

Editorial

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With the English Subject Centre now well into its third year, we are currently engaged in bringing forward a number of major reports which will provide those who teach English in Higher Education with what we hope will be useful and interesting information. We have completed reports on English and IT, the careers of English graduates, on Creative Writing, on English and Access and Widening Participation, on Postgraduate Research training in English, on Part-Time staff, and on External Examining. In addition, the returns from our large-scale survey on the curriculum and its teaching are currently being analysed, and this too will result in a report. All will broadly follow the format established with our first report on admissions. Most Reports are also being distributed to every department in hard copy and are available on our website, temporarily in Word format, and all will be available on the website as PDF files soon. Through this work, we are now becoming a substantial repository of knowledge about English, and we hope departments will draw on these resources in planning their futures.

The recent final report from the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) to HEFCE, UUK and SCOP¹, suggests that the different agencies responsible for teaching enhancement should be merged into a single organisation with the working title of the Academy for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, a term picked up and re-titled in the government White Paper (*The Future of Higher Education*)² where the idea is given support. The report finds that there is too much overlap in the current structures, which are confusing, and argues strongly for better co-ordination. While this will undoubtedly have an effect on the subject centres, particularly in the long term, they will continue as they are until the end of 2004, and after that, all the signs seem to indicate that their roles will strengthen. It is clear that the discipline-specific nature of subject centre work is well-regarded, and seen as a most powerful axis in which to pursue the enhancement of teaching.

It has become a tiresome commonplace in higher education over the last decade or so to remark solemnly upon the pace and scale of change that we continuously undergo. As a consequence, I am slightly embarrassed to repeat the cliché here. Yet anyone who has read the government White Paper released in January, I think, will readily forgive me. Radical changes are inevitable: the structures as we know them are being dismantled and reassembled in very different shapes. This is not the place to run through all the implications of the paper; indeed, all the evidence seems to be that nobody is really sure how these will materialize, and there are major disagreements of its likely effects between all the major higher education organisations. What, however, in the round, are the likely effects of these proposals on English?

Undoubtedly the paper sets out new assumptions on the relations between teaching and research, positing the creation of 'teaching only' universities and colleges more purposefully than has been the case to date. It also steers funded research strongly towards larger units, and encourages collaboration in research – and in teaching provision. The potential division of research and teaching will trouble a great many academics in English, where in the main, the integration between these two activities is deep. The paper states that while scholarship must underpin good teaching, 'cutting-edge research' need not. It is not clear what this means, and too much slippage between the terms presents a real danger for English. It is essential that students taking English degrees should be taught by people with deep knowledge of their specialisms, scholars whose appetite for knowledge might act as an example for their students so that the activity of learning is truly collective, not simply or mechanically directed, and more, it is important that students should be taught by academics who are themselves continually tested by peer-reviewing of their own writing. Higher education teaching in English (and surely in any subject) is not simply a

¹ Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Learning/TQEC>

² Available at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hstrategy/>

matter of reaching a qualification plateau that is then topped up with a teaching-skills package. With this caveat, the paper's intention to provide greater incentives for teaching should be welcomed.

A striking feature of the TQEC report (above) was its summary of student responses to teaching and learning on their degree courses. Working with focus groups of students, the committee's report indicates strong and consistent messages. When asked about the best features of their current experience students cited the benefits of smaller classes or tutorials (so long as these were structured), and good computing facilities. When asked about suggested enhancements to improve learning they cited learning in small groups, including one-to-one tutorials, and good access to computers. When asked about issues of concern, they cited inadequately prepared teaching or tutors and the overstretching of staff resources. There is more to the report, and its surveying of student opinion, than this, but this is emphatic evidence of what it is that students want. The English Subject Centre recently organised a one day seminar (see the article entitled 'Supporting Writing Skills' in this Newsletter) with Royal Literary Fund fellows whose work centres around one to one consultations with students; again, the benefits of such work were positively endorsed.

I recall, some years ago, supervising a final year undergraduate for her dissertation, during which she told me that this part of her degree course was her first experience of someone talking to her in any sustained way about her intellectual interests. It was not a criticism, being intended as a gesture of thanks, but perhaps there could be no greater inadvertent indictment of her higher education experience than this. Over the last decade or so there have been noble and imaginative teaching techniques invented to cope with ever-rising student numbers or reallocations of the teaching resource, and doubtless, some of these have been resoundingly successful. But ask students for an opinion, and they will tell you clearly that they want more individual attention, and a structured, well-resourced teaching experience. Impossible in today's climate? I don't think so necessarily, for there might now be signs that the stress on the teaching resource is

diminishing in some places through new structural changes. The 36% drop in the unit of resource between 1989 and 1997 (cited by the White Paper) is an inescapable and reprehensible fact, but in a great many institutions this was exacerbated by two further complications: first, the construction of greater bureaucracies around teaching, and second, the adoption of large and cumbersome unit-multiplying 'delivery' schemes coupled with the somewhat baffling insistence that the best way to divide such schemes would be by overlaying a three term structure with two semesters. The result of both of these changes, in a great many instances, was the alienation or atomisation of student learning, and the compression of timetables and assessment periods. What is happening now is that some departments are trying to fit a teaching and learning strategy over such structures. But some universities are moving away from the 'two-into-three-must-go' formats, and simultaneously cutting down on the number of different modules students are required to do. In such instances, there is a real opportunity to write a teaching and learning strategy that starts from an informed view of what the students require. Such strategies, if they are truly worth their name, should be the first building block of the student experience, around which other systems must fit. Here is an opportunity to start with first principles. It is clearly impossible, given the erosion of the resource, to supply students with a plethora of tutorials, but it is surely worth thinking about how small group teaching, and even one-to-one tutorials, might figure more frequently in our degree courses.

The second of these exacerbations – the increase in bureaucracy – is something the White Paper also acknowledges, and commits itself to tackling. The emphasis on the paper is on the new 'light-touch' audit procedure, and the streamlining of funding mechanisms, but most of us are aware that a great deal of burdensome bureaucracy is generated by institutions themselves. Unless the 'light-touch' methodology of audit is complemented by internal systems, the bureaucracy of audit will not reduce. It is therefore slightly depressing to see the emphasis placed here once again. What is needed is a turn towards enhancement rather than policing systems, a change of

culture which has been consistently recommended by the Subject Centres and the Learning and Teaching Support Network as a whole.

Time for enhancement is admittedly difficult to find, and indeed, one of the greatest difficulties acknowledged by this Subject Centre is that colleagues in English are not simply busy, but frequently under real pressure. Bureaucracy is only part of this; English also houses onerous responsibilities of preparation and marking. That is why, in part, we have pursued a more 'content-driven' policy this year, and have turned our efforts into producing materials, information, data and resources that we are making available through our

website. Yet it is also the case that our funded projects in departments have shown resoundingly that even the relatively small resource enhancements that we have provided have made a difference. As the projects come to completion, they are yielding interesting and positive results. They also demonstrate how colleagues in English are imaginatively and vitally engaged with the improvement of the student experience of the subject. All the projects have different dissemination devices, and you can find out about them on our website. Our Newsletters and Bulletins will continue to provide further updates.

TRILT: Television and Radio Index for Learning and Teaching <http://trilt.bufvc.ac.uk>

TRILT is a comprehensive online listings service produced by the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC) covering around 300 UK television and radio stations. The information is archived and continuously improved, making the database an invaluable tool to help teachers and students alike identify both forthcoming and already broadcast audio-visual material to support their work. Data is available at least five days in advance of transmission, so TRILT can be used to plan viewing and recording. With options to personalise TRILT, including an easy to use alert service, you need never miss a programme again. TRILT records will be enhanced with extra information such as web-links, bibliographies, additional keywords and indications of sources of post-transmission copies, including the BUFVC's own Off-Air Recording Backup Service. The BUFVC's existing television database, the Television Index, will be incorporated into TRILT, adding selected terrestrial television records back to 1995, making TRILT the most comprehensive record of UK broadcasting online.

Referencing Electronic Sources

Are you at a loss as to how to reference electronic journal articles, e-mails and online images? Excerpts from the International Standard ISO 690-2 covering bibliographic references to electronic documents are available at: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/iso/tc46sc9/standard/690-2e.htm>

Several University libraries also produce guides, for example:

South Bank University: <http://www.lisa.sbu.ac.uk/helpsheets/hs31.pdf>

University of Hertfordshire: <http://www.herts.ac.uk/lis/help/tutorials/refelec.html>

University of Stirling: <http://www.library.stir.ac.uk/refdesk/esour.html>