

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Departments differ widely in their teaching quality

In traditional collegiate university environments what departments used to get up to in their teaching, and how they went about checking on and improving quality, was largely a matter for themselves and only they knew about it. In such institutions one would expect quality to vary quite widely between departments, though we shall probably never know for sure as so little comparative data was ever collected or collated. However when I used to ask Presidents, Vice Chancellors and Rectors of collegial universities if they could name the best and worst teaching departments in their institution, they could usually tell me without any hesitation. They were keenly aware of gross differences, often stable over long periods. It is interesting to speculate on what produces such wide variations given that funding, qualifications of teachers, qualifications of students, library facilities and so on are often pretty much equal across departments. The raw materials are much the same but departments clearly do something very different with them.

In some institutions, such as Cornell University in the USA, Faculties are still virtually autonomous organisations in their own right, with their own employment, pay, budget, student recruitment and other responsibilities and practices, including quality assurance. Each Faculty does it their own way and the centre does not interfere. At Oxford

University, probably the most collegiate institution in the UK, there are central frameworks for many things but they are implemented locally and the centre, while having a watching brief, allows quite a lot of leeway in how things are done. Faculty quality cultures at Oxford vary widely, from relying on teaching quality being the sum total of whatever autonomous teachers get up to, through adopting a locally agreed distinctive subject-based approach, to strongly dirigiste regimes (yes, even at Oxford!).

However, in almost all other UK institutions departments operate under centrally determined rules and regulations, are subject to the same quality assurance regimes, are set the same institutional priorities and are supposed to attempt to achieve the same institutional mission. The rationale for this centralism and uniformity is that it should reduce unwanted variation in quality, and in particular avoid quality disasters.

It doesn't work.

According to National Student Survey results, there is more variation between subjects within institutions that there is between institutions. In some institutions you can find a subject that comes top nationally in its NSS scores, and another subject that comes bottom nationally. Whatever centralised quality assurance systems achieve they seem

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incapable of ironing out sometimes very wide variations between subjects in how well teaching is conducted. In such institutions the quality assurance system seems irrelevant, operating in parallel to what really matters. The variations between departments are neither about the raw materials, nor the quality assurance system.

My next observations have less empirical backing, but after visits to well over 100 UK institutions I feel that I may be on to something.

First, the institutions with the lowest overall NSS scores, ranked at the foot of most league tables for teaching quality, seem to have the most intrusive and inflexible quality assurance systems. Now there may be a chicken and egg problem here. If you are doing very badly then there may be a tendency to crack down from the centre, and the low institutional average scores may have been established before the crackdown on subjects. However teachers in these kinds of institutions have told me that they are often forbidden from implementing the kinds of changes that they believe might solve local quality problems. Even if quality was poor before the crackdown happened, the kind of quality assurance they are subject to has stopped things from improving or only raised everything to a common level of mediocrity. Attention is focussed in meeting rules rather than on improving teaching and learning.

Second, there are a few institutions that are uniformly awful across all subjects. The normal

phenomenon of wide variation between departments or subjects does not exist. To some extent this could be because to be at the bottom of national rankings as an institution you need to be awful at pretty much everything everywhere – even a few good subjects would push you up the greasy pole. But I believe it is also because the quality assurance systems in these institutions are not simply hugely intrusive, leaving very little scope to address quality problems because the rules are so extensive, but because the rules themselves are daft and are causing the problems. I could write an extensive ‘53’ item about truly ridiculous quality assurance regulations and also about imposed features of the funding and organisational infrastructure, that are bound to suit a few and cause real problems to everyone else. I think there are some clear institutional examples of carefully planned and efficiently implemented systems that guarantee poor quality.

Third, there are a small number of institutions that are of similar high quality (according to the NSS) across all subjects: they have few or no weak departments. The three clearest examples are Oxford (despite its collegiality), the Open University (despite its centrally imposed industrial scale systems and infrastructure) and the independent University of Buckingham. What these three extraordinarily different institutions share is an ‘institutional pedagogy’. All subjects are taught pretty much the same way and there is little or no freedom to teach in any other way. A subject at Oxford cannot choose to not have tutorials, not be part of the college system or

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not to rely heavily on final year examinations. Despite its collegiality, teachers at Oxford are more constrained than almost anywhere in terms of the pedagogic system they teach within. Similarly Open University courses cannot choose to teach face to face.

Buckingham does not allow huge classes or no feedback on coursework. Their pedagogic systems all work extraordinarily well regardless of who, in different subjects, implements them (and the Open University, in particular, has poorly qualified and varied teachers compared to everyone else). This might be a true observation, and even an interesting one, but it does not help us in one sense because no-one could become an Oxford or an Open University: their pedagogies suit their context (and their funding levels) but probably no-one else. However both the Oxford and the Open University pedagogies are underpinned by fundamental educational principles that, if you take them seriously, make education work rather well. If only quality assurance systems were driven by such principles!

Despite these exceptions, however, the central phenomenon is wide variation between departments within institutions that are not, in the main, due either to differences in resources or differences in quality assurance systems.

What is left is culture. I know of an institution where the weak subjects areas (in terms of teaching quality) have been weak for as long as anyone can remember. No staff from these subjects ever go to staff development events or apply for teaching improvement grants or

win National Teaching Fellowships. They have never made teaching improvement a priority, and do not hire new staff who care primarily about teaching – or if they do, by accident, they soon put them straight.

I have also visited departments as part of research into how a department becomes very good at teaching. There seem to be two main routes. One involves a dramatic strategic change driven through by a wonderful leader, in the face of a potentially catastrophic problem (for example a threat of loss of validation by a professional body, or closure by the institution) that no previous Head of Department had taken seriously. There had to be impending doom before enough people would agree that they really ought to do something about it. Impending doom is not enough – I am sure most departments faced with closure are closed. They also need very special leadership to mobilise people to avoid closure, and these leaders need to understand how to build culture change, and that you cannot impose a new culture by Monday morning, or quick enough to compare one year's NSS scores with the next.

The other route appears to involve the careful maintenance of an existing culture that values teaching, and its improvement, and that has been in place for as long as anyone can remember. This is the opposite of long standing cultures of indifference. I once met a semi-retired very elderly Professor who, many years ago, had been Chair of Department of the Department I was studying. I asked him if the current very high level of value placed on

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teaching and students in the subject had been in place in his day. He told me that it had also been in place when he had been an undergraduate there 50 years before. In such departments the maintenance of a culture supportive of teaching is the primary driver of high quality.

I believe that much of the difference in teaching quality between departments comes down to the value climate and the local culture and that many Pro Vice Chancellors (Quality) are whistling in the wind while their departments continue to vary widely.

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