Handle with care – why the student:staff ratio may be a misleading indicator

In British higher education, the ratio of students to academic staff (the SSR) has traditionally been a key measure of the adequacy of the human resource available for teaching.

The University Grants Committee, which from 1919 to 1988 allocated public funding to British universities, commented in 1964 - at a time when a number of new universities were being developed, and when, following the publication of the Robbins report of 1963, a large rise in future student numbers was being planned: 'Our … concern arises from the deterioration over the years in the ratio of students to staff. The ratio is undoubtedly open to misleading interpretations but, in the absence of alternative data covering a number of years, it has to serve as a rough and ready measure of the adequacy of staff and of the attention which university teachers can give to their research and to their students.' (p.149) [1]

Weighted SSRs calculated by the UGC were 11.7:1 in 1938-9, 9.2:1 in 1954-5 and 10.0:1 in 1961-2. The public spending cuts of the early 1980s, which saw thousands of academic staff lose their jobs, showing a steadily growing ratio, from 10.3:1 in 1985-6, to 11.8:1 in 1989-90. By 1993-4, with higher education once more expanding, the SSR was 14.6:1.

Since 1994-5, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has gathered and provided data on the 'post-binary' UK higher education system; unpublished data, provided by HESA to University and College Union, show a relatively stable figure for the SSR, fluctuating at around 17:1.

SSRs are important. They are stipulated at course level by some degree accrediting bodies as a measure of learning experience quality. Several annual UK university league tables, including those of The Times and The Guardian, have used SSRs to inform the university choices of prospective students.

The higher education sector has recently proclaimed that its increased income through tuition fees has in part lead to an improvement in the student experience through a reduction in the student:staff ratio. Universities UK, the vice-chancellors' representative body, said in 'Making it count: how universities are

[1] UGC (1964), University Development 1957-62. London: HMSO, Cmnd. 2267, p. 149

using income from variable fees', a report published in 2010 to defend variable fees and also to prepare the ground for further increases in fee income: 'the median student: staff ratio has improved from 17.6 in 2004/05 to 16.8 in 2007/08'.

The report added: 'Although student:staff ratios are not necessarily directly correlated with quality or contact time, and vary significantly depending on subject type and level of study, qualitative evidence from Universities UK's survey confirms that a significant number of institutions have used income from variable fees to improve student:staff ratios, often with an emphasis on particular subject areas, and have explicitly linked the decision to do this with improving the student experience.' [2]

The problem with SSRs and the way they are currently calculated by HESA is that they assume that all the time of the typical academic - who is normally engaged in teaching, research and other activities – is spent on teaching.

As a result, the perception is that 'SSRs do indicate the total amount of academic staff time available per student'. But it is well known that 'teaching-and-research' academic staff also spend a considerable proportion of their time engaged in research, administration and other activities.

Recent institutional data on use of time by academic staff, gathered for the Transparent Approach to Costing programme in UK higher education, and provided to University and College Union through use of the Freedom of Information Act, show a very wide range in the amount of academic time spent on the four main TRAC activities of teaching, research, other activities and support.

Statistical analysis shows that HEIs with a low SSR were likely to have academics who spent a relatively low proportion of their time directly on teaching, and vice-versa. As a result, the SSR is potentially misleading because a low student:staff ratio gives the impression of high teacher availability at institutions where teachers may in fact be rather unavailable because of their extensive commitment to research activities.

In 2008 the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group said 'the current level of SSRs is not sustainable in the medium term', and that if 'the elevated level of SSRs continues, the quality and reputation of UK teaching will be at risk …'. [3] In fact, the position is worse than that

[2] Universities UK (2010) Making it count: how universities are using income from variable fees http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Documents/MakingItCount.pdf p.36

[3] Financial Sustainability Strategy Group (2008), The sustainability of learning and teaching in English higher education, p.26

perceived by the FSSG, given its assumption that all the time of teaching-and-research academics was given over to teaching.

It is a matter of concern that the SSR has potentially over-represented the amount of time teaching-and-research academics spend in teaching.

Recent efforts by University and College Union to get academics' use of time data included in the HESA Staff Record have not been successful. In addition, efforts by UCU to have an accurate SSR included in the Key Information Sets for prospective students from 2012 have also been unsuccessful.

One potential way forward would be to develop a SSR that more accurately reflected the use of time by teaching-and-research academics. Although the TRAC TAS data might in theory be a potential source for that information, methodological concerns raised by HESA and others in the HE sector about this data make this unlikely at present.

Until the current SSR methodology is amended, those who publish SSRs based on HESA data should provide a health warning – particularly to potential students - about the accuracy of the data.

Another way forward would be HEIs employing more academics to share the teaching load where SSRs are judged to be unsustainable. This would improve the student learning experience, staff working conditions, and the opportunity for existing staff to undertake more research, scholarship, consultancy and outreach activities.