

The Perspective of UK National Teaching Fellows: An Overview

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These six papers, written from differing faculty and institutional perspectives—and in widely different styles—provide a glimpse of the place of teaching and learning (or learning and teaching as many of us in the UK prefer to call it, thereby reflecting the emphasis we place on the student) within higher education in the UK at the start of the twenty first century. They all address ‘quality assurance’, but raise questions about this notion and often challenge the concept. One of the most striking aspects arising from these papers is the variability of commitment and approach to teaching and learning that occurs across and between institutions. Each Higher Education Institution (HEI) has its own unique view of Teaching and Learning development activity, arranged in its own way from institutions which have a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)¹ to those who harness individual expertise and enthusiasm.

From my own perspective as a National Teaching Fellow and someone who is no longer tied to an institution (I recently retired from the Open University UK) but has worked with several, I can see that there is sometimes conflict between the individual teacher- scholar and the institution over what is regarded as Quality Assurance (QA). I would propose that it is Quality Enhancement (QE) rather than Quality Assurance that is the key role for such people. This is borne out in the papers as well as in research that I have carried out with two of my NTF colleagues. There is often conflict between the Government- led centralised agenda for QA which can be mechanistic and localised QE which takes a more phenomenological (as one author terms it) approach.

An important context against which to view QA is the UK Government White Paper: *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) which set an ‘excellence’ agenda, including the increase in the number of National Teaching Fellowships awarded annually and the setting up of heavily funded CETLs.

Another vital ingredient is the growth of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) which has become an important activity, separate from teaching itself and regarded as an important area of research apart from discipline-based research. This movement has encouraged intellectual discourse and professional integrity both on the personal and institutional level. It has encouraged collaborative scholarship across institutions, disciplines and countries. One example of the latter is a collaborative project in which I am involved, initiated at the first Multinational Teacher-Scholars meeting in San Diego in 2004 where, as an NTF, I joined with Carnegie Scholars and 3M Scholars. We have presented our project: Students as Architects of their own Education, at three international conferences (including the STLHE conference in PEI) and are writing a joint publication.

There is an extraordinary range of strategies set up by individual institutions in order to foster a climate of excellence. Some have set up specific centres, some of which are described in the attached papers; others see staff development, particularly at the faculty level, as the key. There has also been a growth in institutional Teaching Awards and many HEIs have set up compulsory PGCHE²s for new lecturers. Where there is a dedicated centre, this demonstrates a shared understanding, commitment and responsibility to foster both good practice and SoTL. Where such centres do not exist it can be due as much to financial constraints as to lack of commitment. The HE system in the UK has a dual funding system for teaching and research. The income for teaching is dependent on the number of students recruited and the nature of their degree programme. As a consequence there is a difference in funding between institutions, with the research intensive universities usually being the wealthiest. As one author puts it, Teaching and Learning can sometimes be seen as the ‘Cinderella’.

¹ HEFCE has recently created 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) each of which has received up to 4.5 million UK pounds on a competitive basis.

² Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education – a professional qualification for those engaged in HE teaching.

At a national level, the new Higher Education Academy (and one of its forerunners, the Institute of Learning and Teaching) has helped to professionalize teaching through its registered practitioner register. This is very much part of the quality enhancement agenda as are the 24 Subject Centres throughout the UK which provide advice, materials, opportunities for funding, strategic development, pedagogic development and discipline based research. Institutional Teaching and Learning strategies are relatively new in the UK and are a result of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)³, as part of its quality assurance and enhancement process, requiring each institution to have a T&L strategy in place in order to attract additional funding over and above the core.

What these papers—and indeed the people who wrote them—show is that in this climate of increased emphasis on quality there is an enormous amount of pedagogic innovation going on at both the individual and institutional level. There are ‘champions’ who see this as vital both within the quality agenda and the SoTL movement and who are prepared to lead the way. Many of the individuals have been awarded institutional or national teaching awards and so have a degree of financial and intellectual autonomy; they can work with other like-minded individuals to raise the banner for Teaching & Learning to ensure that this stays at the very centre of our HE system.

Reference

Department for Education and Science (2003), *The Future of Higher Education*, <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/> (accessed 16.5.05)

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³ HEFCE initiatives usually also involve collaboration with DELNI – the funding body for HE in Northern Ireland. There are differences in the approaches of the separate funding councils for Scotland and Wales.