Developing teaching in research-intensive environments: implications for teaching-intensive universities

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The National Teaching Fellowship project reported in this article concerned how teaching can be supported and developed in research-intensive universities. Despite research-intensive universities being distinctive in some ways, a number of common themes emerged which seem likely to be relevant to any attempts to develop a whole institution's teaching. In particular, the project highlighted the importance of departmental leadership of teaching, of career structures that make leadership of teaching a credible and rewarding career option for academics, and of developing collegial departmental communities that value and discuss teaching and work co-operatively across a whole degree programme. Bureaucratic and corporate approaches (McNay, 1995) to developing teaching were not found to be associated with excellence.

The project

I drafted my National Teaching Fellowship Scheme project proposal at a time, in 2003, when I was moving to the University of Oxford to become director of the Oxford Learning Institute. I had spent nearly 30 years in various teaching development roles in teaching-intensive institutions, and been involved in national initiatives concerning institutional learning and teaching strategies (e.g. Gibbs et al, 2000). However, I suspected that most of what I knew about how to develop teaching was going to be of little use to me at Oxford. I needed to inform myself about how it might be possible to value and emphasise teaching quality, and to invest productively in developing teaching, in institutions that had to be ruthlessly single-minded about their research if they were to retain their world rankings, their status and their income. I used my project funding to find a dozen universities round the world that appeared to emphasise both their research and their teaching – they were the research élite either in the world (such as MIT, Princeton, Oxford and Stanford) or in their country (such as Helsinki, Oslo and Utrecht), but they also had a record of paying attention to teaching in interesting ways. I visited them and interviewed their senior management responsible for teaching quality and the 'developers' responsible for improving teaching. I was trying to understand the teaching development mechanisms they used, where they originated from, and what

was believed to be effective. What I found was that different institutions used extraordinarily different mechanisms and also that some did not use mechanisms at all, but worked hard to maintain a well established culture that valued teaching.

It came as a surprise to find that several of these institutions were not only top in their country for research, but top for teaching as well. There is no simple relationship between research excellence and teaching excellence (Marsh, 2007), as illustrated by Harvard's public admission of poor teaching in 2006 and by the Open University being ranked first for teaching in England.

The next step involved setting up a network of these research universities and inviting teams of two – the equivalent of a Pro-Vice Chancellor (Teaching) and the head of 'teaching development', one policy developer and one practice developer – from each institution, to a three-day residential meeting in Oxford at the project's expense. Everyone agreed to come and the meeting consisted largely of institutions taking turns to explain how they supported teaching while everyone else stared in open-mouthed astonishment at what they heard. For example:

- Sydney has parallel career structures, right up to full Professor, for those who emphasise teaching, for those who emphasise research, and for those with a balanced portfolio, with explicit definitions of what you have to achieve at each of five career levels. It also has mechanisms for providing more funding for teaching, for its development, and for pedagogic research for those faculties that perform better.
- Oslo has a substantial teaching award not for the best teacher but for the best 'learning environment', rewarding collaboration between teachers across an entire degree programme.
- The Provost at Stanford personally vetoes departmental appointment and tenure decisions if he cannot see sufficient evidence of excellent teaching in job applications.
- MIT is entrepreneurial about developing structures within which it is easy and attractive for departments and teachers to 'opt in' to developments. For example 80% of its undergraduates, across every subject area, have first-hand experience of working as a kind of

intern in a real research project, often in their first year. The offers of such research opportunities come from individual academics but the system is administered centrally (Bergren et al, 2007).

- Utrecht identifies those it would like to see in positions of influence in teaching in the future, and puts them through a programme that grows educationally and organisationally sophisticated change agents. Many graduates of this programme end up as heads of department or programme directors.

- Helsinki hired a very large team of curriculum development experts to help departments to implement the Bologna Process, turning very traditional content-led curricula into outcomes-driven curricula across the entire university, and then researched the consequences (Lindblom-Ylänne and Hämäläinen, 2004).

- Oxford has increased by a factor of ten the number of teachers voluntarily involving themselves in teaching development programmes each year by organising this on a discipline-specific basis and putting most of its central resources, funding and expertise into supporting devolved implementation by high status disciplinary academics rather than by low status generic 'developers'. Similarly Copenhagen and Lund have Faculty-specific teaching development units.

Leadership of teaching

In research universities, departments are usually highly autonomous, and it became clear through discussion that many significant developments in teaching emerge from initiatives within departments which may then be picked up and spread with the support of the centre. However, the centre itself is rarely successful in initiating changes in teaching. In most cases, initiatives could be traced back to an individual, often a head of department or programme director. The network of research universities that the project had set up decided to seek funding for a research project that identified the best two teaching departments in each of the network institutions and then undertook detailed case studies to find out what role, if any, leadership had played in creating teaching excellence in these departments. The Leadership Foundation and the Higher Education Academy jointly funded the study. Twenty-two departments

round the world were visited by three researchers and a number of patterns emerged from these case studies (Gibbs et al, 2007).

The most obvious conclusion was that while leadership of teaching was usually very important, there was no one way to achieve excellence. Also, while some achieved excellence through a huge range of leadership activities and planned strategic interventions, others achieved undeniably wonderful teaching without strategic leadership or even any overt attempts to develop teaching, largely culturally and through carefully nurturing and maintaining values associated with teaching. For example one department displayed 46 of the leadership activities that were identified across all case studies while another displayed just five (Gibbs et al, 2007), but the one that displayed five took great care to appoint new academics who "valued young people and their development as scientists" and then just let them get on with it (England, 2007). The role of the head was to maintain the culture. I visited the department and the students thought it wonderful. It had outstanding teaching ratings at both undergraduate and graduate levels and was ranked first nationally for teaching in its subject. The crucial point here is that this was not achieved by 'educational development' nor indeed by any planned or strategic process. Leadership was 'distributed' (Bolden et al, 2005) rather than residing in one person.

It also became obvious that contexts differed enormously even within the same institution. This parallels the phenomenon evident in National Student Survey scores that subjects within an institution can differ from each other more than institutions differ from each other. In terms of teaching quality it is the department that makes most difference. It was found that Humanities departments achieved excellence in quite different ways from science departments and both were different from professional subjects. Unless the department faced a very serious problem that had to be tackled there was little chance of academics accepting, or helping to implement, planned strategic change. Emergent change happened when there were fewer pressing problems. Only one institution could claim to have convincing evidence that central planning had achieved anything other than creating an environment within which

departments were more likely to flourish in their own idiosyncratic way.

Conclusion

The range of strategies and tactics being used to develop teaching in each network institution was summarised and each institution's efforts were categorised in relation to the summary (Gibbs, 2005). Ideas on how to develop teaching were shared on a password-protected website for the sole use of the network. Utrecht offered to host a meeting in 2006. Oxford were the hosts again in 2007, Helsinki in 2008 and MIT in 2009. By the time the formal project ended it was a self-sustaining network with substantial momentum. Examples of successful leadership of teaching and case studies of successful teaching departments, together with materials to support workshops for heads of department, have been produced for the Leadership Foundation (Gibbs et al, at press).

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