

## Studying from anywhere (SFA) – does the student to staff ratio issue mean anything in this context?

Greg Whateley

Andrew West

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The impact of COVID-19 created a shift from face to face teaching to online teaching – and it happened rather quickly. Our own organisation moved rapidly to the online mode given our in-house expertise and preparedness to invest in the accompanying resources. One of the key concerns at the time was the impact that the shift would have on *learner engagement and the student experience*. We had been working for a number of years with F2F delivery for international students – so the concern was of some significance and relevance.

The key issue was whether or not our high levels of student satisfaction (leading up to the pandemic) could be sustained in a WFA (or studying from anywhere, SFA) environment when it came to teaching international tertiary students who were accustomed to the face to face mode – and in fact it had been mandated by the Australian Government that they could not do more than 30% of their onshore study in an online option.

Over a six year period (17 trimesters) our institution has systematically gathered feedback (both internally and externally) monitoring student levels of satisfaction and performance. One of the measures we have used, over a number of years, is the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey - [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

A number of institutions (particularly public universities) performed rather poorly throughout the COVID-19 period given their reluctance to focus on learning and teaching and an obsession with cost saving initiatives. One remedy commonly touted as a means of improving student satisfaction is reducing class sizes - that is reducing the staff to student ratio (SSR). For some, this was seen as a panacea for all student dissatisfaction.

### Little more than a distraction

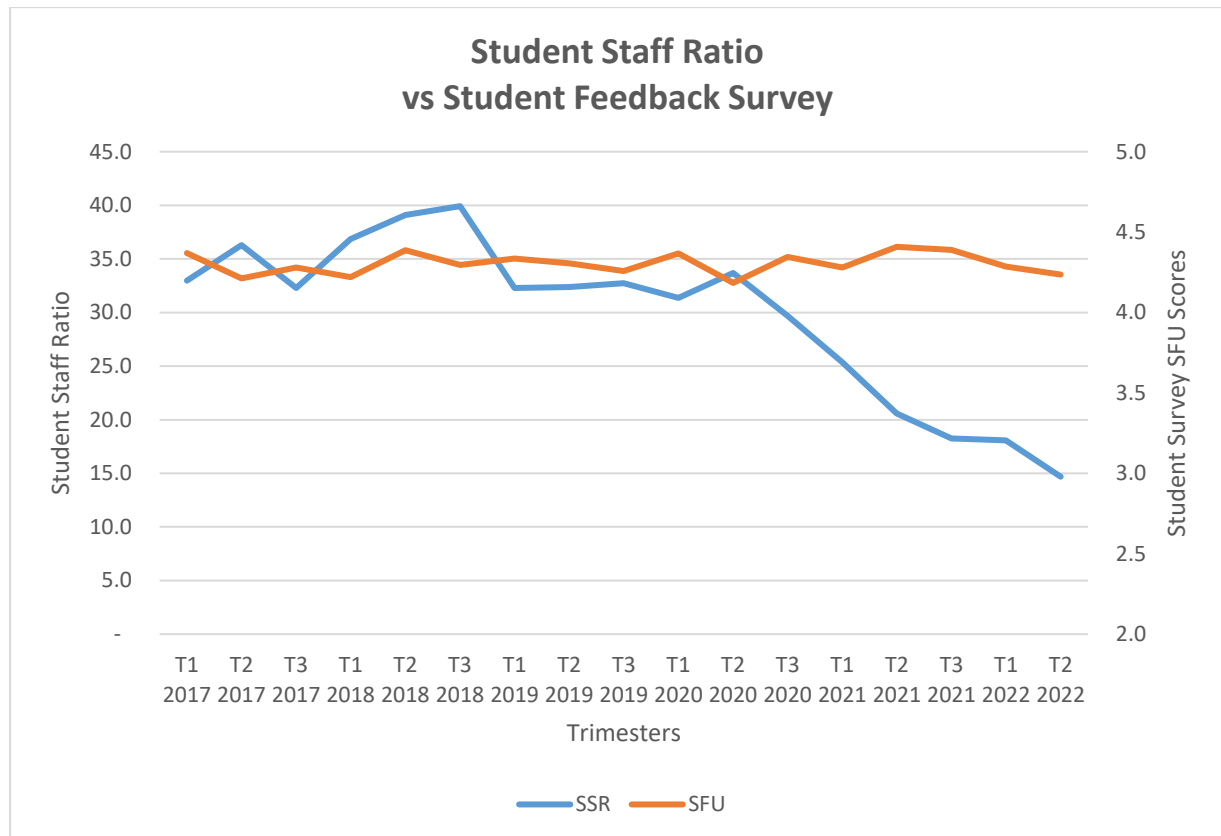
We have argued for a number of years now that there is little *if any* relationship between quality teaching and learning and Staff to Student Ratio (SSR). Attempts to reduce the ratio is little more than a distraction. This applies to both F2F mode teaching and online mode teaching.

**Student to staff ratio** is calculated as the sum of student EFTSL (excluding work experience in industry) divided by sum of staff full time equivalence (FTE) in teaching and teaching/research functions, including actual casual staff – [www.heimshelp.dese.gov.au](http://www.heimshelp.dese.gov.au)

Using our own institution as an example (over a six year period – or 17 trimesters) we have matched the **Student Feedback on Units** (SFUs) aggregates (internal); the **QILT annual outcomes** (external); and the **grade distributions** (internal) - and overlaid them on the changing SSR during the same period.

## SFUs and SSR

The following graphs are a comparison of the *Student to Staff Ratio (SSR)* and the *Student Feedback on Units (SFU)* surveys for the period Trimester 1, 2017 to the most recent Trimester 2, 2022 (that is 6 years and 17 trimesters) –



This graph shows the consistency of the SSR between 32 and 39 up until T2 2020, when COVID-9 impacted student numbers. Since then the SSR has been in steady decline to a level of 14.7 in Trimester 2, 2022. The SFUs remained constant throughout the whole period between a tight range of 4.2 to 4.4 out of a possible 5.

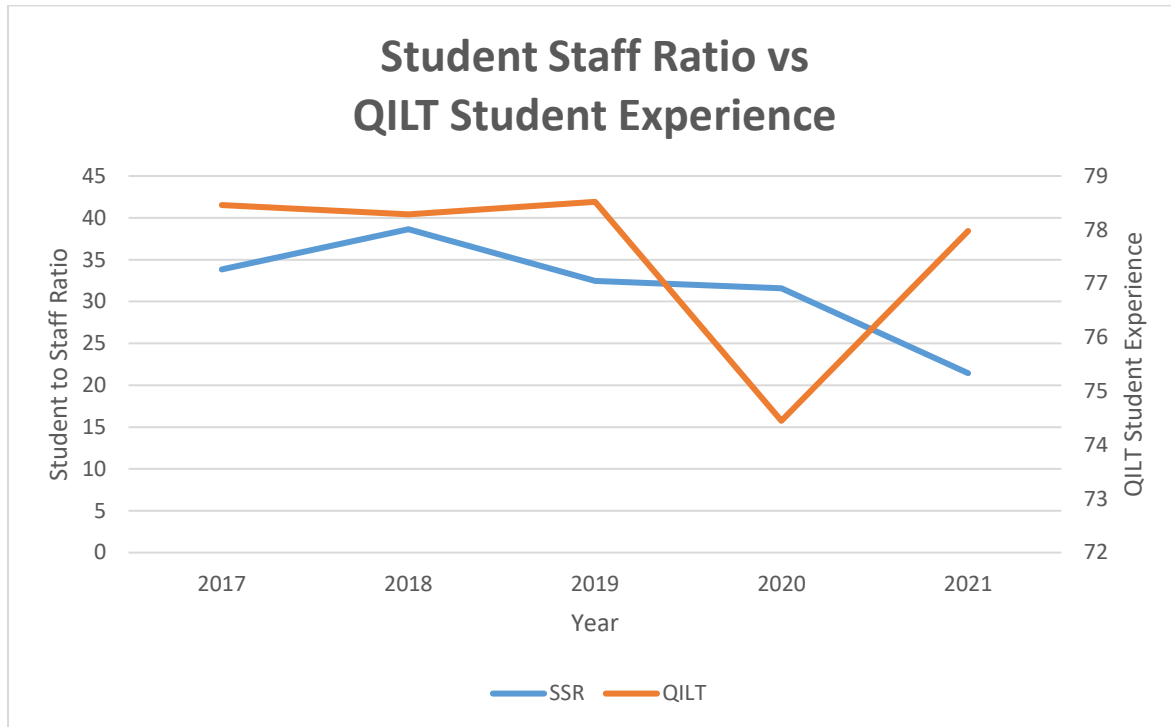
The correlation between these two variables is -0.17. This indicates a negative, weak correlation. There is no impact of lower SSRs.

## QILT and SSR

The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) surveys are an annual request for feedback from all students at universities and independent higher education institutions who chose to join. Since 2016, our School has been involved in the QILT Student Experience Survey. "The SES is the only comprehensive survey of current higher education students in Australia. It focuses on aspects of the student experience that are measurable, linked with learning and development outcomes, and potentially able to be influenced by higher education institutions. Information collected in the SES helps higher education institutions and the government improve teaching and learning outcomes for students." -

[www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey](http://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey)

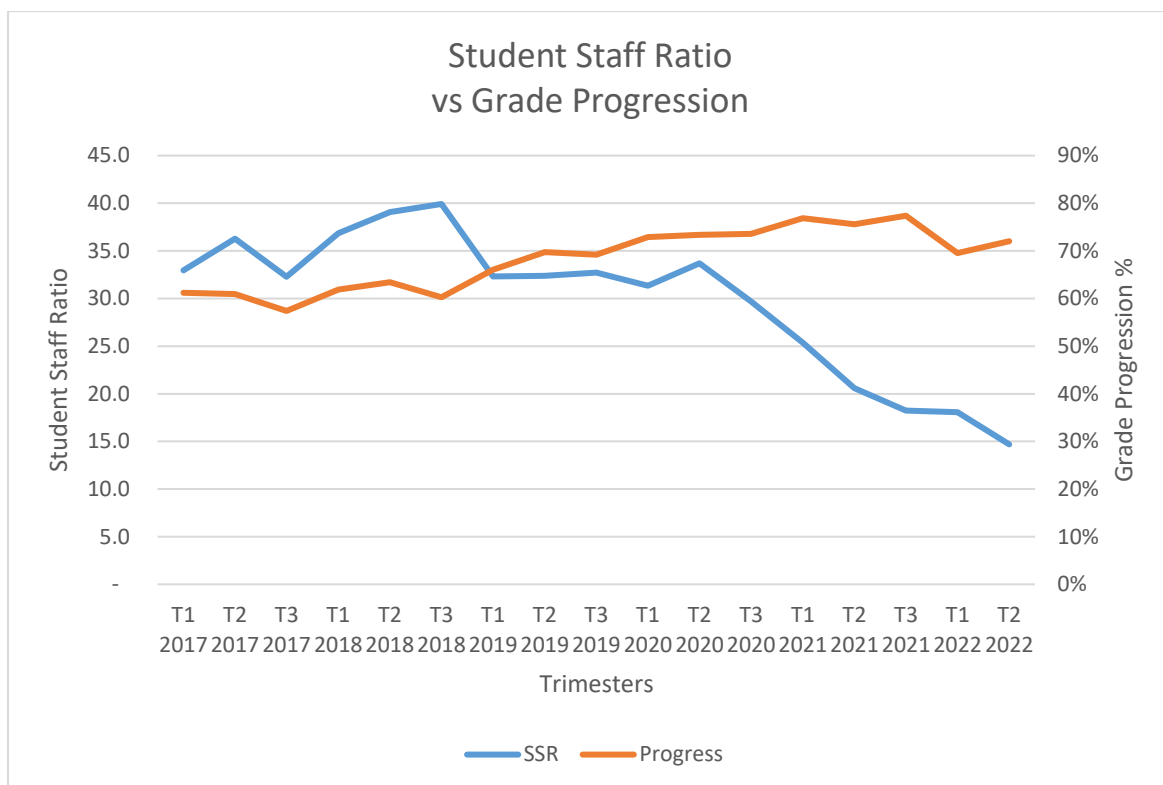
The following graphs are a comparison of the *Student to Staff Ratio (SSR)* and the *QILT Student Experience Survey* for each year from 2017 to 2021 - which includes the latest results available for QILT.



The line graph for SSR shows the same steady level of SSR in 2017 – 2020, in an annual range between 31.6 and 38.6. There is a steep decline in the SSR in 2021 to 21.4. The QILT SES score is consistently high between 78.3 and 78.5. There was a drop in the 2020 survey to 74.4, due to the negative impact of COVID across the Sector. In 2021, the QILT SES rebounded to 78. There is no correlation between SSR and QILT with an  $r = 0.09$ . It can be seen that the impact on QILT is due to a range of other factors (mostly COVID) and nothing to do with the SSR.

### Grade Distribution and SSR

The following graphs are a comparison of the *Student to Staff Ratio (SSR)* and *Grade distribution (progression)* for the period Trimester 1, 2017 to the most recent Trimester 2, 2022 (6 years/17 trimesters)



This graph shows the consistency of the SSR between 32 and 39 up until T2 2020, when COVID impacted student numbers. Since then the SSR has been in steady decline to a level of 14.7 in Trimester 2, 2022. The grade progression was a band of between 57% - 63% up to the end of 2018. The grade progression, then, steadily improved to a high of 77% by Trimester 3, 2021. During the time from mid-2020 the SSR steadily decreased.

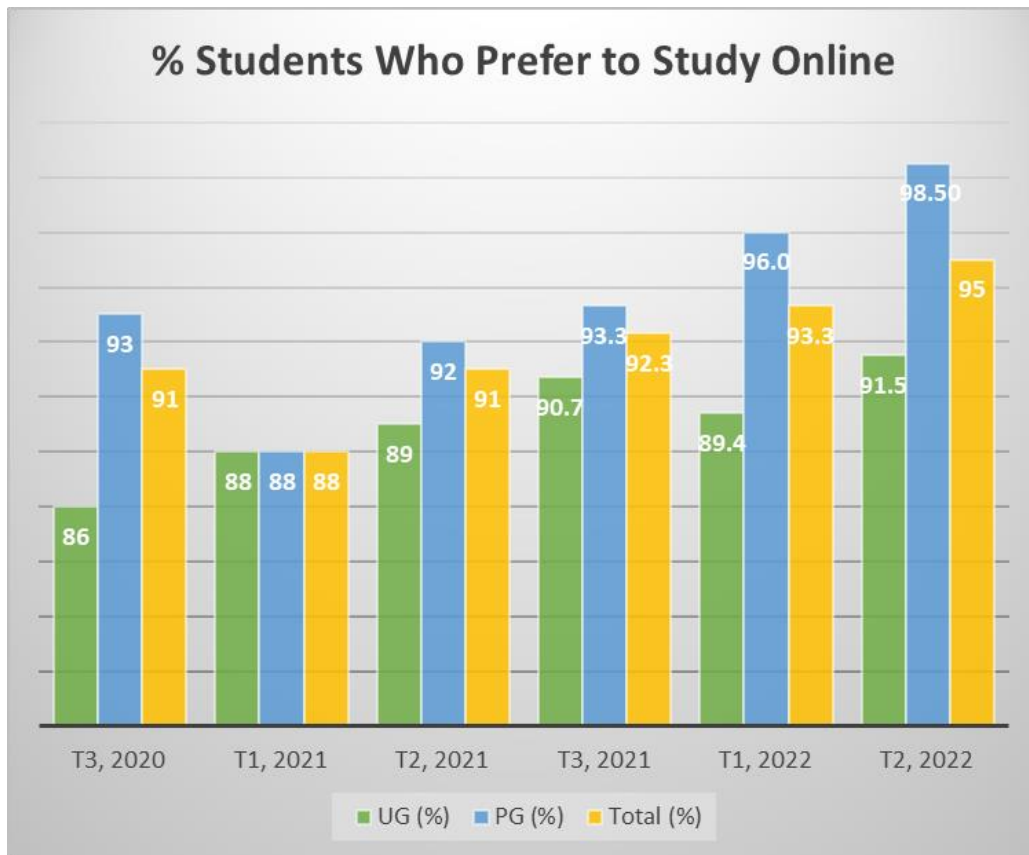
For 2022, as the SSR dropped to its lowest level of 14.7, the grade progression dropped back to 70%, reversing the previous trend. The correlation between these two variables is - 0.66. Which indicates a negative, moderate correlation.

### **No impact on quality teaching and learning**

What we can clearly see is that the SSR is essentially irrelevant and bears no impact on student feedback and performance. Amongst a flurry of suggestions on how to improve student satisfaction has been the suggestion to reduce the SSR – a waste of effort! The focus needs to be on quality teaching and learning that is well done by our private providers – but poorly done by our research focused institutions. If you want to engage students - put the time and effort into that very thing.

### **Measuring eagerness to return back to F2F**

In addition to measuring levels of student satisfaction and performance (especially during the SFA phase) we have also been eager to monitor the level of enthusiasm from our students to return to face to face teaching – that is a return to campus. Each trimester, over a 3 year period (since being online) we have requested feedback from students accordingly. The data has remained relatively constant over the period as reflected in recent surveys (T3, 2020 to T2, 2022) –



Clearly, our students wish to remain on line (95% overall) and at the same time the feedback suggests that they are quite happy with the online (SFA) experience.

**Emeritus Professor Greg Whateley** is the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Universal Business School Sydney/Melbourne) and Vice President (Academic) at Group Colleges Australia

**Dr Andrew West** is an Adjunct Professor at the Universal Business School Sydney/Melbourne