

Student numbers soar – and staff levels fall

University students should feel confident that lecturers can provide the support they need throughout their academic study at the institution.

Is this crucial aspect of higher education being compromised?

Whilst job cuts are limiting the number of lecturing staff, enrolment figures continue to rise. If a lecturer does not have enough hours in the day to spend time with an ever increasing number of students, the quality of learning will, inevitably, decline.

Perhaps we should first question what exactly tuition fees are being used for. They rose to a staggering £9000 per year in 2012 giving rise to a climate of uncertainty in other areas.

This annual 3 fold increase from £3000 does not appear to have put people off enrolling; but is this a temporary situation? Whilst the demand for a university place has continued to soar each year, it may well tail off rapidly in the future if standards of teaching fall.

By then, will it be too late to reverse new strategies, or will it be too expensive or confusing? Or will standards remain low and the world wide historic recognition of British university education enters an irreversible decline while other nations overtake?

It has also highlighted the issue of value for money when considering the staff-student ratio.

Academics must maintain a balance between conducting research and time spent tutoring students. Unfortunately, as universities face a decrease in financial backing, lecturers are coming under increasing pressure to generate private funding from marketable research. This has left some students feeling that they have little or no relationship with the tutors for whose expertise they are paying out so much.

It can be argued that different courses require different levels of contact with lecturers. Arts and humanity students would typically be expected to spend more time reading on their own than someone on a science course for example. Yet all students require a certain amount of face-to-face contact with lecturers to develop their skills. So how can a student's understanding be thoroughly tested if they are just one in a sea of faces filling the lecture theatre?

Universities owe both the lecturer and the student a system which does not compromise the quality of learning if the institution cannot afford to employ more staff.

If students can get a degree by passively taking notes and rarely speaking to academics, surely we are losing the whole the point of higher education? Universities could, instead, strive to create smaller group tutorials and limit the amount of two-hundred-plus student lectures to an absolute minimum.

Reverting to a more hands-on approach to university tutoring with less staff might be labour intensive, but it is vital that students do not feel that they are on their own.

The relationship between lecturer and student should give both parties the opportunity to experiment, debate and discover. It's not just a case of taking notes.