



CAMBRIDGE ASSESSMENT

Small is beautiful. An exploration of class size at A level

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Abstract

Background

There is a popular view that smaller class sizes facilitate higher standards of education, since each student receives a greater proportion of their teacher's attention. For example, a recent poll (Robinson, 2008) indicated small class sizes were a common reason for parents sending their children to independent schools. Since 2001, infant classes in England have been restricted to a maximum of thirty pupils and there has been considerable interest in the effects of this policy. For older age groups, however, research on class sizes is scant. Among the 16-19 age group sizes of A level classes vary considerably among schools/colleges, yet little is known about the effects on teaching approach and learning experience.

Research questions

As part of a wider empirical study of A level teaching and learning, two research questions were explored in the context of Mathematics, Economics and French:

1. How does A level class size vary in relation to school/college type and subject?
2. Do teaching approaches and learning activities vary with class size?

Research methods

Questionnaires were sent out to 400 schools/colleges. There were two separate questionnaires – one for teachers and one for students – asking about their experiences of teaching and learning in the subject concerned. The questionnaires were sent to heads of department; those teachers who agreed to participate distributed the student questionnaire to their classes. The sample represented the complete A level population for the subjects investigated in terms of social deprivation, academic achievement and school/college type, as measured by indicators derived using data from the National Pupil Database.

The teachers were asked a series of questions about their class sizes in years 12 and 13, and further questions pertained to the frequencies with which they adopted various teaching approaches. Students were asked questions addressing their course enjoyment and the frequency of classroom tasks they undertook.

Analytical framework

20% of schools/colleges responded, returning 86 teacher questionnaires and 663 student questionnaires. The data was sufficient for quantitative data analyses to be undertaken, and comparisons were made across school/college type and subject.

Research findings

Initial findings, which will be explained in detail in this paper, revealed some interesting differences in class size among different school/college types and subjects. Inter-subject



differences in teaching approach and learning experience were greater than differences associated with class size.

References

Robinson, J. (2008) Public Attitudes to Independent Schools, Ipsos MORI [online], <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/sri-public-attitudes-to-independent-schools-isc-slides-june-2008.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2010)