

promoting access to White Rose research papers



Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **AAPT News: The Newsletter of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers**

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3246/>

Published paper

MacDonald Ross, G. (2001) *The establishment in the UK of a philosophical and religious studies subject center*, AAPT News: The Newsletter of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, Volume 24 (1), 3 – 8.

The Establishment in the UK of a Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre

Author: [George Macdonald Ross](#)

Publication date: Tuesday 1st of November, 2005

Summary: A paper, originally presented to the 13th International Conference of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, on the establishment of this Centre.

I have been invited here to speak to you about the new Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network, of which I am Director. This is a terrible mouthful, so we usually refer to it as the PRS-LTSN, in the absence of any jazzier acronym.

Although the mission of the PRS-LTSN (at least as far as philosophy is concerned) is very close to that of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, its structure and funding are very different. This is because of the unique nature of the British higher education system. So in order to explain how the PRS-LTSN fits into its institutional context, I shall begin with a thumbnail sketch of how British higher education has developed over the last century or so. My apologies to anyone who is already familiar with the facts.

The origins of UK universities

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Scotland had five universities, England had two, Ireland had one, and Wales had none at all. Of these, the two English universities of Oxford and Cambridge had long since ceased to be seats of learning in any meaningful sense, and had become little more than finishing schools for the younger sons of the rich. Only Anglicans could enrol, and the teaching staff had to be ordained priests, and to remain celibate. The government made repeated attempts to reform them; but it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that they began to regain their status as scholarly institutions of international renown.

As for philosophy - the academic discipline closest to our hearts - it had effectively disappeared from the English university curriculum by the end of the seventeenth century. It only re-emerged nearly two centuries later - at Oxford through the study of ancient Greek philosophy, and at Cambridge through the study of scientific method and of human nature, or 'moral science' as it was called. Although British philosophy flourished during the intervening period, it was no thanks to the English universities (however, it should be noted that the position was very different in Scotland and Ireland).

Ultimately of far more significance than the slow reform of Oxford and Cambridge was the creation, in 1836, of the University of London, out of University College (founded in 1826), King's College (founded in 1829), and a number of other colleges. It offered syllabuses deemed appropriate for the capital city of the world's most industrialised economy and largest empire. Not only did it have no religious bar, but it

had no residential requirement either. Anyone who presented themselves for examination and paid a fee could be awarded a degree.

Concern about the poor state of English post-school education, in comparison with that of competitor nations, was by no means confined to the capital. Throughout the century, increasing numbers of colleges were founded by local authorities, business guilds, and wealthy benefactors, primarily to provide a skilled workforce, and to conduct research into modern industrial technology. Then, as now, there was relentless upward pressure from within the more successful colleges to turn themselves into universities. The only way they could move towards this higher status was by adding more traditional, non-vocational disciplines to their subject base (not least subjects like philosophy), and by submitting their students for examination by the University of London. Eventually, between 1903 and 1909, seven colleges finally achieved full and independent university status, and could grant their own degrees (Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, and Bristol).

University funding

However, the colleges' academic achievements were not matched by financial success. Although they charged fees, fee income could never cover more than a small proportion of their costs, because most of their potential students were too poor to pay more than a token amount. Many of them were on the verge of bankruptcy, and in 1889 the Government made the momentous decision to set up an *ad hoc* committee to distribute emergency grants to them. In the first year, the total sum distributed was only £15k, but from then on the amount rapidly increased each year.

At the end of the first world war, there was a dramatic increase in student numbers, and the Government decided to set up a new system to regularise the funding of the universities. Unlike some more recent governments, it was highly sensitive to the need for academic autonomy to be preserved. Ministers and civil servants genuinely believed that academics knew best how to run academic affairs. They wanted a system which would ensure that increased central funding would not mean increased governmental control. So they established a body called the University Grants Committee (UGC), with its own office and secretariat, and consisting mainly of retired professors. The central idea was that the Treasury would give the UGC a block grant covering a five-year period (so that it could plan ahead), and the UGC would be entirely responsible for how the money was distributed, and for reporting annually on how well it had been spent. The UGC also had the task of advising the Government on the amount which needed to be spent in order to fulfil national needs.

The UGC remained in existence, with largely unchanged terms of reference, from 1919 until 1988 - the best part of a century. Until its final years, it was largely successful in protecting the universities from government interference, and its legacy has been a highly diverse pattern of provision. During this period it oversaw a massive expansion in the number of students and universities, many of them being created from scratch with UGC funding in the 1960s. It soon drew the ancient universities into its ambit, and by the 1970s, the whole university system was almost entirely dependent on public funding, apart from research contracts from charities and commercial sponsors.

From the student point of view, the situation was equally rosy. Fees, which were in any case only nominal, were paid by the Government through local authorities, and

there were generous (though means-tested) grants to cover living expenses for all students who gained a place.

The continuing elevation of colleges to university status created a vacuum, which was filled by the foundation of new technical colleges by local authorities. In 1964, the Government gave 30 technical colleges the title of Polytechnic, and created a body called the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), with the power to award degrees of the same status and standard as university degrees to polytechnic students. It is fair to say that the CNAA leant over backwards to ensure parity of esteem, and it instituted validation procedures which were far more rigorous than the quality assurance mechanisms of existing universities.

This golden age of almost unlimited funding, continuous expansion, and lack of state interference came to an end after the economic crisis of the early 1970s. The system was simply too expensive. For the rest of its existence, the UGC presided over cuts in funding, reductions in student numbers, a decline in the real value of staff salaries and student grants, and the closure of whole departments (including half a dozen philosophy departments).

The Conservative Government under Margaret Thatcher was clearly tempted to solve the problem of university funding by adopting an American-style system, in which the main source of funding would be student fees. However, her government was defeated by middle-class opposition, and it opted instead for closer central control. In 1988, the UGC was replaced by a body called the Universities Funding Council (UFC), which was dominated by employers, and had a brief to increase efficiency and accountability, and to ensure that university education was made more relevant to the needs of employers.

The UFC lasted for only four years. In 1992 there was a much more radical shake-up, in which the polytechnics and some other institutions were granted independent university status, and responsibility for funding was divided between four separate councils - one each for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This is the system which still exists. The only significant change under the new Labour government is that maintenance grants have been replaced by loans, and a proportion of the block grant has been replaced by a standard fee. The re-introduction of the fee has not increased income to the universities (it has merely added the cost of collecting it), and the Government is resolutely opposed to allowing universities to charge differential fees in order to increase their income. The only exception is fees charged to non-European students, which are high enough to subsidise the cost of teaching our own students.

To summarise, we now have a system in which universities are almost wholly dependent on central Government for the cost of teaching students. The cost to the student is the same, whichever institution they attend; the funding per student is broadly the same for every institution; and (with the exception of some senior professors in near-market disciplines) staff salaries are on centrally determined pay scales.

Centralised quality assurance systems

Parallel to these developments, there has been increased central control over output. The first innovation was the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). When the

university and polytechnic sectors were merged, it was noted that the funding per student was much higher for university than for polytechnic students. The universities argued that this was because university teaching took place in the context of a much higher level of research activity - indeed, that it was essential to genuinely university-level education that teaching should be informed by research. Their bluff was called, and the funding councils decided that funding for teaching and funding for research would be separated, and that research funding would be on a competitive basis. There is now a four-yearly assessment of the quality and quantity of research output of every department in every institution, and changes in the ratings make a major difference to income.

The original intention was that there would be a similar procedure for teaching; but the funding councils have not worked out any sensible system for penalising departments whose teaching is below standard. The main cause of low standards is usually lack of resources, and reducing resources still further makes matters worse rather than better. Teaching assessment differs from the Research Assessment Exercise in that there is a six-year cycle in which different subject groups are assessed. Philosophy departments will be assessed during the coming year in England and Northern Ireland, though they have already been assessed in Scotland and Wales. The criteria change from one year to the next, and the responsibility for assessment has now been transferred from the funding councils to a new agency, jointly owned by the funding councils and the universities, called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The only sanction the QAA has is to recommend withdrawal of funding from failing programmes, and this sanction has virtually never been applied.

The outcome of the above developments is that departments have naturally concentrated their efforts on increasing their research income, at the expense of improving the quality and efficiency of teaching. The funding councils are wise to the fact, and this is where we come in.

Staff development

The paradox has long been noted that, whereas we, as university teachers, certificate others for entry into their professions -law, medicine, school teaching and so on - we ourselves do not undergo training or certification for entry into our own profession of university teacher. *Quis docebit ipsos doctores?*

For many years, UK universities have had Staff Development Units (SDUs), with a wide brief covering all employees. As well as providing induction courses for new members of academic staff, they have been responsible for training all other categories of staff, introducing appraisal systems, raising awareness of equal opportunities issues and employment legislation, and a host of other things. Although some of the trainers have an academic background, they tend to belong to a culture of staff development which embraces all spheres of employment. Training academics to teach is only one aspect of their work.

When I was first appointed, induction courses were very perfunctory, and they lasted only a day or two. Within the last few years, many of the larger universities have provided much more ambitious courses, which are taken over a year or more, and are certificated by the institution. For example, at my own university, new academic staff are encouraged (though not usually compelled) to follow a course which takes up one

afternoon a week over a year, and results in a Certificate of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

At the national level, a major review of higher education (known as the 'Dearing Review', after the name of its Chair) recently recommended that eventually all university teachers should be required to be members of a professional body in order to practice - just as is already the case with physicians, engineers, accountants and so on. Initial membership would require successful completion of an accredited training course, and renewal of membership would depend on evidence of continuing professional development.

We are still some way from compulsion, and in typical British fashion, we are starting with a system of professional self-regulation. The HE funding councils have provided pump-priming funds to set up a body called the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT). Eventually it will be self-supporting through individual membership fees (currently about \$110 a year), and it will be governed by an elected Council. During the set-up period there is an accelerated mode of entry for experienced teachers who can give evidence of innovation and self-development. It held its first annual conference in July 2000, and the first issue of its journal was published at the same time.

The generic vs. the subject-specific

Now, all these developments may sound very sensible and progressive, but there is one major snag. This is to do with the distinction between *generic* and *subject-specific* staff development.

Staff Development Units and the Institute for Learning and Teaching are well equipped to raise standards and improve skills on generic issues. Some such issues are so general as to be common to all professions: for example, time management, leadership, chairing meetings, making presentations, IT skills, equal opportunities awareness, and so on. Others are largely peculiar to university teachers, but still common to teachers in any discipline: for example, knowing how students learn, giving a lecture, using audio-visual aids, running a seminar, commenting on written work, designing courses, deploying varied modes of assessment, and so on.

The trouble is that Staff Development Units are not equipped to deal with subject-specific issues. This is partly because there are very few trainees from any given subject area each year, and partly because staff developers do not have the necessary subject expertise. However, there is also a serious ideological issue at stake.

At least in the UK, and especially in the humanities, academics have generally been deeply hostile to staff development. While they might grudgingly admit the usefulness of knowing how to use an OHP, or to project their voices, they usually consider staff development events to be a waste of valuable time, and irrelevant to their perceived needs. I might also add that many feel sickened by the jargon of 'staffdevelopmentese', and they simply switch off. In so far as they acknowledge that their teaching could be better, the sort of questions that concern them are subject-specific, such as:

- How can I get innumerate first-year students to overcome their fear of logical symbols?

-
- How can I write and apply explicit assessment criteria for how well a student has argued philosophically?
-
- How can I get students to read and understand the text of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and test whether they have done so?
-
- How do I generate dispassionate discussion of theological issues in a class which includes fundamentalist believers in a number of faiths?
-

These are not the kind of questions which can be dealt with in generic courses designed as much for scientists and engineers as for philosophers.

I say that the issue of the generic *versus* the subject-specific is an ideological one. This is because a substantial body of academics believe they have nothing important to learn from generic staff development; whereas an equally substantial body of staff developers believe that everything of importance is generic. According to the latter view, there are objective facts about how students learn, and established techniques for bringing about learning - facts and techniques about which most academics are deplorably ignorant. Once academics have been trained, the application of standard techniques to different disciplines is a matter of detail. An analogy might be that, if you have been trained as a dog surgeon, it makes little difference whether you are presented with a sick husky or a sick poodle.

In my view, both these extreme positions are wrong. There clearly are many aspects of good teaching which are common to all disciplines, and are teachable by staff development generalists. Equally obviously, there are many aspects of good teaching which are highly specific, and which can be taught only by experienced subject experts. However, there is a grey area as to what is generic and what is specific; and it is far from clear where the balance lies between the two. The main reason why it is unclear is because so little work has been done to develop the skills of teaching staff on subject-specific issues. This is a remarkable phenomenon when you consider that courses for training schoolteachers have always had a strong disciplinary component. If in higher education there were two complementary development programmes with roughly equal resources, it might then be possible to evaluate their relative effectiveness in improving the quality of teaching.

The Learning and Teaching Support Network

To their credit, the British funding councils have taken these considerations on board. For a number of years they funded a range of subject-specific programmes. I shall not go into the details here, but they included projects on the use of computers in teaching, and projects which focussed on areas of concern arising from teaching quality assessments. In 1999 they reviewed these programmes, and decided that they lacked sufficient coherence and funding to be fully effective. Their solution was to replace

them with a Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), funded to the tune of \$10.5m a year for at least 5 years.

The LTSN came into being on 1st January 2000. It is run by a Programme Executive under the aegis of the Institute for Learning and Teaching, both of which are based at York. It is divided into 24 Subject Centres, covering all the disciplines studied at UK universities in cognate groupings, and based at universities in different parts of the country. Their main purpose is to encourage research into subject-specific educational issues, and to disseminate good practice as widely as possible. There is also a Generic Learning and Teaching Centre at York, which will co-ordinate the activities of the individual subject centres, and advise on generic issues.

The Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre

The Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre, or PRS-LTSN, is based in the School of Philosophy at the University of Leeds, with a satellite at the University of Wales, Lampeter. It currently has funding of over \$400k a year. Most of the money is spent on buying out the time of experienced academic staff, since the very essence of the network is that it is run *by academics for academics*.

The subjects we cover are philosophy, history and philosophy of science, theology, and religious studies. One of our first tasks is to create a database of all teaching staff in UK higher education who consider themselves to be primarily practitioners of one of these five disciplines. For a number of reasons, this is not any easy task:

- first, published staff lists are invariably out of date by the time they appear in print, and they usually omit casual staff, who would benefit most from our services;
-
- second, the departmental structures of individual institutions often do not correspond to the above subject categories;
-
- third, many individuals are located outside their natural 'home' department (for example, a philosopher teaching medical ethics in a school of medicine, or working in a department of continuing education);
-
- fourth, there are many grey areas, such as whether a historian of ancient philosophy is a philosopher or a classicist, or whether a philosopher of education is a philosopher or an educationalist;
-
- fifth, recent European legislation on data protection makes it difficult for us to hold or exchange information about individuals without their express permission.
-

So far we have a list of over 2000 names covering the five subject areas. We are about to issue a questionnaire which should bring in much more and up-to-date information, and it would not surprise me if we ended up with as many as 3000 names. Merely maintaining the database will be a major task.

The aims of the Subject Centre

But what is the PRS-LTSN aiming to achieve? It would be nice if we could build on pre-existing structures for sharing good practice and innovation in the teaching of philosophy. Unfortunately there are none such in the UK - unlike the USA, where your AAPT and the journal *Teaching Philosophy* have a long and successful history. In the UK there is no such association, and no such journal. If anyone wanted to publish an article on teaching philosophy in the UK context, there is nowhere obvious to place it, apart from generic journals which hardly any philosophers read. If they wanted to meet face-to-face with teachers from other institutions to discuss shared problems, they would not know who was likely to be interested. There is a vacuum waiting to be filled; but we have no idea whether our Centre will release a huge head of pressure, or whether it will at first appeal only to a small band of enthusiasts.

It is odd that teachers of philosophy should be so keen to publicise their successes in research, and yet so secretive about their successes in teaching, which takes up most of their time. I do not believe that the majority of philosophers consider their teaching techniques to be trade secrets - although a competitive attitude might have been fuelled by the numerical scores awarded under teaching quality assessment, and competition for students in the national market. A more likely reason is that departments have a major financial motive to maximise their scores under the Research Assessment Exercise, and individuals are promoted mainly on the basis of their research output, rather than because of their excellence as teachers.

The mission of our Centre is to bring about a change in academic culture, so that it becomes as natural to discuss and publish about teaching issues, as it already is to discuss and publish about research.

How the Subject Centre will operate

Our mode of operation will mainly be through a website, although we shall also organise national and regional conferences and workshops, and make consultancy visits to individual departments on request. If there is sufficient demand, we shall publish a regular newsletter; but such things are expensive to print and distribute, and I suspect that most of them go straight into a filing cabinet or trash can.

The way we shall use the website is this. On the basis of answers to a questionnaire, we shall allocate respondents to a wide range of threaded discussion lists on specific issues, and invite contributions. Each discussion list will have a Chair, and when its members agree that a particular document is in a publishable state, it will be promoted to the public website. Moribund discussion lists will be closed, and new ones set up as different topics emerge, thus feeding an increasing number of documents into the website. The outcome will be an ever-expanding, easily searchable, electronic encyclopaedia of good practice and innovation in the teaching of philosophy and the other disciplines.

Although the contents of the website will increasingly consist of materials generated through the discussion lists, we are also conducting literature and website searches for relevant materials which have already been published. Our initial impression is that there is relatively little out there which comes under our brief, namely subject-specific material on HE teaching methods in the UK. Most of the UK material is generic, and much that has been published in the USA (largely thanks to the AAPT) is not easily transferable to the UK context. Nevertheless, there are some useful materials, and we would like to make them more widely available. Merely providing a bibliography is not much use, since few university libraries have the relevant items (for example, I believe that only one in the whole of the UK subscribes to *Teaching Philosophy*). Where we can obtain copyright permissions, we shall place digital versions on our website; otherwise we shall have to content ourselves with reviews.

Subject-specific issues

So what sort of issues will be discussed? Here we need to distinguish between the Subject Centre as a whole, the five disciplines, and their many sub-disciplines. If we first take the Subject Centre as a whole, then subject-specific issues *in the strict sense* would be issues which are both common and exclusive to just these disciplines. I am almost certain that there are no issues which concern all philosophers, historians and philosophers of science, theologians, and teachers of religious studies, and no-one else. However, we can define 'subject-specific' more loosely and pragmatically as an issue which is of concern to most teachers of these disciplines, and of little or no concern to teachers of most other disciplines. Taken in this looser sense, we have identified a number of subject-specific issues for the Subject Centre as a whole. These include:

- enabling students to acquire and apply highly abstract concepts;
-
- developing student autonomy in reading difficult primary texts;
-
- making effective use of information technology in disciplines which are largely text- and discussion-based;
-
- fostering student-led discussion of abstract material;
-
- assessing student performance where there are no clear right or wrong answers;
-
- re-educating students who believe they are expected merely to absorb and reproduce what they have been taught or have read;
-
- improving the employability of graduates of non-vocational disciplines;
-

- making courses with a strongly western and Christian bias more accessible to ethnic minority students.
-

I think everyone would agree that these issues are highly relevant to the teaching of all the disciplines covered by the Subject Centre, but of much less relevance to most other disciplines taught in universities.

If we drill down further, there are issues which are specific to one or more of the disciplines covered by the Centre, but not to the others. For example, a large proportion of students of history and philosophy of science have a science or engineering background. Teaching them what is essentially a humanities discipline raises all sorts of problems which are not normally faced by philosophers or theologians. There are no doubt many other such relatively general issues which are specific to just one of the disciplines.

At the lowest level, there are innumerable issues which are specific to a sub-discipline, such as logic, the history of philosophy and its different periods, pre-modern science, the philosophy of 20th-century physics, textual criticism of the Bible, Hebrew and New Testament Greek, different religious faiths, and so on. The list is potentially endless, and we shall set up networks only where our questionnaire shows there is sufficient demand. Some of these areas may have as much in common with other Subject Centres as with our own -obvious examples are mathematical logic, ancient philosophy, language teaching, and textual criticism. We shall co-operate closely with these other Subject Centres, so as to ensure that specialists with similar interests work together.

Relations with other organisations

Finally, we need to address the question of how the PRS-LTSN can help to promote the cause of philosophical education world-wide. As far as I am aware, the only two going concerns at present are the AAPT, and the Association Internationale des Professeurs de Philosophie (AIPPh), which, despite the 'Internationale', is mainly European in orientation. There is considerable scope for the PRS-LTSN to act as a bridgehead between America and Europe.

Like the AAPT, the AIPPh is funded from the subscriptions of individual members, and neither organisation has anything like the resources of the PRS-LTSN. However, the PRS-LTSN is funded by the British taxpayer, and it cannot spend money on international initiatives, unless these can be proved to be of benefit to UK higher education. On the other hand, our strategy of concentrating on discussion lists and a website means that anyone can join in. It doesn't cost us a penny if philosophers from all over the world hit our website, and any marginal costs in managing enlarged discussion lists will be more than compensated for by the materials contributed.

Again, all conferences and workshops will be advertised on the website, and any overseas philosophers will be welcome to attend. Until such time as we have to become self-financing (which may be never), any registration fees will be on a cost-only basis.

To conclude, the PRS-LTSN is in its early days yet, but it is well funded. We are going to hold a launch conference for UK departmental delegates in September, and

our website will go live within a matter of weeks. There will not be much on it at first, but it should become a major resource over the next year or so. Although we are a UK body, we shall maintain an international outlook. We look forward to close co-operation with associations such as yours, and we hope that, together, we can stimulate a truly international dialogue on the teaching of philosophy.