

What prospects for the older graduate?

Richard Pearson

Employers have been slow to adjust to the changes in graduate supply. Soon, with decreasing numbers of school leavers, they may have to.

LAST year was the year of the school leaver, or rather concern about the lack of them in the 1990s: as the number of school leavers in the United Kingdom will have declined by 35 per cent over the decade to 1994. With the economy booming and unemployment falling, a shortage of young people will affect employers, trainers and higher education alike (*Nature* 335, 100; 1988). In the case of higher education the hope is that more mature students can be found who, along with other under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities and those from the lower social classes, will, along with a rising participation rate among young people, fill the empty places in higher education and boost the numbers graduating to meet the needs of the economy.

Since the late 1970s there has been growing interest in improving mature students' access to higher education, with more than 400 special access courses being launched to help mature students who lack the standard qualifications for access to higher education. At the same time most institutions now offer applicants aged over 21 selection criteria that do not rely on the normal academic qualifications. Just over half the mature entrants to full-time degree courses lack the traditional entry qualifications, rising to 75 per cent for those entering part-time courses.

Mature numbers

During the past decade the number of mature entrants in higher education has increased by over 50 per cent to total over 186,000 in 1986, driven mainly by the growing number of women and those on part-time courses, the number of men entering full-time university courses rising by only 10 per cent. The overall proportion (aged 21 or over at the time of entry) has now reached over 11 per cent in the universities and 34 per cent in the polytechnics and colleges. The majority of mature students are, however, studying at sub-degree level and on a part-time basis. These older students also have rather different subject preferences to their younger counterparts, with a much higher representation in the humanities and the social sciences, and lower representation in the sciences, technology and engineering.

In addition there is the Open University which was established to meet the needs of the mature, part-time student, many of whom are already in employment. Some 8,000 students graduate each year from

the Open University, and of new entrants over 60 per cent are aged 30 or over.

It is worth noting that while in the United Kingdom the mature first degree graduate is still relatively rare, the majority being aged 21–22, this contrasts with the pattern in mainland Europe where courses take longer and many graduates only qualify in their mid to late 20s.

In trying to achieve a further increase in the number of mature entrants, institutions will be facing growing competition from employers for the good mature entrant as both they and higher education seek to make up for the shortfall of school leavers. One important determinant of who wins this battle will be students' responses to loans and the way they trade cash in the hand for potentially higher earnings later in life. One concern, expressed even before the loans proposals were introduced, is the financial barrier facing students taking access courses who were not eligible for mandatory grants. A recent survey of students suggested that half of them would not have started their access courses if the grant had not been available.

What then are the prospects for mature graduates, and will they benefit alongside the traditional young graduate in the booming graduate labour market of the 1990s (*Nature* 334, 90; 1988)? Looking back to the mid-1980s, when the graduate market was starting to take off, mature graduates were slightly less likely to be in employment and also less likely to be unemployed, with a higher percentage going into further education and training or not being available to work. The latter figure is rather higher still for mature women than for mature men.

When due allowance is made for subject differences mature graduates had rather better employment rates in education, with little difference being apparent in the case of engineering. In the case of the sciences, administration and business studies, and humanities, they fared rather worse, with both lower employment and higher unemployment rates.

How then are mature entrants treated in the labour market? One problem they face is that many employers, especially in the private sector, structure their recruitment, training and career development programme around the 21 year olds, seeking to get them into management positions by their late 20s. A recent survey has, however, shown that while half of the

respondents say they treat all their applicants equally, one in three expressed reservations about applications from mature graduates, with one in five specifying age limits, normally 30 or under, in their recruitment literature. Teaching is a notable exception where positive efforts are being made to attract mature entrants.

Most welcome

More generally the most welcomed were those applicants who had a relevant degree and relevant work experiences, although there was still an age threshold of about 30 after which entry could become more difficult. Much depends on the relevance of the work experience and the job applied for, it being much harder to enter a general training scheme than entering a direct appointment. For those with a non-relevant degree the opportunities were more restricted, reflecting in part the more limited opportunities open to this group of conventional graduates. In general, difficulties increased with age and with the decreasing relevance of qualifications.

The main perceived disadvantages of the mature graduate were their apparent poor mobility, poor adaptability, too high salary expectations, difficulties fitting in with younger peers and not fitting into promotion structures. Given that many companies do not recruit them, it must be assumed that they have a strongly stereotyped picture of them. On the positive side their maturity, stability, commitment and better social and interpersonal skills were often highlighted. Another positive sign for those in their mid-20s is recruiters' growing interest in 'second bounce' graduates, those who re-enter the job market quickly after a mistaken first choice.

With the market expected to tighten further into the 1990s only a minority of recruiters when surveyed say they are looking to adjust their policies, despite the fact that mature graduates will be an increasing proportion of those graduating in the future. As with school leavers, most recruiters seem set to carry on with policies appropriate to a time of abundance in the labour market rather than one of stiffening competition. For the mature graduate, economic conditions and skill shortages are going to be the fastest way of breaking down traditional stereotypes. □

Richard Pearson is at the Institute of Manpower Studies, Mantell Building, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RF, UK.