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Engendering a culture of quality enhancement in teaching and learning: lessons learned.

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ENGENDERING A CULTURE OF QUALITY ENHANCEMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING – LESSONS LEARNED.

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Abstract

Enhancing the quality of learning and teaching in higher education has been on the English national agenda for more than a decade. The Government and funding organisations have enabled universities to focus on creating a culture of excellence in learning and teaching and continuing academic and professional development. This paper describes some of the strategies that have promoted a culture of quality teaching in higher education in England and how one organisation, the University of Westminster has implemented those strategies to engender a culture of quality enhancement and continuing professional development.

Promoting learning and teaching

In England, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) took a positive step in 1999 by supporting the development of initiatives that promoted and supported innovation and the recognition of excellence in learning and teaching in Higher Education. Early manifestations of this support were the Fund for the Development of Learning and Teaching, and the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, and later the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLS). Universities were encouraged to focus on their approach to learning and teaching through financial support to develop institutional strategies for learning and teaching. Many of these recognised the need for groups within their organisations to coordinate and lead the development of academic skills and to introduce a formal development programme for new lecturers in learning and teaching. Initially in many universities this was only a short programme subsequently rolled into the new staff induction programme. However, with the advent of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and their process for accrediting programmes, many institutions developed postgraduate certificates in Higher Education. Successful completion of such a programme, if accredited by the HEA, leads to the candidate becoming a Fellow of the Higher Education

Academy. Many organisations have made this a condition of employment for all staff new to teaching at university level. These programmes not only teach staff about the basic requirements of higher education governance in relation to learning and teaching but also help them understand the theories upon which curriculum design and development is based.

In 2004, Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP now known as GuildHE) established the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, recognising that excellence in leadership in Higher Education should be held in equal esteem as excellence in research or teaching. The Leadership Foundation provides development services to leaders in all aspects of Higher Education and supports institutions (both UK and international) to foster the development of middle managers, educational and research leaders, succession planning and change management.

These initiatives have led to a better understanding of the theories, practices and processes of teaching and leading learning in higher education, helping to overcome the mis-match between student expectations of higher education and the reality of their experiences. They have also helped to raise the profile of academics who engage in the scholarship of learning and teaching, paving the way career pathways through to senior management within Higher Education. Previously considered to be of lesser importance, those who excelled in teaching practice were rarely recognised or rewarded for their leadership in this field. However, the concerted, government-led, move to raise the profile of teaching in Higher Education (clearly enshrined in HEFCE's Learning and Teaching Strategy in 1999) has influenced institutions in the way they manage the support and development of learning and teaching standards and recognise those who excel in championing them. Many organisations, including the University of Westminster, now include criteria relating to excellence in learning and teaching for Professorial appointments.

Standards and Quality Enhancement

With its mission of 'educating for professional life' the University of Westminster has a strong commitment to its students' learning experiences. It has an institutional Learning and Teaching policy and strategy and requires all its

Schools to have their own. These must not only meet the disciplinary requirements of each School in relation to learning and teaching but must also contribute to attaining the relevant institutional strategic aims. These strategies recognise the need for constant enhancement of the standard and quality of the educational experience provided to our students. Indeed, Westminster, as with most English universities, complies with the standards set by the national Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which requires organisations to demonstrate how they maintain the quality of the education they deliver, providing all students across the organisation with the opportunity for an "equivalent learning experience". Success in delivery of quality teaching is characterised in the UK university model by the development of autonomous and reflective learners. Whilst we strive to achieve this, it is unclear whether or not all students fully understand this model or in deed appreciate the necessity for it in relation to their future employability and career development. There is a wide ranging dialogue that needs to be had between academia and the student body to help those transitioning to higher education understand the step change in learning they need to undertake to be successful.

University of Westminster academic development – Westminster Exchange

To help promote an organisational culture of quality teaching, the University of Westminster established the 'Educational Initiative Centre' (EIC) in 1995, which led staff development activities to enhance learning and teaching practice, develop a culture of pedagogic research and inquiry, and nurture the development of research and evidence-informed teaching practice.

In addition to the EIC, the university had a specialist group – the On-Line Learning Group- whose responsibility was to encourage staff to use the virtual learning environment, Blackboard. The group provided support relating to the technological aspects of using the software, advice on the appropriate pedagogic use of technology-enhanced learning activities and how to design on-line learning activities. Use of the VLE is now enshrined in university policy and constant review and updating ensures that it is fit for purpose.

In 2005, the University of Westminster was awarded one of 72 Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning established with competitive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council of England, in recognition of its expertise in professional learning from the workplace. This group (CEPLW) has led projects across the University to develop institutional engagement with employers, ensuring students have the opportunity during their academic careers to learn in a professional practice environment. The lasting legacy of CEPLW has been the changes in curricula to encompass employer engagement and the development of an accreditation framework to encourage employers to engage their staff in study at HE level. The final evaluation of these Centres will be carried out in 2010 and it remains to be seen how great an impact this grand experiment has had in general and in specific disciplines and aspects of Higher Education in particular.

Last year, the University of Westminster acknowledged the value of its different units in leading teaching quality enhancement by committing to the continuation of these important activities despite the removal of specific government funding. In order to ensure that the separate units are:

- each informing the others work,
- informing the Westminster learning, teaching and assessment strategy
- helping to meet the University's top level strategic aims and priorities

the decision was made to integrate them into a single unit called 'Westminster Exchange'. The remit of this department is to promote high standards in learning and teaching across the University. It is responsible for leading the review of the institutional learning, teaching, assessment and student support strategy and will take a leading role in helping the University to address local and national priorities in relation to the quality enhancement of learning and teaching. The aims of Westminster Exchange will be achieved through facilitating the development of professional approaches to learning and teaching which are research and evidence informed and reflect the diversity of the University's students and academic disciplines. The ultimate outcomes of Westminster Exchange activities demonstrate a commitment to continuing professional development for all staff and the development of high quality learning experiences for the benefit of our students.

The role of students

In common with all English universities, the role of students and their representatives is key to the quality assurance and enhancement of Higher Education at the University of Westminster. Student engagement at its simplest level involves student surveys at the end of modules or programmes of study. However, the student voice is heard on all key committees and in curriculum development teams. In addition, nationally, the student satisfaction survey has considerable impact on student choice and on organisational success. Thus universities now truly listen to students rather than pay lip service to them. This is key to the success of the student-centred approach taken by many universities (including Westminster), ensuring that students take responsibility for shaping their academic careers and take ownership of their learning.

In order to ensure that the University achieves its strategic objectives in relation to student learning, Westminster Exchange's mission is *'To facilitate the development and adoption of new enhancements in learning and teaching and to contribute to the pedagogic knowledge base through the performance of scholarly inquiry and pedagogic research. By working in partnership with all relevant stakeholders we shall enhance the higher education experience for all staff and students and support their professional development.'*

This mission is underpinned by a number of strategic aims in relation to quality enhancement which are in brief:

1. Supporting the organisational enhancement culture.
2. Encouraging scholarly inquiry and pedagogic research.
3. Facilitating enhancement in learning and teaching.
4. Supporting professional development and lifelong learning.
5. Developing future global citizens.

Progress towards these strategic aims is made through the delivery of validated, professionally accredited courses, continuing professional development activities and consultancies. Westminster Exchange (which, whilst generating revenue, is paid for from the Universities central budget) considers itself to be an extension

of each academic school within the organisation, supporting the development of pedagogic research and inquiry and learning and teaching excellence by:

- providing funding for the school-based Directors of Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement;
- working with schools to support and develop the skills required to design, undertake and publish pedagogic research;
- helping schools (re)develop their curricula to include evidence-based effective practice, ensuring an enhanced student experience;
- providing accredited and non-accredited CPD opportunities for all staff;
- facilitating networking within the University, with the Higher Education community and the wider global educational community.

This close working relationship with the academic schools and indeed with the University's corporate services, is essential to ensure that a culture of quality enhancement grows and evolves within the University. The wider community recognition of the value of excellence in learning and teaching has been essential to the growth of quality within the Higher Education sector. However, in the present economic climate, with caps on student numbers funded by HEFCE and penalties for ignoring these, increased international competition, changes in how quality is assured and assessed, how can we ensure that we continue to provide an ever improving learning experience for our students?

As with any 'product development,' a cyclical programme of research, evaluation and refinement needs to occur. This is applicable to teaching practice and the development of higher education policy and theory which impacts on student learning. However, until recent years, such development has-taken place on an ad hoc basis by enthusiasts. Our current climate of quality assurance and enhancement, academic and professional standards means that this development cycle needs to be formalised and properly funded. The creation of knowledge in all disciplines is underpinned by rigorously designed research and evaluation and we need to raise the standards of this activity in relation to Higher Education. At the University of Westminster, our institutional research strategy recognises the need for all academic staff to be engaging with the scholarship-research continuum, where at its simplest form research-derived

knowledge is used to inform the curriculum, to the creation of knowledge in relation to learning and teaching through scholarly research and inquiry and finally to the creation of discipline-based knowledge through research. Whilst it is recognised that not all academic staff will necessarily have experience of academic research (particularly those from professional backgrounds) the organisation supports the development of relevant research skills through the pedagogic research and scholarly inquiry activities led by Westminster Exchange. Thus, by recognising that a culture of quality is dependent not only on the maintenance of academic standards but also the enhancement of those standards within a subject specific peer group, the University is committed to promoting the culture of enhancement by providing the required support to colleagues through the agency of Westminster Exchange. This level of engagement is shared with partner institutions which co-deliver courses and research degree programmes leading to Westminster awards.

At a national level, the Funding Council for Higher Education in England (HEFCE) has sponsored quality enhancement through a range of initiatives and commissions the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to undertake institutional audits to determine whether or not the framework for standards is being effectively managed. The current cycle of these audits finishes in 2011 and will not be extended in its current form. Currently it is proposed that a new overarching organisation will be developed to oversee quality. This might include a 'college of external examiners' accredited to offer their expert opinion on the quality of individual programmes within their area of expertise.

In England, we now also have a different message from Government. The department responsible for Higher Education was the Department of Universities, Innovations and Skills (DIUS). This has now become the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) removing the focus from Higher Education and emphasising the role of business in economic recovery and future development. This gives a clear signal that the role of universities in the knowledge economy is going to be more hawkishly examined, perhaps by a group of authoritative and respected peers using dialogue about quality enhancement strategies and priorities rather than monitoring and inspection quality assurance policies. Greater public accountability from these publicly

funded organisations is expected and with it increased access to openly published documentation in accordance with the UK's Freedom of Information culture.

So with the approaching change, we are poised to look at the future of quality assurance and enhancement in England. How should UK universities, as part of the international Higher Education community, develop quality strategies and demonstrate their approach is effective? Within Europe, we are part of the the European Universities Area but have, as a community, been slow to fully embrace the Bologna process. Internationalisation within Higher Education in England is widely variable from organisations which wholeheartedly embed it in all its activities, strategies and policies to those which consider internationalisation as purely the opportunity to attract overseas students and the funding they bring. We cannot claim excellence in quality without embracing the international stage upon which Higher Education now operates. We have had a commitment to quality and professional standards for a long time in the UK but now we have the opportunity to work closely with our European partners to align practices to ensure that Europe offers the greatest flexibility and highest quality to our future students.