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HOW WOULD NATIONAL SURVEY ON ACADEMIC STAFF SATISFACTION DRIVE CHANGES IN POST-92 UNIVERSITIES?

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Part 4: Students Recruitment and leadership management

By Dr Solomon Habtemariam

1. Students' recruitment at post-92 universities

Academic staff employment prospects and working conditions are highly influenced by student numbers. This is even more relevant to post-92 universities whose income mostly derive from students' tuition fees. The percentage of income attributed to tuition fees and/or education contracts for the UK universities can be calculated from income/expenditure entry in the HESA 2020-21 data. For the top Russell Group HEIs in London such as the Royal Veterinary College, Imperial College, UCL, King's College and QMUL, their share of income by teaching (in comparison to overall income) was 32.2%, 35.5%, 44.7%, 50.5% and 53.3% respectively. This varies by institutions such as LSE (63.5%), Brunel (65.6%), Birkbeck (68.3%), South Bank (70.2%), Goldsmith (75.2%), West London (76.3%), Greenwich (76.6%), Middlesex (77.6%), St Mary's University Twickenham (77.9%), City (79.3%), Roehampton (79.9%), Westminster (83.2%), East London (83.3%), University of Arts (84.1%), London Business School (85.4%), London Met (85.5%), and University of Law (97.1%). As revealed by HESA, there has been a steady growth in the UK student population over the decade and this data for the last six years are graphically presented in **Figure 1**. On this basis, the UK HEIs may be perceived as places for profitable business where academic jobs are secured and staff satisfaction are dependent on other areas including salary and pay rise that are addressed in our previous publications (**See part 1, part 2 and part 3**). As shown below, however, the UK market-driven and/or league-based competitive HE system shows inequalities in students' recruitment profile with implications to academic job security and satisfaction.

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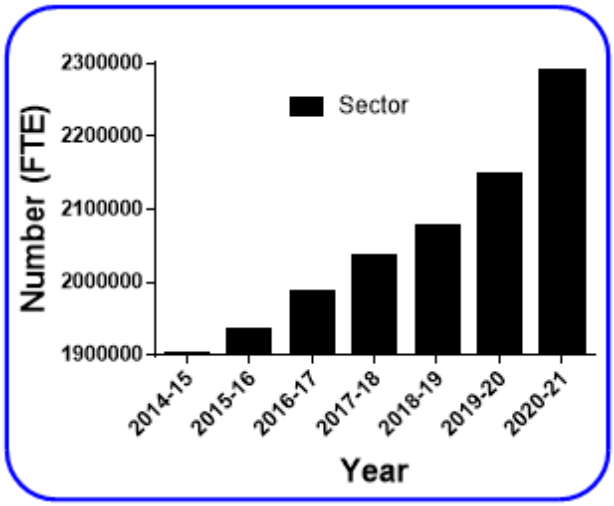


Figure 1. Number of students in the UK HEIs

- **Learning from students' recruitment experience at my own university**

The London post-92 universities are non-selective HE providers with proven success for being places of mass education. With their reputation for widening access, one of the best performance measures they achieved over the years is value adding. This along with student satisfaction is among the few performance measures they do well in league table competition. Improvement in league position cannot be achieved without a cost, however, and over 75% of league table matrices are known to be negatively correlated with widening participation.In this context, the long-standing value of widening participation that the University of Greenwich is known for was somehow side-lined by the then Vice Chancer, David Maguire, appointment in 2011. The most pressing priorities as outlined in the University's strategic vision was making the institution a Russel-group equivalent (research-led) and improving its ranking to among the top-10 universities in London. There was convergence of leadership style between the research elite Russel Group and the new University of Greenwich and culture change within the institution was felt at all levels. Indeed, many good changes happened of which the research-led teaching culture, the increased research output in view of future REF submission, and requirement of higher qualifications (e.g., PhD) for academic staff are just few to mention. This by its own along with teaching-research conflict must have potential impact on



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academic staff moral and motivation but I want to focus on the vivid impact of the strategic change on student numbers as shown in **Figure 2**. Several factors including the rise in entry standard can be listed as possible causes but the implication of loss of ~28% of students over one Vice Chancellor's 8-year term was easy to imagine. Ironically, the share of income from tuition fees and teaching contracts in 2009/10, at the peak of students' number, was far lower than the data we have today. The league (e.g., the Guardian league) ranking variations over the same period does not correlate with this change in student numbers either. Fortunately, this trend of unsustainable decline is now being reversed as shown in **Figure 2**.

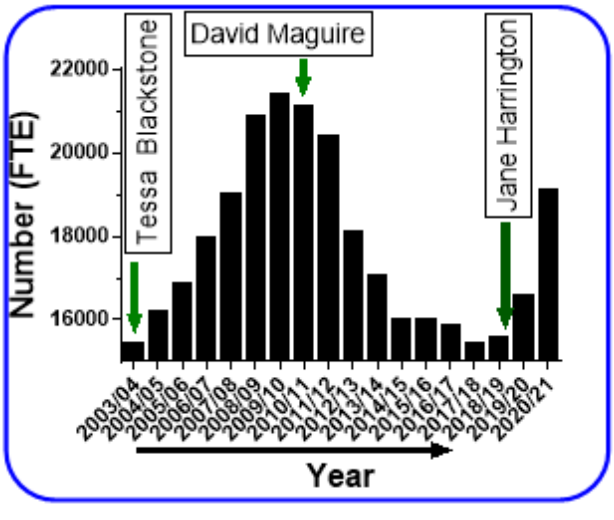


Figure 2. Student Numbers at the University of Greenwich. Data (FTE) sourced from 18 years of HESA publications. The appointment Vice Chancellors are indicated by arrows. The cap on HE student numbers in the UK was lifted from 2015-16.

- **How does students' recruitment profile compare in London universities?**

Given the implication of student numbers to academic staffs' life and the inequalities between universities highlighted in our articles, it is worth studying the trend of change in other universities in London. For the top London universities of the Russel Group-type with over 10,000 students, **Figure 3** shows a steady increase in number as with the sector data (**Figure 1**). The post-92 universities (with few exceptions) however seem to

have a different overall profile. Once more, there may be several reasons for variation in student numbers in any university but as revealed in **Figure 1**, it is not a sector-wide issue in the UK. Irrespective of the causes, be it a consequence of competition or strategic decision by top leaders, it is one more concern for academics in post-92 universities.

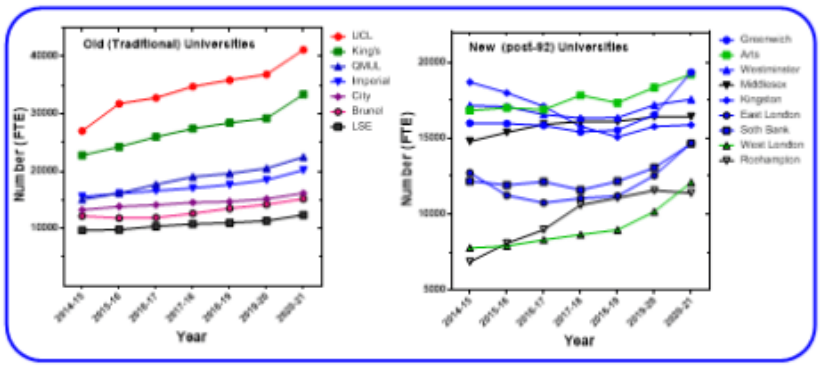


Figure 3. Number of students (FTE) in London universities.
Data from HESA for institution over 10,000 students.

4. Leadership/management

Beyond academic salary and pay rise, institutional culture, working conditions and leadership/management should play major role in staff satisfaction. In the absence of quantitative data for comparison, only investment on academic staff and financial issues affecting work environment are highlighted in these articles. As shown in our previous report entitled "QUALITY CHECK ON THE NEWER UK UNIVERSITIES", post-92 universities struggle in academic role models when assessed by research outputs. Several studies in this field have published the qualities and traits of successful academic leader and managers. There is no guarantee that those who are highly recognised in their research/academic field would be good managers, but they are mostly respected and followed as role models. Eventually, those who succeed in staff satisfaction would start by admitting that post-92 universities have their own unique problems that needs addressing at all layers of leadership/management.

5. Summary and conclusion

Since they got their university status in 1992, modern (post-92's) universities have taken a large share of the UK HE provisions. They have transformed too in many ways including in research culture which used to be the feature of the old traditional universities. Many external factors commonly affect both groups of universities of which the casualization of academic contract, teaching/research only contract and market-driven higher education system are some to mention. While the gap between the two university groups continue to narrow, there are also challenges more common to the post-92 universities. In this article, academic staff inequalities were assessed on the bases of investment in the form of salaries, pay rise, career progression and student/academics numbers as potential variables of staff dissatisfaction. Organisational culture and staff management are not addressed due to lack of data for quantitative and comparative analysis.

We could all agree that HEIs should not be pushed for a pay rise that they can't afford, see their teaching programmes closed or staff make redundant. No one also wants top senior managers' positions (e.g., VC) in their HEI undermined to an extent that it can't attract competent leaders. The existing pay gap between top earners and academics however seems to be a serious sector-wide problem that needs addressing. If a university is recruiting more than before and its revenues expanding on annual basis, pay rises should always be expected – indeed this has been the norm in the UK HEIs. The question remains how much rise is sustainable and fair. Protecting the most vulnerable, as demonstrated by the UoG pay rise system this year should be supported. It is inevitable that sustainable/fair rise across the sector requires the UK universities reviewing the structure and salaries of their senior management team. In the world we live in, however, this would be difficult, though VCs have already undertaken slight voluntary pay cuts during the COVID pandemic. The lower end of management structure still offers a fertile area of discussion for cost saving. In the meantime, academics in the UK universities may continue to feel the burden of inflation, with some far more than others. Being female, BAME, disable, and working in post-92 universities is not

in favour of academic pay/career rise. Of the London post-92 universities, some universities appear to do well in academic staff pay while at the same time have lower pay gap between their VCs and median staff pay.

All these measures of inequalities based on investment (money) and recognition would have received more attention if there was a national survey on academic staff satisfaction across our universities. Learning from the NSS, the approach of naming and shaming poor performers may help addressing the continued deterioration of staff metal health and wellbeing across the UK HEIs. The benefit of this approach would be even higher for academic staff in smaller/newer universities who are at greater risk of poor mental health while ***doing great with little*** in a market driven, HE system.

Missed some information? Read part 3 of the article!

The opinion expressed in this article is solely the author's.

Dr Solomon Habtemariam is a principal Lecturer at the University of Greenwich

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