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EDUCATION CUTS: Another View from the Polys

In the old days, one had to justify new staff for higher education institutions using educational arguments, based on such questions as: need for the course, in terms of the balance of the institution's offerings and the goals of the community; the desired amount and structure of teaching, given the course's objectives; student numbers; and the current workload of teachers in the department.

Nowadays, it appears that answers to this admittedly difficult set of questions can be simplified or 'rationalized' by looking at a single number, the staff/student ratio (SSR).

A number of points need to be made about SSRs and SSR-obsessed thinking:

(i) They are considerably inferior to even the worst sorts of cost-benefit analyses, since SSRs can measure "progress" only in terms of decreasing costs, and not in terms of benefits, or changes in the quality of the education being provided. SSRs are thus admirably suited as conceptual tools for an epoch when there will be a sustained attempt to lower costs without reference to changes in quality of provision of education, health care, etc. This affects all of us as "consumers". In addition, the disastrous implications of such thinking for the job satisfaction of "producers" of education, i.e. teachers, students and some administrators, need hardly be spelt out.

(ii) The fact that SSRs refer solely to academic tends to focus discussions on "over-spending" on academic staff, rather than on other staff or on other costs. This leads to a situation where academic staff face the possibility of redundancies while the admin. staff numbers may be steadily increasing. It also leads to the situation where the elimination of academic staff, even very accomplished ones, is regarded by those obsessed by SSRs, as an achievement: the Director of Middlesex Polytechnic expended a great deal of energy to get rid of the highly respected teacher and academic, Stephen Bodington (author of many books and articles on political economy e.g. Computers and Socialism), in order to make a minute saving on the Poly's salary bill. The reason given was that Bodington was 66, whereas staff and students on the Society and Technology and the Social Science degrees maintained that his continued contribution was essential to upholding standards on the degrees.

(iii) What is presented as a "desirable" (sic) level for the ratios has a habit of changing as time goes by, without its being clear that a great deal of thinking in educational terms lies behind the changes. Thus, the "Delaney norms", discussed in the early 70's by the Local Authorities Pooling Committee (for educational expenditure) asked LEAs to "move towards" levels of 1 staff member per 7.5-8.5 students, for lab/studio-based courses, and 1 to 9.2-10.2 for "lecture-based" courses. The 1972 Thatcher White

Paper proposed ratios of 1 to 10 by 1981 for all sections of higher education. No people like my course leader are talking about 1 to 12.

(iv) These calculations appear straightforward for the institution as a whole; however they require a myriad of (unstated) conventions and decisions about which particular members of staff "count" in the calculation and to what extent; e.g., should a Dept Head who does 2 hours teaching be included as a fraction or at all? In addition, the calculations are even more problematic when carried out for single courses, or for a subject section (esp. when there is a considerable amount of service teaching done across Depts.).

(v) From the staff point of view, the use of SSRs tends to lead to greater workloads. The tendency for students is towards less contact with academics - and towards changes in the structure of teaching; i.e., towards a greater proportion of more "efficient" modes of teaching, at the expense of group discussion and tutorials. From both sides then, this will tend to lead intellectually to fact-grubbing, and socially to more formal and authoritarian relations between staff and students.

Given these remarks, what should the response be?

1. Any use of SSRs that purports to be associated with serious educational planning must be resisted. We have to get straight ourselves the benefits that accrue from decent educational provision; e.g., we must defend and build on what is probably the finest "structure" of teaching in higher education in the world (in the sense of a reasonable proportion of small group and tutorial work). And then we have to articulate these benefits meaningfully to those who should be our allies in the T.U. movement.
 - (a) The articulation of "benefits" almost certainly requires the stating of fairly clear educational objectives, plus ways of deciding when a student has reached them. Students can and should be involved in these processes.
 - (b) At the same time, the concrete implications of increasing SSRs from say 1 to 8 up to 1 to 10 on a given course should be spelt out (see (v) above).
2. Where they are still used extensively, the assumptions underlying SSRs must be revealed, and different SSRs insisted upon for different decisions. This will tend to reduce their convenience for administrators, and the naive trust with which they are still viewed by many colleagues.

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