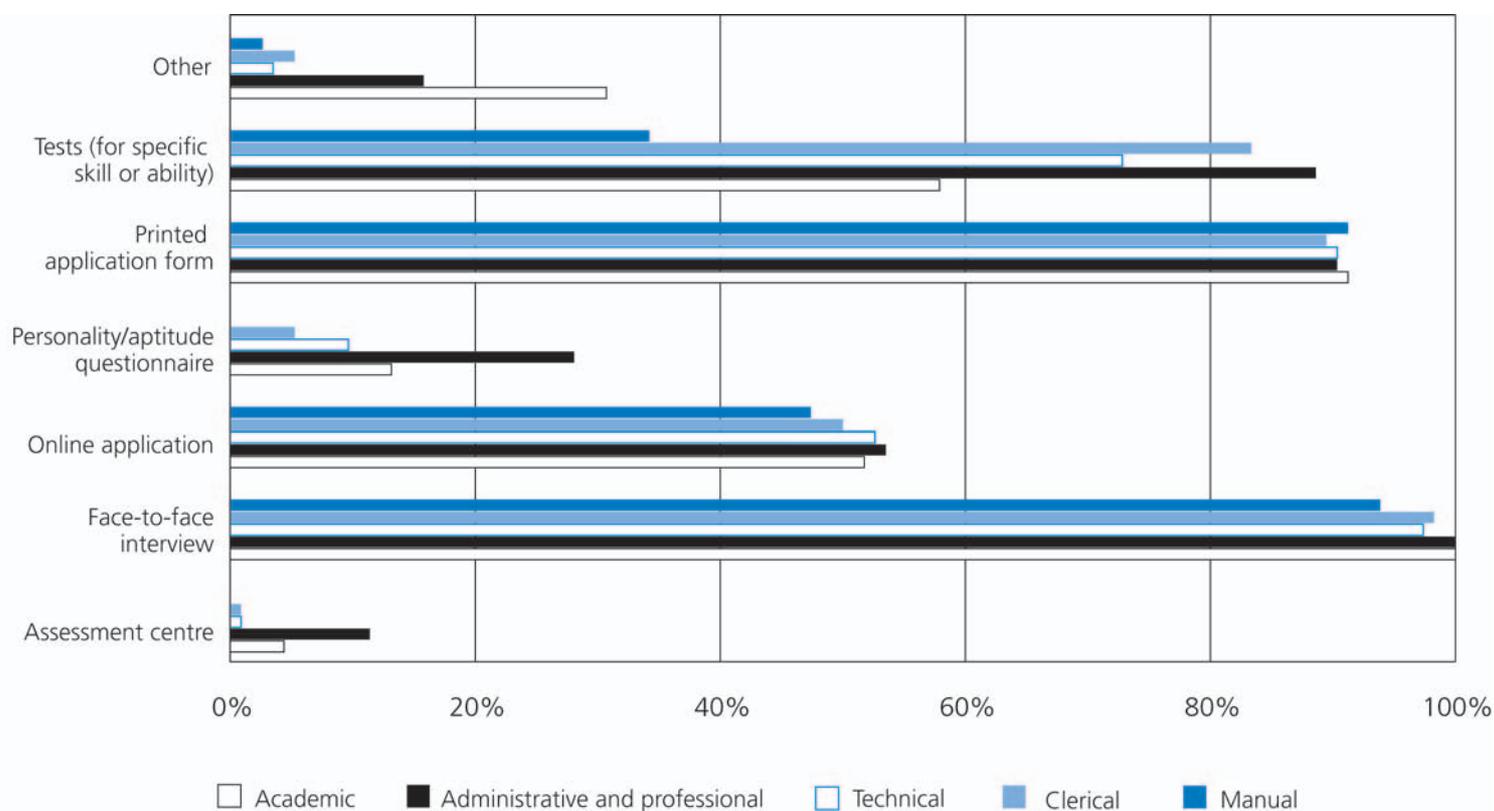
Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

Selection

The most common selection technique for all staff groups was a face to face interview. This was followed by an application form and tests. Interestingly, assessment centres were rarely used within the sector but were most common for administrative/professional staff.

One 'other' method of selection that was reported as being used relatively frequently for academic staff was giving a presentation or lecture.

Figure 8: Methods of selecting applicants



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

Recording of leavers

HEIs in the survey were asked about their use of attitude and exit surveys. Whilst in the 2005 survey less than a third reported using attitude surveys, in 2008 this had risen to 63%. The use of some form of exit survey or interview had also risen, from just under three quarters in 2005 to 80% in 2008.

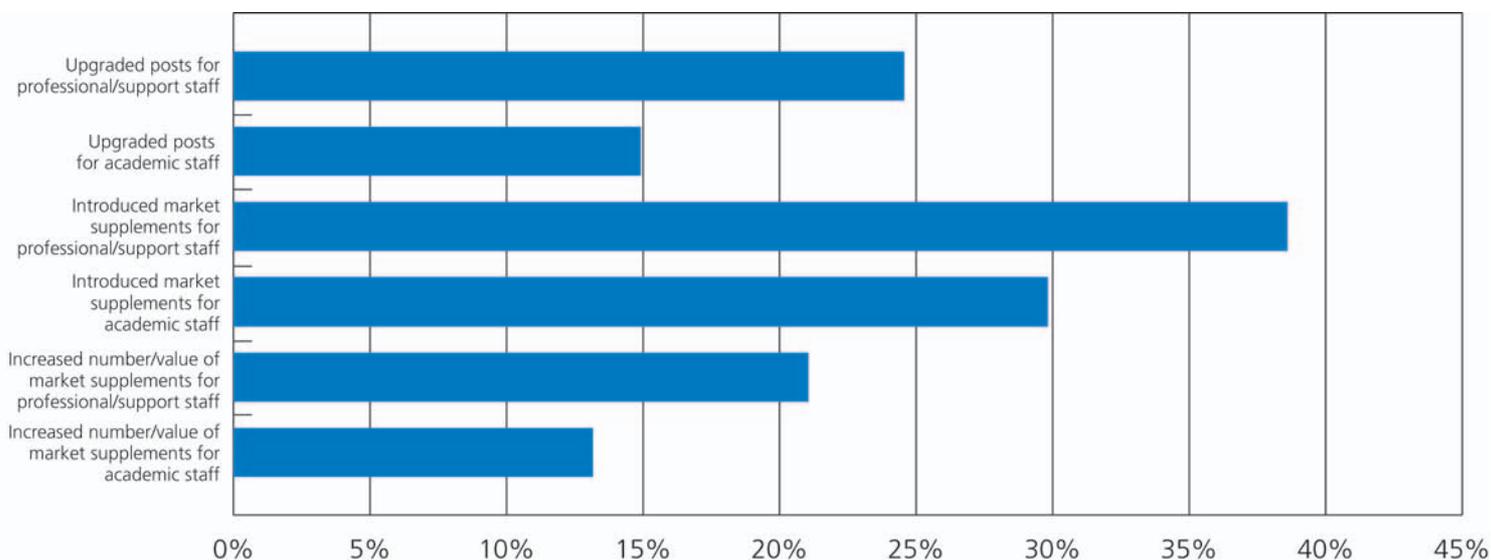
This year respondents were also asked how they used the findings of these surveys. Almost 90% reported regularly analysing the results and at least three quarters either disseminated the findings to senior management or discussed the findings with them.

Actions to tackle issues

Since the 2005 survey there appears to be increased action being taken to address recruitment or retention issues. A quarter of HEIs reported upgrading posts for support staff. The most common technique to tackle recruitment and retention problems was the introduction of market supplements. More HEIs reported carrying this out for support staff than for academic staff.

Where retention difficulties had been identified during the year, the most popular technique to combat this was increased learning and development opportunities followed by improving HR/line management skills. Interestingly, an improved remuneration/benefits package lagged both of these other options.

Figure 9: Action taken to resolve recruitment and retention problems



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

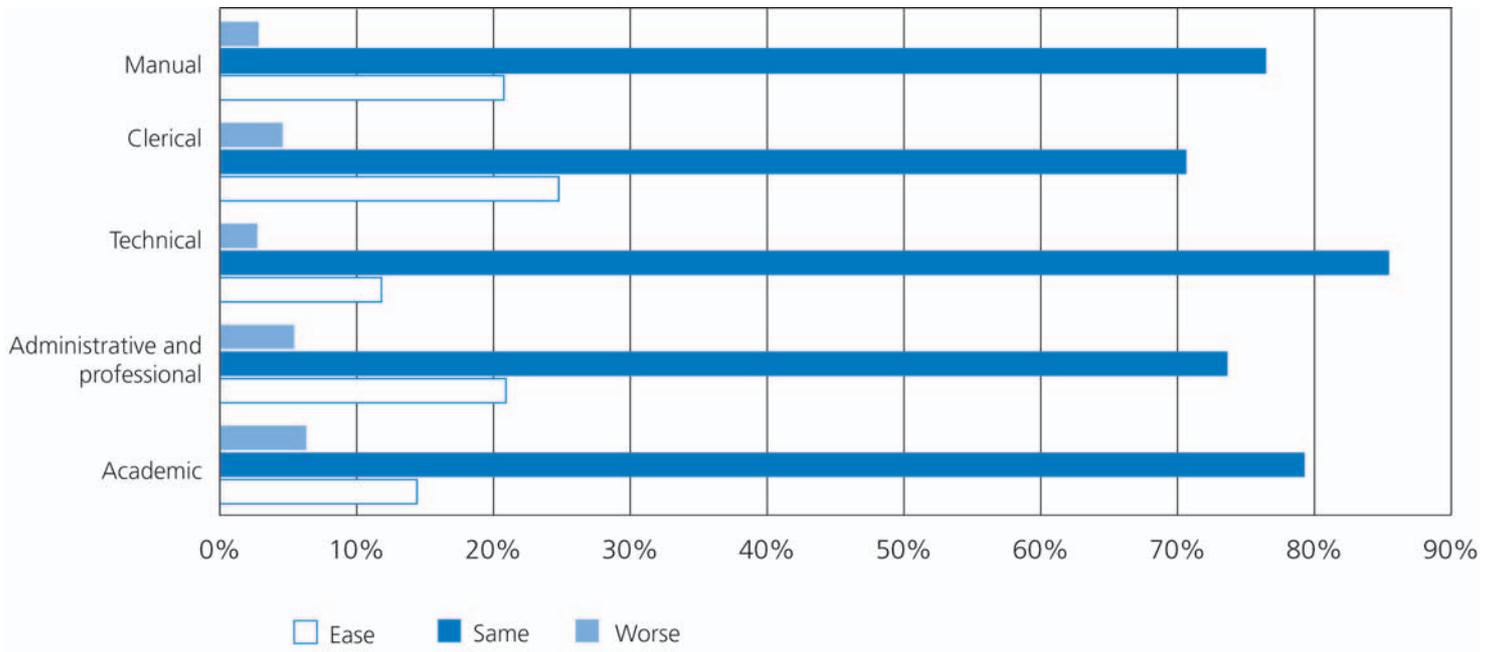
The future

As previously stated, this survey was conducted during July and August 2008 and therefore the views expressed on the following 12 months must be viewed in that context. The full effects of the ‘credit crunch’ on the national labour market were only just appearing at this time.

The vast majority of HEIs expected levels of recruitment difficulty across all staff groups to remain the same over the ensuing 12 months. Of those that expected the situation to change the majority believed that it would ease as opposed to getting worse.

“Bearing in mind recent large scale redundancies in areas affecting the building and banking sectors, we would anticipate more availability of labour in the areas indicated as ‘easing’ under recruitment. Equally, because of the credit crunch and general fears in relation to a potential recession, we anticipate that retention issues in the areas identified earlier in the survey may ease as staff within them may be more likely to remain with their current employer for the sake of security.” (Post-1992 university)

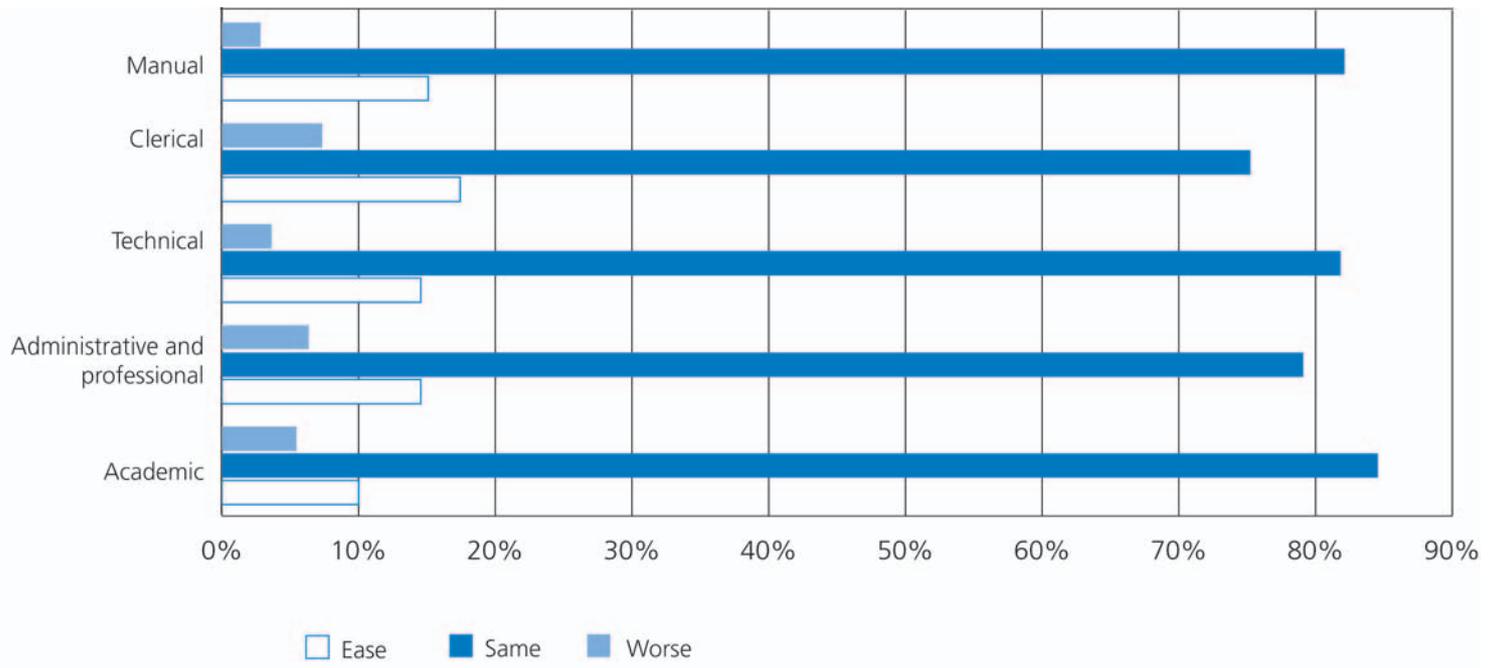
Figure 10: Recruitment expectations over the next 12 months



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

As with recruitment the vast majority of HEIs expect levels of retention difficulty across all staff groups to remain the same in the next 12 months. Again, of those that expect the situation to change the majority believe that it will ease as opposed to getting worse.

Figure 11: Retention expectations over the next 12 months



Source: UCEA survey of HEIs, 2008. (Note: the survey does not include clinical academics)

