Students for higher education

Richard Pearson

The demographic changes predicted for the 1990s may not have the effects that had been expected as there will be a rising proportion of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

EARLIER this year, the UK Secretary of State for Education and Science introduced a new era of expansion for higher education with the announcement that he wished to see a doubling of student numbers over the next 25 years. This plan has received broad support, not least from employers who see an expanding supply of good graduates as a prerequisite for a successful economy. Given the demographic downturn, whereby the number of 18-year-olds in the population will fall by a third in the decade to 1994, where will these students come from? This is the subject of a new report out this month*.

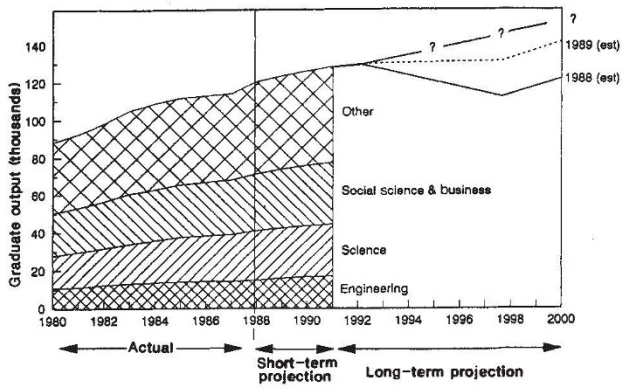
Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, higher education expanded rapidly as demand for places rose with rising attainment levels and prosperity. This growth continued through the earlier and smaller demographic downturn in the mid-1960s. In the early 1980s, this expansion showed because of the then-expected fall in demand for places resulting from the demographic downturn and the government's wish to reduce public expenditure. Nevertheless, graduate output continued to expand and in 1988 there were approximately 120,000 new first-degree graduates.

Entry to higher education continues to be dominated by young people with A-level or equivalent qualifications, who accounted for more than 80 per cent of entrants in 1988; women now account for 43 per cent of the intake. Mature students account for a slowly rising proportion of entrants, but still only about 15 per cent in 1988.

A key determinant to entry to higher education is the number of people staying on at school after the age of 16. In England and Wales, this has been increasing during the 1980s to 48 per cent in 1988. The past year has shown a significant improvement, but this figure lags well behind that achieved in Scotland. Women are more likely to stay on than men although they subsequently achieve fewer higher level qualifications. The UK staying-on rate is the ninth lowest in the European Community.

Further along the academic pipeline, A-level and equivalent attainment rates in England have improved marginally in the 1980s to total 13.8 per cent of the population, while in Scotland they have been improving rapidly to total over 23 per cent. The proportion of these qualified young people entering higher education has reached almost 90 per cent. Overall, the percentage of the age group going on to higher education has risen slowly to reach 14.5 per cent in 1987.

The key determinants of staying on in education, educational attainment and propensity to enter higher education are social class and parental education. In 1987, managerial and professional social classes, who formed 32 per cent of the population, accounted for 68 per cent of entrants to the universities and slightly fewer to the public sector. This proportion has hardly changed in the past decade which suggests no widening of the intake into higher education. The importance of this factor is underlined by the fact that the demographic downturn over the decade to 1994 is concentrated in the whie collar skilled and manual occupational groups, whereas the fall among the managerial and professional groups is only 10 per cent.



Actual and estimated UK graduate output, 1980–2000.

In the 1980s, demand for places in higher education (as expressed by university data) has grown fastest in the case of women, mature students aged over 25 (albeit from a low base) and students wishing to study business and administrative subjects; interest in engineering and technology has fallen. In terms of subject choice, women are disinclined to study engineering and applied science, while mature students are disinclined to study the applied sciences.

The fastest growth in graduations in the 1980s has been in the sciences (output up by 47 per cent), followed by engineering (up by 36 per cent) and social sciences and business subjects (up by 31 per cent). Despite this rapid growth, engineering and technology subjects accounted for only 14 per cent of first degree output in 1988. Despite campaigns to attract them, women still accounted for only 13 per cent of the output in engineering and technology, while in education they accounted for 80 per cent and in arts and humanities 63 per cent of new graduates.

The supply of new graduates is expected to continue to increase over the period to 1992 when the demographic downturn will start to have its limited effect. The current round of educational reform in the schools is expected to increase the inclination of students to enter higher education. A large number of access courses are also now being run to improve the ability of women, mature students and those from ethnic minorities to enter higher education.

After 1992 we now expect graduate numbers to stablilize as rising demand from women, older students, those with vocational qualifications and the young counteracts the effects of the demographic downturn. Numbers are expected to increase again at the end of the century when they will be more than 5 per cent higher than in 1989 (see figure). Within these totals, there is expected to be a rising proportion of women, of mature graduates, and of those from non-traditional backgrounds. The proportion of those with engineering and technology degrees will fall if the current swing away from these subjects is not reversed.

Thus the demographic downturn will not have the dramatic effect on higher education that had once been feared. The challenge now will be to see how numbers can be doubled, especially in the face of the introduction of student loans and increased employer competition for young people. This will be the topic of the December Employment column.

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* *How many Graduates in the 21st Century*, Pearson, R, *et al*, IMS, 1989.