



## **National and International Policies in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

I outline the historical background to teaching and learning in higher education in Ireland and the UK. I examine what relevant national and international reports have to say about teaching and learning in higher education. I suggest that teaching and learning have not been traditionally perceived by higher education authorities to be as important as they should have been. I trace the developments that have been taking place to put teaching and learning on a more professional basis. In addition I discuss recent endeavours to link teaching, learning and research.

### **Developments in UK higher education: UK context**

If we look back on access to higher education prior to 1963, it is evident that, up to that point, higher education had mainly been the province of the rich. By then a larger proportion of the academically gifted were gaining access and after the adoption of the 'Robbins Report on Higher Education' (1963) access was extended in principle to all those capable of benefiting from a university education. In practice, university education remained largely the preserve of children of parents in higher social classes. As for university teachers, appointments to higher education were made on the basis of candidates' higher degree qualifications, or on the basis of evidence of their research achievement and their ability to push forward the frontiers of knowledge. In other words, there was no real effort made to find out whether these academics had appropriate teaching skills. In short the art of teaching was not understood as being of critical importance in the context of higher education.

The increasing need for vocational, professional and industrial type programmes, and the recognition in the UK that universities could not fully meet this need, resulted in a White Paper entitled, 'A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges' (1966) that proposed the setting up of Polytechnics and other Colleges. The idea was to place non-university higher education in polytechnics in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. This led to the development of the 'binary system' or two-tier system of higher

education in the UK which, in turn, had echoes in Ireland, and indeed in France, Germany and other countries. The introduction of polytechnic education in the UK brought about the following developments that diverged in varying degrees from traditional university practice: multidisciplinary courses: entrants who were less academically qualified; more part-time students, and adults taking up the opportunity to return to study; separation of teaching from research; evaluation and validation of courses and their teachers through the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) validation processes.

The CNAA opened up questions about teaching methods and teaching quality. BTEC, and more particularly, CNAA validations obliged polytechnics to address issues relating to teaching quality throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, course validators and the polytechnics were chiefly interested in evaluating and improving the ability of staff to offer courses at a sufficiently advanced academic level. Emphasis was placed on staff involvement in subject relevant research. Reaching the requisite standards often involved increasing the unit of resource (staff : student ratio) and raising staff salaries. A major change in approach came about in the early 1980s when central government in the UK assumed greater responsibility for the finance of polytechnics. The result was a reduction in staff, and encouraging polytechnics to teach more students with the same staff complement. The UK universities moved in the same direction as the Polytechnics, but at a slower pace, and without the polytechnic quality appraisal processes until the publication of the National Committee of Inquiry for Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997).

The UK Government managed to contract one higher education sector while expanding another. In the 'Public Expenditure White Paper' (1981) the UK Government stated that there would be a reduction of 8 percent in expenditure in further and higher education, over the following three years. This expectation arose from the fact that twenty years earlier, birth rates fell in the United Kingdom and Government therefore anticipated that higher education demand would decrease when the relevant age cohorts reached university age.

As mentioned above, the actual participants in UK higher education were predominantly drawn from the higher social classes. There had been no significant reduction in the birth-rate of these wealthier classes twenty years before. In addition, a major recession in the early 1980s reduced the employment opportunities for young

people and this forced them to consider gaining higher qualifications. The consequence of this was that the university sector was forced to shrink and did so while maintaining teaching quality by the traditional method of maintaining favourable staff student ratios - protecting the unit of resource was the phrase used. That meant cutting back on student entry. However, there was an increasing numbers of young people trying to get higher qualifications. As they 'were unable to gain university entry, they turned to the polytechnics. Although the Government had cut back on university places, they encouraged polytechnics to take more students and rewarded them for doing so. With this increase in numbers, it became increasingly doubtful whether quality in teaching was being maintained.

With the 'White Paper on Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge' (1987) there was a distinct change in government policies towards higher education. There was the start of a commitment to increased participation rates and to widening access to higher education for more mature learners. On the other hand, Government was unwilling to pay the extra cost of teaching more students. Government began to talk about productivity and institutions began to talk: about questions of quality. This initiated a debate on the value for money, with a focus on teaching and research, increased efficiency, improvements in management and development, and the use of performance indicators. The White Paper 'Higher Education: A New Framework' (1991), recommended removing the two-tier or 'binary system' between universities and polytechnics and higher education colleges. The United Kingdom moved toward the setting up of a unitary system of higher education. Polytechnics and Institutes of Higher Education were allowed to use the term 'university' in their title, provided that they satisfied certain criteria.

As mentioned above, since the 1970s the number of students participating in higher education in the United Kingdom had increased. There has been similar growth in the Republic of Ireland. When the student staff ratios had been 10:1, academics in higher education did not need to examine too closely their methods of teaching and learning. The emphasis was on the subject content and on research. It was considered important that the academic be actively engaged in researching the subjects the discussed with students and not that s/he should have a teaching qualification. Likewise, when entry to university had been highly selective, and selective secondary school systems allowed universities to select around 10 percent of the most talented students

from the relevant age groups, little attention was given to how students learned as the students had come from academically orientated schools. The role of the academic was to bring the students to the boundaries of existing scholarship and to point towards the next advances in research.

### **Wider participation in higher education and its effect on teaching and learning**

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997) report was drawn up in the wake of increases in student numbers in UK higher education. The report highlighted the need for increased and wider participation in higher education, and also the need for the curriculum to be more learner-centered.

*Many students will be mature students increasingly aware of the knowledge and skills that are valued in employment.*

*Teachers in higher education will have to respond to a changing - and more discerning and demanding - student population.*

*Teachers will need to deliver a learning experience in higher education which enthuses students to become lifelong learners.*

(NCIHE, 1997, chap. 8)

Traditionally, the link between research and teaching in higher education was not questioned. In the United Kingdom system core funding for universities' research was assumed as a proportion of the grant accorded by Government for teaching. In few other European countries was the linkage quite so close. But, over the past twenty years, UK universities have been obliged to distinguish increasingly between their teaching and research functions. In the 1980s the British government began to make attempts to fund the two separately. It began to assess the performance of universities with respect to research through Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs). The next idea was to use these assessments of institutional research performance to determine the level of funding each institution should receive. Meanwhile teaching in universities was still funded on the basis of a formulae that reflected numbers rather than any assessment of the quality of teaching. This form of funding system allowed universities to improve the quality of their research while neglecting the quality of teaching. Dearing was aware of this risk and urged (NCIHE, 1997, chap. 8) that *"in pursuit of a national strategy of*

*excellence, we are convinced that the enhancement and promotion of learning and teaching must be a priority for all of higher education".* He referred to an analysis of the impact of the 1992 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in higher education institutions in England that alleged that the RAE devalued teaching since research assessment was closely linked to the allocation of large sums of money, whereas teaching assessment was not. Dearing pointed out that almost every higher education institution in the England entered the RAE exercise regardless of whether the primary mission of the particular university was to research or to teach. He believed that this indicated the influence that RAE had on institutions' activities. He highlighted the importance of higher education institutions continuing to emphasise the centrality of learning and teaching in all their work.

### **Changing patterns of learning**

The motivation to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education led to the recommended setting up of an Institute of Learning and Teaching (IL T) to oversee the development of teaching and learning, and to accredit teacher-training courses. The aim was to place higher education teaching on a more professional basis. Dearing envisioned that; *"The Institute is about the profession itself taking responsibility for raising the standards and standing of its own central professionalism and getting proper recognition for achievement in a way which has been denied by the rewards system in the past"* (NCIHE, 1997, chap. 8).

The ILT was set up in 2000 with the stated aim of enhancing the status of teaching, improving the experience of learning and supporting innovation. The ILT has had its critics. Rowland believes that the IL T is *"steeped in a discourse of skills and competencies"* (Rowland, 2000, p. 30). He believes that *"improving teaching involves critique, personal enquiry and openness to change"* (Rowland, 2000, p. 99). Pickering also casts doubt on the approach used by ILT. She believes that it promotes the view that effective teaching can be defined in terms of a set of skills or techniques, that are, to a significant extent, transferable between teaching and learning contexts. She believes that the researcher and the researched bring their own personal theories into the teaching and learning process. Pickering's stance reflects a growing belief among practitioners that political and economic pressures on teaching and learning in higher education do not necessarily lead to more effective practice. She debunks the myths of the dominant view of the need for external assessment and

suggests that it is only through the practitioner becoming involved in developing their own conception of teaching that free them to develop as practitioners (Pickering, 2002, p. 28).

### **Towards a framework of professional teaching standards**

In February 2002, the Teaching Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) was set up to review the arrangements for supporting the enhancement of quality in learning and teaching in higher education. The TQEC published a report in January 2003 that proposed the creation of a single, central body to support the enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education - the Higher Education Academy. The establishment of the Higher Education Academy is seen as a unique opportunity to improve and enrich student learning through innovative professional development for staff. The establishment of the Higher Education Academy is intended to build on the work of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) and on the contribution of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) to the development of subject-based and generic teaching practice.

### **Assessing quality in applied and practice-based educational research**

There is a growing recognition of the need to see a closer link between research, practice and policy. There is a recognition of the need for research to contribute to solutions and thus the idea of evidence informed policy and practices have gained support.

### **Increased importance of learning and teaching in higher education**

The recognition of the importance of teaching and learning in higher education and the increased funding that is currently being provided to Institutes of Higher Education is documented in 'Towards a framework of professional teaching standards' (2004).

### **Conclusion**

I have explored the needs and challenges of teaching and learning in higher education. The literature, reports, and historical survey of educational developments in UK and Ireland, suggest that developing teaching and learning have only been seriously addressed in recent years in higher education. This is surprising, as teacher certification has been part and parcel of primary and post primary education for centuries. There are

of course obvious reasons for the present interest and demand for developing teaching and learning in institutions that have paid little regard to teaching and learning processes in the past.

While research has been given a high status in higher education, teaching and learning has traditionally been seen as separate from research. Higher education institutions are currently addressing this deficiency. There is a growing awareness of the need for teaching to be seen as a 'scholarship' and a growing awareness of the need to see practice-based research as a valid form of research. Hence I will now focus on pedagogies in higher education.