

## Institutional Commitment to Learning and Teaching Centres

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### Preliminary Note

The briefing document for the Multinational Scholars' Forum uses the expressions "teaching and learning" and "teaching and learning." This paper substitutes "learning and teaching" and "teaching and learning" to reflect the widely held view in the UK that the prime focus should be on learning rather than teaching.

### What is the level of institutional commitment to learning and teaching centres?

First, what is meant by 'institutional'? The briefing document for the Forum does not offer definitions of 'institution' or 'institutional', despite them being open to a variety of interpretations. In this paper, the author adopts the usage that 'institution' means a particular educational provider, i.e. a university or college, termed a 'HEI' (Higher Education Institution) in the UK.

Second, what are 'learning and teaching centres'? This is not as straightforward as it might appear. The UK's National Teaching Fellows were asked whether they had any information which might contribute to this paper. The first question put was: "What is the level of institutional commitment to learning and teaching centres?" Interestingly, the replies included the following:

*By this I expect you mean commitment to the [Higher Education] Academy's Subject Centres.*

*Depends what you mean by 'learning and teaching centres'. We still use the old word – library...*

*[Here are a few details on] our Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching.*

Clearly, these Fellows had very different understandings of what was being asked. Because of the author's decision to construe 'institution' as a HEI, 'the Academy's Subject Centres' are ruled out as candidates for 'learning and teaching centres.' The meaning 'library' is also rejected because, arguably, it is no more an example of a 'learning and teaching centre' than is a classroom. Instead, the author chooses what the third respondent above apparently means: an identifiable part of the HEI offering staff development (and, perhaps, research) opportunities in the area of learning and teaching.

One important contextual issue is the financial climate in UK HEIs. Many universities are in a fairly precarious financial position and a few have been reported recently as being close to bankruptcy. A typical HEI obtains a high proportion of its income from government, dependent on the numbers of students and the nature of its programmes. The 'unit of resource' (money per student) has declined sharply in the last two decades. Two years ago, the UK government announced in a 'white paper' (DfES 2003) a significant increase in funding for higher education in the next few years, with some of the extra money coming from government and some from student contributions to tuition fees. However, at the time of writing, very little of this new money has reached institutions and budgets tend to be very constrained. Moreover, the UK is no different from many other countries in that learning and teaching is not a well-regarded activity in most HEIs. Therefore it is often particularly difficult to obtain money for learning and teaching related activity other than for basic classroom teaching.

So do UK HEIs have a staff-focused 'identifiable part' or 'centre' whose remit is development in learning and teaching? As with so many questions about British universities and colleges, the answer has to be "it varies". Learning and teaching development in UK HEIs includes a number of activities:

- initial teaching programmes for new lecturers, e.g. Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE);

- higher qualifications in learning and teaching, e.g. M.Ed.;
- discipline-based collaboration amongst colleagues;
- generic professional development activities for established teachers;
- awards for 'excellent' teachers;
- learning and teaching focused scholarship and research.

Typically, these activities are located in different places. For example, at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), a large, middle-ranking former polytechnic, which became a university in 1992:

- the PGCHE is 'owned' by, and delivered in, the School of Education;
- a lecturer working towards higher qualifications in learning and teaching will probably be on an individually-negotiated programme overseen by the School of Education;
- each school has its own discipline-based learning and teaching development activity;
- generic professional development for established teachers is organised by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality (CASQ) and its distributed network of Learning and Teaching Coordinators;
- CASQ organises the University Teaching Fellowship Scheme for 'excellent' teachers;
- scholarship and research on learning and teaching is mainly driven by a few individuals, perhaps supported by external awards.

Three further examples go to make the point that each HEI has its own unique mix of learning and teaching development activity, arranged in its own unique way. The University of Plymouth supports a range of learning and teaching developments but has no 'centre'. In contrast, the University of Hertfordshire is strongly committed to its expanding Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching. This delivers a PGCHE which is compulsory for inexperienced teaching staff, runs higher level programmes, and is partly serviced by university teaching fellows who have gained institutional awards for excellence—high prestige individuals. The Arts Institute at Bournemouth demonstrates its strong commitment with a new (2004) centre, which is small but encourages and facilitates all staff in taking responsibility for their own professional development.

Even if there is a centre, much of the learning and teaching development activity may be devolved to local level or simply occur spontaneously, often on the initiative of energetic individuals. The author's own institution again provides an illustrative example: Nottingham Trent has had a 'centre' for about ten years—originally it was the Centre for Learning and Teaching, which became the Centre for Academic Practice and which has now been subsumed in the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. However, in 1998 the university set up a network of Learning and Teaching Coordinators (LTCs), Principal Lecturer appointments, one per faculty. The LTCs (of whom the author was one) were all jointly responsible to the centre and to their own faculty. They directly organised development events but sometimes were merely catalysts for the activity of others. The LTC initiative signalled an important expansion of NTU's commitment to learning and teaching but it was expressed in a fairly complex way, not simply through a centre.

Why do some universities and colleges not have a learning and teaching centre? There can be a variety of reasons for this. The relatively low status of L&T has already been mentioned. Discipline-based research attracts funds more readily and shapes the careers of most academics. Hence learning and teaching usually sits at the margins, competing for funds and attention from a position of weakness. Sometimes the institution is small and lacks the 'critical mass' which allows the provision of central services. However, in larger HEIs such as the author's own, the existence of a centre, its size, remit and prestige are likely to depend mainly on the attitudes of key senior managers, the presence (or not) of charismatic 'champions' of learning and teaching and, of course, the finances of the institution. Yet again Nottingham Trent provides an illuminating example.

In 1998 NTU had a charismatic and energetic head of its Centre for Learning and Teaching. She persuaded the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to fund an expansion of the staff of the centre, a move to much better premises and an activities budget which, by the prevailing standards, was generous. The centre was renamed the Centre for Academic Practice (CAP), to reflect a wider remit, to include 'quality

enhancement' as well as learning and teaching. It could also afford to pay for a substantial number of learning and teaching projects, many of which were in e-learning. How did it fare? Between 1998 and 2002 the centre was perceived in different ways by different parts of the university. With some, it was popular and seen as providing good value for money. In other places, key people such as heads of department and deans were less positive or even antagonistic, resenting the well-furnished, spacious building, and lumping CAP with other central services branded as a drain on the university's limited funds. By 2002, the head of the centre had left and its patron, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, had died and the vacancy was not filled. The new head of centre, previously employed very successfully to improve the institution's scores in external inspections – 'subject reviews' – focused mainly on quality assurance matters, rather than the enhancement of learning and teaching. In 2003, this head also left and an 'acting head' was appointed.

The university's finances, like those of most UK HEIs, had deteriorated and the centre's budget was cut back sharply, to the point where it could no longer fund projects. In 2004, CAP was subsumed in the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality (CASQ) and the acting head departed soon afterwards. The main stimulus for the creation of CASQ had been an impending 'institutional audit'—an institution-wide, government-sponsored quality inspection. Quality assurance remains the main business of the remodelled centre, with learning and teaching development a relatively minor activity. To the author, who has been closely involved throughout, this 'rise and fall' of the learning centre appears very much to have been due to personalities, attitudes of key players, local politics and external financial pressure, rather than any fair measure of its value.

### **How is the institutional commitment measured?**

This question is very difficult to answer, due to the lack of information that the author has about other institutions. One obvious yardstick would be whether a centre exists and, if it does, the proportion of the institution's income allocated to it. The salaries of key staff within the Centre would be another indicator: how do they compare with those of experienced teachers, researchers or managers? A further insight into institutional commitment may be obtained through considering the quality of the centre's staff, although judgements of this nature are likely to be highly subjective. The author has heard of some universities where centre staff have been transferred, not entirely willingly, from academic departments because they somehow 'failed' there. At the other end of the spectrum, Lancaster University recently advertised nationally for extra staff for its centre, emphasising that the successful candidates would be joining a group which includes two National Teaching Fellows.

A related question is how the *performance* of centres is measured? This type of assessment is, inevitably, difficult and imprecise. The author has already indicated that in his own institution it has largely been a subjective matter, with personal attitudes and politics playing an important part. Other, possibly firmer, indicators such as numbers of people attending seminars have commonly been ignored unless evidence was being marshalled for a reduction in provision. Elsewhere, the evaluation may be more systematic. For example, at the University of Hertfordshire, account is routinely taken of attendance and progression rates on the PGCHE; qualitative and quantitative staff and student feedback is used; external audits are considered. In the Arts Institute at Bournemouth, several of the above measures are used, along with reports to appropriate committees. However, we should remember that 'quality' and 'added value' (a vogue concept in the UK) are elusive when applied to education and professional development.

### **How is the institutional commitment supported?**

Learning and teaching centres appear to be supported in different ways. Many institutions 'top slice', i.e. take a proportion of all income to pay for central services such as libraries, the registry, etc. A central learning and teaching centre is likely, but not guaranteed, to be a beneficiary of such an arrangement. However, even if 'top slicing' has regularly benefited the centre, it may be vulnerable if the institution's finances are particularly constrained or there is a change of senior management. One centre known to the author was recently disbanded, mainly because of the institutional imperative to reduce costs.

Sometimes, as at the author's own institution until 2004, the L&T centre is dependent on 'soft finance' (short-term, perhaps discretionary allocations). Arguably, the 'softest' money is the most discretionary, dependent on the good will of a senior manager – enjoyable when plentiful but painful if suddenly withdrawn. A slightly less 'soft' source of learning and teaching money in recent years has been HEFCE, with its distribution of modest 'ring-fenced' development funds, contingent on approval of learning and teaching strategies. HEIs differ widely in how they use this money, but some partly support their L&T centres in this way, perhaps topped up with small grants from external bodies, such as the Higher Education Academy, for short-term projects. An arrangement of this kind tends to inhibit long-term planning and, especially if the funds are meagre, is likely to limit the impact of the centre within the institution.

A significant new development in the UK, which is likely to benefit some institutions, is the creation of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). First proposed in the white paper (DfES, 2003), seventy-four of these centres have recently been announced, with a total budget of approximately £315 million over five years. A centre may have a capital allowance of up to £2 million (enough for a new building) and revenue of up to £500,000 per year for five years (enough for several well-paid staff and some services). The centres may be run by consortia but any HEI playing a leading role in a CETL is likely to have its ring-fenced learning and teaching budget increased very markedly as a result of its success in the competitive bidding process. CETLs vary a great deal in their focus: many are concerned with the learning and teaching of particular disciplines, whereas some have a more generic remit. It remains to be seen how this major initiative evolves, but one likely consequence is a widening of the inequalities between institutions in provision for learning and teaching development.

## Conclusions

This paper is limited and is hampered by a shortage of data on institutions other than the author's own. Its main purpose is to contribute some information about learning and teaching centres in UK higher education. With equivalent contributions from other national perspectives it may be possible to draw some comparisons.

Learning and teaching tend not to be high status activities in UK higher education. In a difficult financial climate, they often fare poorly when competing for funds against discipline-based research. Of the questions tackled in this paper, probably the most significant conclusion is that, as with so much else in UK higher education, the level of institutional commitment to learning and teaching centres varies. Not all HEIs have a centre, and it is probably fair to say that each institution has its own unique set of arrangements for the development of learning and teaching. HEIs differ, too, in how they measure the centres which exist and how they support them.

Universities and colleges are differentially funded, have differing traditions and, of course, different degrees of success in an increasingly competitive market. The white paper (DfES, 2003) contains several measures supposedly intended to remedy the 'Cinderella' position of learning and teaching. However, it remains to be seen how successful they will be. One potential problem resides in the government's wish that HEIs should have greater freedom to manage their resources as they see fit. Another comes with the new, well-resourced (but differentially distributed) Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. We may expect even wider variability: in some HEIs Cinderella will probably go to the ball; in others she will not.

## Reference

Department for Education and Science, (2003), *The Future of Higher Education*, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/> (Accessed 4.5.05)

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