Calder, J. (1994). The nature of evaluation, (Chapter 1, pp. 15 –29); and Student recruitment and support services, (Chapter 6, pp. 101 –108). In J. Calder, Programme evaluation and quality: A comprehensive guide to setting up an evaluation system. London, UK.: Kogan Page.

Student recruitment and support services

In this chapter we look at the structures and support systems insofar as they relate to the teaching process and the provision of open and distance learning courses. The aim is to examine how evaluation can help you view programme provision as a whole from the perspective of the student in order to get a better understanding of how evaluation can contribute to the more effective functioning of the student service areas.

Pre-registration issues

The focus of all the concern and activity, the people who are to benefit from the carefully designed and constructed courses, are the students. They are on the receiving end of a whole range of different aspects of the course presentation system. Figure 6.1 represents the interaction of the different service systems with the teaching system.

The point is that even if the pedagogic aspects of a course are all tested and well structured, the experience of entry into and participation in the programme may be spoiled for the student if any aspects of the service systems are not operating as they should be; for example, if enquirers get their materials late, or if information about courses or workshops is inaccurate. If you are trying to design a system of evaluation which will take into account the overall experience of the student within the institution, you will need to consider including some form of evaluation of the student interface with these associated service systems.

The flow diagram in Figure 6.2 shows each successive stage in the recruitment process from awareness that the learning or training opportunity exists to actually applying for a place. In the figure, six different groups of students or clients who are potential students are identified. In the following sections, we will be considering the extent to which the interests of these groups need to be represented through the programme evaluation process.
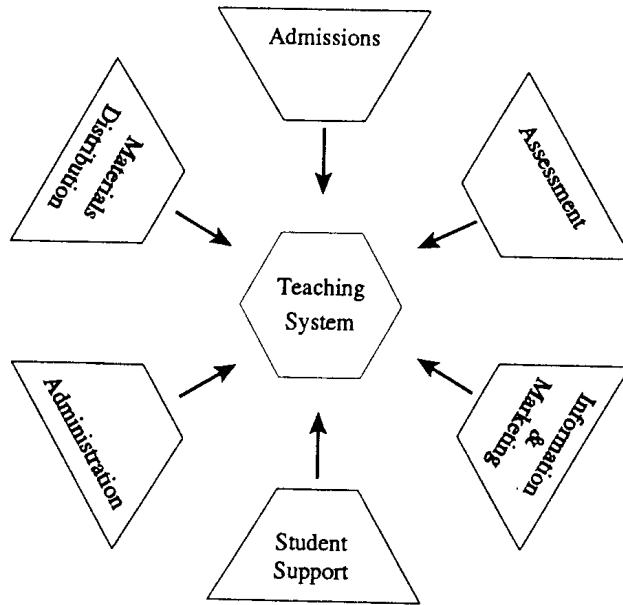
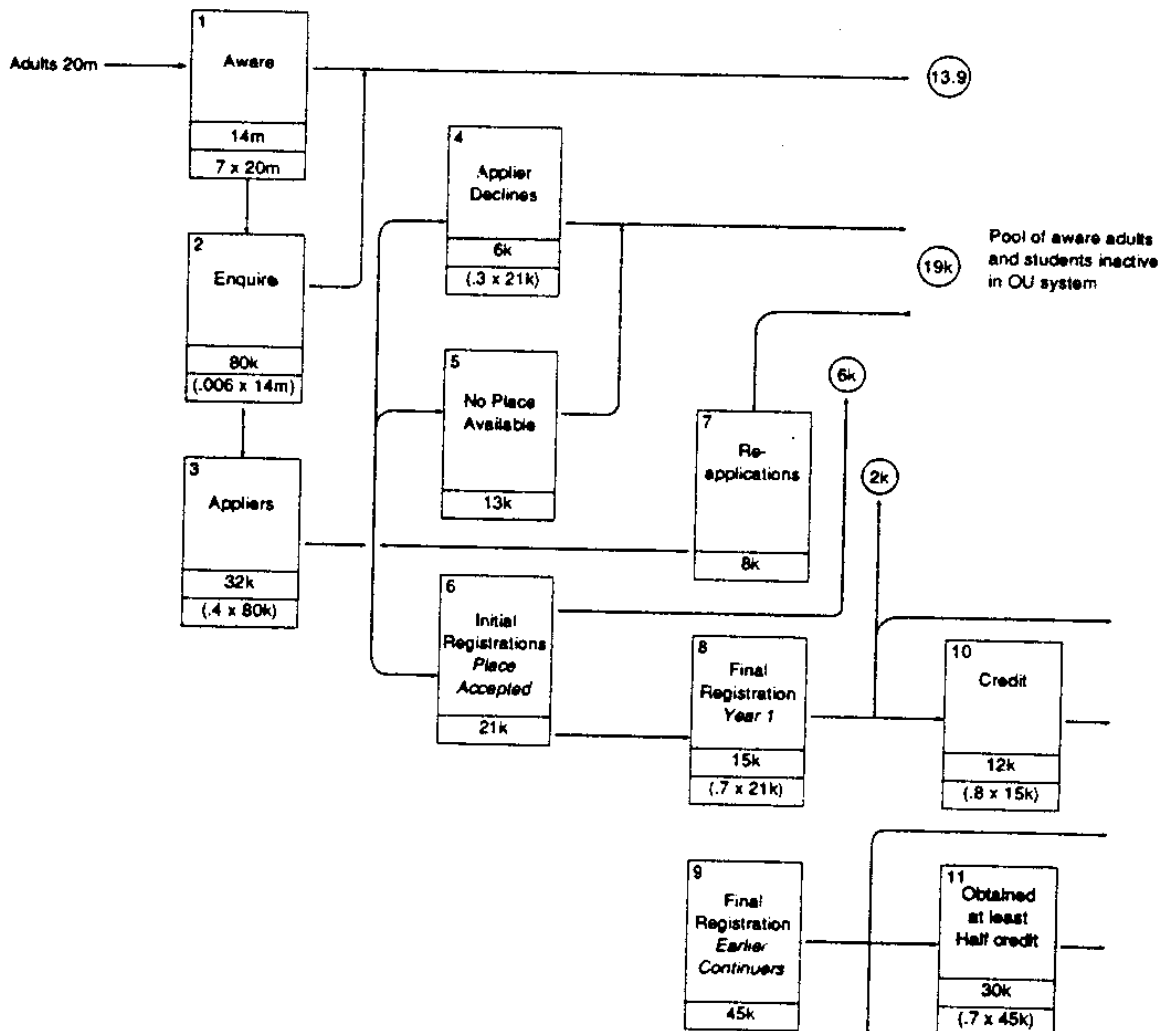**Figure 6.1** *Interaction of service systems with the teaching system*

Figure 6.2 *Flow diagram showing stages in the recruitment process*
Source: Field 1982, p 129

Information and marketing

If you have designed or developed a course or a programme of courses with particular target groups in mind, perhaps after having carried out careful needs assessment and market research, you will want to ensure that the right people are aware that your courses are available. Think about your own organisation, and the information and marketing strategies it uses for open and distance learning courses. What aspects do you feel should be included in evaluating its effectiveness? Some ideas about the sorts of issues you might be interested in are listed below.

·   Do the people you are trying to attract on to your programmes of study know of your existence?
·   Is people's knowledge about the organization and its programmes of courses accurate?
·   Is the right information getting to the right people?
·   Are enquiries being handled satisfactorily from the users' point of view?
·   How easy is it to get hold of an application form for your programme of study?

In the following sections we will be looking in more detail at these issues with the aim of identifying just what aspects may be useful for you to build in as part of your programme evaluation.

Awareness of programme provision

Clearly the size of the pool of applicants on which a course or a programme draws will depend to a large extent on the proportion of the target group who are aware that the courses are available. The distribution of public awareness in terms of geography, location within a company and socioeconomic status, can tell you much about the success of the marketing and information effort. For example, for many years now the Open University has regularly monitored the UK general population about its awareness of the OU as an institution, and about its courses and the special features of the University. Figure 6.3 shows how public awareness has increased from 31 per cent in 1971 to 87 per cent in 1993. In this way, senior management have been able to monitor changes over time in awareness among certain key groups. They are also able to monitor the accuracy of the information which was getting through.

Thinking about your own organization, who would be the most appropriate groups to monitor in terms of their awareness of your provision? Your answers will depend very much on whether you are providing for a closed population, such as certain categories of staff in a particular company, or people who live in a certain geographical area, or, perhaps, people in a particular profession. Whatever your answers, you need to know whether your target groups, and indeed your potential clients, are aware of the programmes you offer and of the benefits to them of those particular programmes.

How do you make contact with members of your target group for the purpose of establishing the level of penetration of your message? For this type of information, it is essential that the data is statistically valid, that it comes from a representative sample or a full census if you are only dealing with a small population. It does not matter what method you use to contact people for this type of study - face-to-face, phone, postal
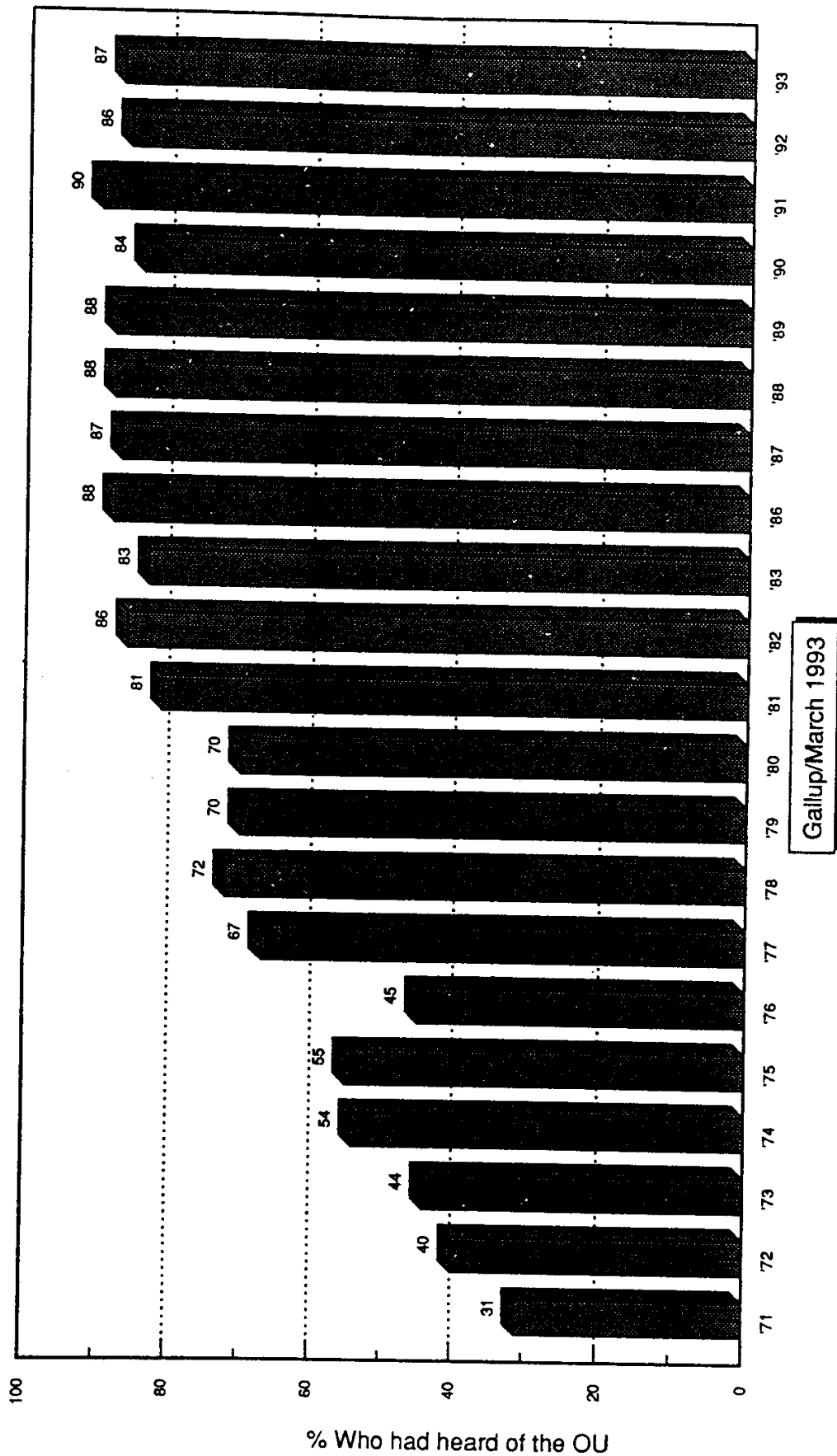
Figure 6.3 *Public awareness of OU provision*
Source: Social Surveys (Gallup Poll) Ltd 1993

survey - but a sound sample design and a good response rate are essential if you are going to make estimates from the data.

Enquirers

The enquiry phase plays a key role in linking potential students to the institution. Frequently some details are kept about enquiries. Think about your own institution. Are you familiar with the procedures for dealing with enquiries? Is any record of each enquiry kept?

· Address of inquirer - an analysis will give an indication of the geographical spread of enquirers.
· Details of query - an analysis will give details about the sorts of topics people have an interest in studying; the sorts of questions they would like information on.
· Where did you hear about us? - a commonly used but extremely useful way of getting feedback on contact sources for different groups in different areas.

It must be said, however, that there can be a great danger of too much data being collected at this stage with no procedures being set up to gather together this information and analyzed it. This data can be very useful as feedback on what messages are getting through to whom, and on what is not getting through that people want to know about, but only if the data is actually analyzed and fed through to the person or people who can make use of it.

Non-applicants

Non-applicants are people who have enquired about a course or a programme but who have not followed through their initial interest with an application for a place. Can you think of why it may be important for you to find out why this is?

· The person's personal circumstances may make it inconvenient at the moment.
· The way the enquiry was handled may have deterred the person from pursuing the idea of an application.
· The course/programme the person wanted is not available at all/at the time it was wanted/in the form it was wanted/at the price that was wanted.

The three groups of reasons listed above each suggest possible areas for further research and evaluation. The reason it may be worth considering looking further at this group is that you know that they are already interested in study or training, and that they were interested enough to take the trouble to make an enquiry. If there are problems with the way enquiries are being handled, then you need to know about the problem quickly so that it can be rectified. If the problem falls into one of the other two categories, then you still need to know about it in case changes in provision or in the regulations are possible. The use of information and the adoption of ideas from this group may well help to minimize the loss of people at this stage.

Recruitment and selection

Guidance

Part of the application process may well include some guidance for applicants. Advice can vary from the provision of a detailed personal session with someone, either face-to-face or on the phone, the provision of detailed and often complex information booklets, or simply including very brief instructions with the application form. Whatever form the guidance available to your students takes, you will need to know:

· whether the applicants are aware that it is available;
· whether those who might benefit from the advice actually use it;
· if they do use it, whether it is useful;
· how accurate the information is which is given to them.

Applications

It can be crucial to monitor carefully the people who make an application to join your course or programme. Unless you are always able to accept everyone who wishes to join a course whenever they apply, then the data about your applicants may also have to serve as a basis of selection, and as a means of ensuring that there is no bias or discrimination in your selection procedures.

Selection

The question of selection of students is an important one. If the selection is being carried out by intermediaries, for example if departmental heads select those of their staff whom they wish to take a specific course, then the criteria they are applying will need to be clear, explicit and open to monitoring. Selection may just mean imposing some sort of queuing procedure, or it may mean choosing a sub-group of those who have applied on the basis of the possession of some Attribute. Consider the following example: a course for middle-managers is only open to those who have completed three years in a management position. If you were to carry out an evaluation of the selection system, what aspects would you want to see included? The sorts of issues I would consider including are:

· Establish the aims of the selection criteria - what outcome are they trying to achieve?
· Are the selection criteria actually being applied as set out in the regulations?
· What are the outcomes - are they the ones being aimed for?
· What are the other effects of having these selection criteria - on different groups of stakeholders, on the courses and programmes?

Non-acceptors

Even after applicants have received the offer of a place, they may choose not to accept the offer. Whatever the size of your organization, the existence of this group can make planning difficult. It can also mean lost revenue, and it may be an indicator that there is a problem in the system which needs attention. Typical of the sorts of reasons a person might have for not taking up the offer of a place are:

· their personal circumstances have now changed;
· they forgot to respond to the offer and missed the deadline;
· they decided to go somewhere else.

The reasons which people who do not take up the offer of a place give when asked about their decision can tell you a lot about the effects of competition and who the competition is, whether people are having problems in fitting in with your regulations, whether they are too complex or the application period too extended, and whether additional guidance or counselling may be needed for applicants so that problems can be anticipated, or possible options identified for the individual. For example, if there is some sort of financial problem, there may be a financial assistance fund or special scheme about which they could be given information.

The major problems in carrying out any evaluation of this group are in fact likely to be ones of making contact and of getting the people involved to participate in your evaluation research. The less involved a person feels with an organization, the less likely they are to want to participate in any research activities which are primarily for its benefit. This does not mean that research is impossible with this group; but it does mean that considerable care will have to be taken in following them up. Personal interviews either by Telephone or face-to-face, although expensive, are likely to yield much better response rates than postal questionnaires or invitations to. participate in group discussions.

Teaching and support systems

Student support *issues*

As Mary Thorpe pointed out when discussing the problems of evaluating counselling provision, a wide variety of approaches for supporting students are used by different organizations (Thorpe 1993). Some provide continuing support from the first point of contact before the student has even applied for the course. This may be the case particularly where certain groups have been targeted for recruitment. Others may have a brief induction for new students, and then leave them to get on with their studies, responding to any requests for help or information as and when they occur. This help and information. may be provided by a variety of people in different departments of the organization.

Organizational policy may be to encourage such Variation within a particular programme, with different approaches being used in different locations. Where this is the case, then local evaluation studies may need to be considered. There are several ways in which this can be organized.

- organized and carried out locally;
- organized centrally and carried out locally;
- organized and carried out centrally.