ABSTRACT. Since 1980 the staff student ratio in the UK has halved. This has been contributed to, amongst other factors, by the massification policy of the UK government. The requirement to publish, the view of students as consumers, an increase in managerialism, and reduction in real pay levels as well as the threat of compulsory redundancies have also been changes which have affected the attitudes of staff. As a result of these factors, the experience of both academics and students has deteriorated, and this is likely to continue. This paper uses survey data from three higher education institutions, which indicates a reduction in the satisfaction of staff over a number of years. Interviews with key informants and a literature review also support the view that levels of stress are increasing amongst academic staff within UK Higher Education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Higher Education in the UK has undergone dramatic changes within the last 20 years. It is difficult to gauge which factor has had the most effect since many of them are inter-related; an increase in the number of students, a decrease in the staff/student ratio, widening participation, an increase in workload and a change in management style have all affected staff working in Higher Education. This change has not been unique to the UK, similar changes have occurred in many countries, including Australia, the USA and Japan, and the effect on staff has been negative wherever the changes have occurred.

The author of this paper will examine the changing nature of Higher Education in the UK and, through an analysis of published papers and student experience surveys and interviews with representatives from the two main lecturers’ unions: Association of University Teachers (AUT) and National Association of Teachers in Further and higher Education (NATFHE), examine the reaction of staff to these changes.
The approach taken in this paper was to analyse data from staff experience surveys which were made available to the author. The following data are extracted from staff experience surveys carried out in different institutions in different years. Unfortunately it was not possible to carry out longitudinal analysis, since data was only available for two years from each of the institutions. Another problem was created by the fact that questions tended to change from year to year, and from institution to institution; thus some topics do not appear in all institutions nor in all years. Because of these limitations the data is necessarily simply indicative of changes in the attitude of academic staff in higher education.

In each case the staff satisfaction survey was sent to all staff employed within the institution, but the results which have been quoted relate only to academic staff. The response rates from academic staff are set out in Table I.

The methodology used in the surveys was the level of satisfaction measured on a seven point scale. Respondents were also asked to rate how important each topic was to them. The resultant data has been averaged using the mean. All the topics shown below were rated as important or very important; only their satisfaction scores are shown. In order to calculate the satisfaction scores shown the scale of 1–7 used in the questionnaire was transformed into a scale of 0–100. Thus, if the mean on the original scale was 4 (the midpoint) the satisfaction score would be 50 (the midpoint of the transformed scale). The percentage satisfaction scores are therefore the mean scores expressed as a percentage.

There are obvious differences between the institutions; for example the mean score for staff in Institution A is generally lower than that for staff in Institutions B and C. However, for the purposes of this paper, the interesting points are that, first, with few exceptions, the mean score for staff within each institution has decreased between the first and second survey, indicating a reduction in the level of satisfaction, and this is more marked in recent surveys. Second the mean level of satisfaction is, in most cases, less than 50.

Thus, satisfaction with salary reduced within each institution (most markedly within Institution A where it decreased by 11%). Satisfaction scores for communication with line managers and senior managers increased in Institution C between 1996 and 1997, but have