

Chapter Two

National and International Policies in Higher Education Teaching and Learning

Introduction

In this chapter, 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 schooling in Ireland: Irish context

The 1967 Report of the Commission on Higher Education (Coolahan, 1981) was a landmark document for higher education in Ireland. The methods of university government and academic appointments were criticised. It predicted that with the introduction of free education there would be a growing demand for places in higher education. To fulfil the demand it recommended the establishment of new colleges in Dublin and Limerick and later in other urban areas. In 1968 a student scheme was introduced for third level education. This provided valuable support to enable students to avail themselves of a higher education. The Report of the Commission on Higher Education had drawn attention to the inadequacies of technological and technical education. Regional Colleges were established in key urban centres, e.g.

Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Dundalk, Athlone, Carlow and Letterkenny. This reflected the government priority of promoting technological and applied studies.

The National Institutes of Higher Education (NIHE) were set up in Dublin (present day Dublin City University) and Limerick (present day University of Limerick). The Dublin NIHE received its first students in 1980. The growth in population in the greater Dublin area - an increase of 66 percent between 1971 and 1979 – (Coolahan, 1981, p. 251) led to an unprecedented building programme to cater for larger student numbers and to provide up to date equipment and facilities for teaching, learning and research.

Widening access to higher education, greater diversity of courses and various forms of course delivery have put pressure on the budgets of the Department of Education and Science. At present, there is a severe strain on the budget allocation to university education, and universities are being called upon to deliver more for less. Greater competition between institutions has increased the demand for higher productivity within the university sector. It is, therefore not surprising that there is an increasing interest in the processes of teaching and learning in higher education and, in particular, a concern to discover what efficiencies can be achieved without affecting quality of teaching and learning.

Ireland's first colloquium on university teaching and learning

In 1998 the Irish Universities Training Network sponsored Ireland's first Colloquium on University teaching and learning in higher education. The outcome of this Colloquium was the setting up of the All Ireland Society of Higher Education (AISHE). Teaching and learning are seen as the core of the objectives of the activities of AISHE. The establishment of AISHE was due to a sense of frustration on the part of practitioners with regard to the status of teaching and learning in higher education. On delivering his keynote address at the Colloquium, Noel Treacy, TD (Teachta Dála) commented on the huge changes that had taken place in Irish higher education. He referred back to the 1970s as a time when third level education was a luxury reserved for the middle classes (Irish Universities Training Network, 1998) and to the increase in participation rates in higher education that had occurred since then. In 1984-1985 about 39 percent of eighteen year olds were in full time education. By 1993, actual enrolments in higher education in Ireland had doubled from the 1984 figure. In his address Treacy pointed to the need for a vigorous policy of staff development, and need for clear policies to encourage higher education teachers to focus on teaching students how to learn and how to take initiatives. Staff development programmes were needed to encourage constant innovation in curriculum, teaching methods and ways of learning, and appropriate status should be accorded to teaching in higher education.

I report below on the discussions that took place within two relevant working groups at the Colloquium: the Accreditation and Teaching Development and the Performance Development for Academic Staff groups.

The Accreditation and Teaching Development group stressed the importance of putting policies in place in institutions to ensure that teachers could gain incentives and rewards for good teaching. It recommended the dissemination of models of good teaching and learning practice that allowed the sharing of expertise; it stressed the need for a strategic plan in universities to ensure development of teaching and learning. It commented that higher education staff members are not prepared formally for their primary role, that of teaching. The group offered detailed recommendations to five different parties: Government, Institutions on Teaching Development, to Institutions, Faculties and Departments, and Individual staff members. Firstly, they referred to the need for Government to develop and implement policies for higher education and to provide funding to enable institutions to fulfil their mission. Secondly, Institutions on Teaching Development should make resources available to strengthen teaching programmes and to raise their status in the academic community. Thirdly, Institutions themselves, should adopt a performance development scheme for teachers, that move beyond appraisal and review processes. Fourthly, Faculties and Departments should hold regular Departmental Performance Reviews. In the final recommendations to individual academic staff members, the group stressed the need to focus on the future, rather than dwelling on any shortcomings of current appraisal systems.

The Performance Development for Academic Staff group reported on problems with an external appraisal of teaching. They pointed to external assessment reviews that had been carried out by Lonsdale in Australia, Hughes in UK and Licata in USA. After reviewing the Australian experience, Lonsdale (1998, p. 2), concluded that in

the majority of institutions, external appraisal of teaching had not resulted in expected staff development results. Hughes' (1998, p. 3) report in the UK concluded that appraisal had as yet to fulfil its considerable promise. Licata and Morreale (1996, p. 33) report in the US concluded that the actual benefits of instituting post-tenure review appeared to outweigh the costs. The group pointed out that institutions not wishing to have external evaluation schemes imposed on them should develop their own in a professional manner. This group pointed to the fact that few academic staff in Ireland have a teaching qualification and entry to the profession is usually through a research degree, which lacks relevance when it comes to helping staff to cope with rapidly changing learning environments. Since this Colloquium, universities have established Centers for Teaching and Learning and have begun offering or are developing professional development courses, such as Certificates in Teaching and Learning for staff.

Skilbeck report on higher education in Ireland

In 2001, Malcolm Skilbeck was commissioned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Ireland to write a report on higher education in Ireland. In his report, entitled 'The Challenge of Higher Education in Ireland', Skilbeck drew attention to the challenge for higher education staff; "*New and improved ways of teaching students is one of the challenges facing higher education staff*" (Skilbeck, 2001, p. 73). He points to weaknesses in institutional policies; for example, despite general recognition of the centrality of teaching, many institutions have failed to make teaching excellence an important factor in career advancement and recognition (Skilbeck, 2001, p.87). He refers with approval to Trow's perceptive remark that "*almost everything in a university depends on the inner motivation of teachers – their sense of*

pride, their intellectual involvement with their subjects, their professional commitment to the role of the teacher, their love of student or of learning” (Trow, 1989, cited in Skilbeck, 2001, p. 87). He expresses the fear that institutions have not fully understood how teacher commitment can be enhanced by appropriate institutional recognition. He sees shortcomings in the methods of teacher appraisal and contrasts these with institutions’ relative ability to appraise and recognise the achievement of research excellence. Skilbeck pointed out that, unlike teaching, research has widely accepted criteria for assessing its performance. Skilbeck claims that there is a widely held view that *“a vigorous, broadly defined research culture should pervade all parts of the university and that there should be a constant endeavour to engage students in all levels in critical, systematic inquiry – which is the essence of research”* (Skilbeck, 2001, p. 94). This is to be applauded but a greater recognition of the process of disseminating the research urge, and the problems that can be encountered in doing so, would provide a better balanced statement of the Universities’ *raison d’etre*. On the other hand, Skilbeck recognises that universities have been putting in place various procedures for the better recognition and strengthening of teaching. He highlights the possibilities offered by new technology:

With the advent of technology-rich teaching on a large scale there are many opportunities for creative and innovative teaching and new relationships both with students and the shifting world of knowledge (Skilbeck, 2001, p. 89).

Submission to O.E.C.D. review of higher education in Ireland

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the planning and advisory body for higher education in Ireland. A key function of the HEA is to allocate state funding for

teaching and research to the universities in Ireland along with other designated institutions. In 2004, the HEA made a submission to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Review of Higher Education in Ireland which is quite revealing. I refer specifically to what it stated about teaching and learning in higher education.

The HEA observes that teaching and learning are central to the higher education system, and that it is important for institutions to continuously develop and enhance their teaching and learning processes, in particular to take account of new ways that learners can participate in higher education. The HEA commits itself to supporting institutions in measures to promote quality teaching.

(HEA submission to OECD, 2004, par. 21)

The HEA submission highlights the central role of teaching and learning, and states that it encourages institutions to continuously develop and enhance their teaching and take account of new ways in which learners can participate in higher education. The HEA affirms that it will continue to play a role, through the funding framework, in supporting the institutions in measures to promote quality teaching. The manner in which it is done was not specified.

The All Ireland Society of Higher Education (AISHE) also made a submission to the OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland. It stressed the vital contribution of higher education to the establishment and maintenance of ‘open societies’ - societies whose citizens are free and *empowered* to engage in continuous innovation and

critical learning, rather than locked in dogmatic or authoritarian ideas. The AISHE submission averred that the most distinctive aspect of 'higher' education was precisely that it is based on *critical* rather than *authoritarian* learning (Submission by AISHE to OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland, 2004).

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 birthrate 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 s/he 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 enthralls students to become lifelong learners.

(NCIHE, 1997, chap. 8)

In the report, Dearing pointed out that there was an “*inadequate recognition of teaching excellence in higher education institutions*” (NCIHE, 1997, chap. 8). He was convinced that higher education institutions would need to continue to emphasise the centrality of learning and teaching in all their work. The importance of research and scholarship in informing and enhancing teaching was not overlooked in the report.

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 (ILT) 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 ILT 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 (ILTHE) and on the contribution of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) to the development of subject-based and generic teaching practice. A national consultation document ‘Towards a framework of professional teaching standards’ (2004) was issued by Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals, The Higher Education Academy, The Higher Education Funding Council for England, The Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, The Higher Education Council for Wales, The Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland following preliminary discussions with the Higher Education Academy and an external stakeholder group. The consultative document invited comment, observations and suggestions on the proposal to commission work through the Higher Education Academy on the development of professional standards for academic practice and continuing professional development that will support teaching and learning in higher

education. The origin of the aforementioned consultation document was in the White Paper, 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES, 2003) that stated that from 2006 all new teaching staff in higher education should obtain a teaching qualification that incorporates agreed professional teaching standards. It is interesting that in feedback on the consultative document, a large number of respondents stressed that they would like to see a proposed framework based on, or incorporating professional values as an alternative to the conventional, competence-based approach to standards.

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. This is evident in a recent framework for discussion document called 'Assessing Quality in Applied and Practice-based Educational Research by Furlong and Oancea (2005) at Oxford University, UK. In their report, the authors point out that traditionally it has been assumed that there is a distinction between the worlds of research and the worlds of policy and practice. "*The world of research was based on explicit, systematic work aimed at the growth of theoretical knowledge*" (Furlong and Oancea, 2005, p. 5). On the other hand, "*practice and policy were seen as taking place in a world based on tacit knowledge and practical wisdom*" (*ibid*). This new recognition of the research/practice and policy relationship is written in to the UK Government's RAE 2008 which states that researchers should be able to submit applied and practice-based research that they consider to have achieved 'due standard of excellence'. Within the UK, the RAE – Research Assessment Exercise is one of the most important definers of research quality. It bears repeating that: "*Where*

researchers in higher education have undertaken applied and practice-based research that they consider to have achieved due standards of excellence, they should be able to submit it to the RAE in the expectation that it will be assessed fairly, against appropriate criteria” (RAE 2008, par. 47).

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).

The following approaches have been introduced by the UK Higher Education funding bodies to promoting the quality of teaching and learning in higher in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I will also refer to approaches in the Republic of Ireland.

In England, additional funding has been provided to institutes by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to recognise and reward excellent teaching practice.

In Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning Strategic Plan 2003-2006 made a commitment to investing substantial effort and resources to enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

In Scotland, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), in partnership with the Scottish HE sector and student representatives' claims to place particular emphasis on learner experience and supporting institutions to continuously improve their approaches to teaching and learning. SHEFCs has set a target that all teaching staff be professional competent, not only in their discipline but also in teaching skills by 2006.

In Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEDCW) corporate strategy 2003-2010 has identified a range of priorities for the 2003-04 to 2005-06 planning period, which includes the need to develop a mechanism for rewarding high quality teaching.

In the Republic of Ireland innovation in teaching and learning in higher education is supported through the targeted initiative programme which is allocated by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland.

Conclusion

In this chapter, 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.