



Systemic Dissonance in Higher Education: The Collapse of Cadre Norms Amidst Expansion and Austerity — Insights through the University of Ruhuna

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Staff-to-student ratios serve as one of the fundamental indicators of institutional quality in higher education. In Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission (UGC) formalized these standards via Circular No. 04/2019, mandating specific staffing ratios for academic, temporary academic, administrative, and support staff categories. Ideally, this policy framework requires that student intake expansion be synchronized with proportional workforce growth. However, this study identifies a systemic breakdown in this mechanism, precipitating a “tri-partite divergence” between regulatory standards (Normative De Jure), administrative authorizations (Static De Jure), and operational realities (De Facto). Using the University of Ruhuna (UoR) as a case study, this research investigates the “quality gap” driven by uncoordinated increase in student enrollment and severe post-2022 economic austerity measures. A critical disruption occurred between the 2017/2018 and 2023/2024 academic years, where annual student intake increased by 30% to 160% across different faculties, while the workforce simultaneously contracted due to “brain drain” and the strict 2022 treasury recruitment freeze. Quantitative analysis exposes a two-tiered crisis: a “policy gap” where approved cadres failed to match intake, and a “vacancy gap” where even approved posts remain unfilled. Currently, UoR faces an academic shortage of 221 against the approved cadre and 894 cadre positions against the regulatory norm. Consequently, student-to-teacher ratios have deteriorated drastically compared to UGC standards: Medicine (1:12 vs. 1:7), Science (reaching 1:38 vs. 1:10), Humanities (1:26 vs. 1:15), and Management (1:51 vs. 1:18). Furthermore, the administrative and executive staff ratio has plummeted to 1:0.02 (norm: 1:0.1), while the support staff ratio stands at 1:1.3, failing to meet the 1:2 standard for science-based programs. The institution’s records show absolute shortfalls of 369 temporary instructors, 113 administrative/executive staff, and 1,454 support staff. To prevent an irreversible collapse in educational quality, the higher education sector must be exempted from the 2022 recruitment restrictions to urgently fill approved vacancies and align staffing with established norms.

Keywords: Brain drain, Higher education quality, Quality assurance, Recruitment freeze, Staff-to-student ratio