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## **THE UK SUBJECT CENTRE FOR PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY**

**George MacDonald Ross (Director of the Subject Centre, University of Leeds)**

**American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 04/2,  
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This article is about the work of the UK Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies of the Higher Education Academy. In order to explain what the Academy and the Subject Centre are, I need to point out some key differences between the UK and the US higher education systems.

In the UK, we do not have a distinction between private and state universities (except that there is just one small university, the recently founded University of Buckingham, which receives no direct funding from the Government). All universities are private in the sense that they are self-governing charities<sup>1</sup> with a royal charter granting their status as legal entities. On the other hand, they are all state universities to the extent that they are largely funded by the Government, and subject to indirect control by the Government as a condition of that funding. Even the best endowed universities (Oxford and Cambridge) are poor by US standards, and they cannot afford to go it alone in competition with heavily subsidised institutions.

The situation is beginning to change since the introduction of tuition fees for all but the poorest students. The Government determines the maximum fee that universities can charge UK and European Union citizens, and from 2006, the limit will be nearly tripled to 3,000 British pounds (over \$5k at the current exchange rate). The Government subsidy per student will remain the same, so universities will have a welcome increase in income, which will partially correct serious underfunding over the past three decades. However, the new fee level falls far short of actual teaching costs, and even the fee plus subsidy is totally inadequate for supporting both a high quality education for students and a decent standard of living for teachers. If some future Government decides to lift the cap on fee income, we may see a system more like that of the US (warts and all).

For most of the 20th century, the Government kept relatively light control over universities, by giving a block grant to a body called the University Grants Committee (UGC), which the latter redistributed to universities with few strings attached. Central control increased under Thatcher, and still further under Blair. Thanks to devolution, which has meant the devolving of certain powers to assemblies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, we now have four separate funding councils responsible for transferring Government funds to universities, with the anomaly that the UK Government can dictate policies to English universities, but not to those in the Celtic fringe. One of the undesirable consequences of devolution is that decisions about UK-wide bodies, such as the Higher Education Academy, have to be agreed by four separate funding councils.

A further complication is that there are two separate organisations: Universities UK (UUK), consisting of the heads of all UK universities; and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP), consisting of the heads of all colleges which do not have independent university status, but which deliver degrees validated by universities. Some

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<sup>1</sup> A charity is a not-for-profit organisation which serves a public good, such as education. Charities have the advantage of exemption from certain forms of taxation.

Government policies are directed towards UUK/SCoP to be delivered in a consensual way, whereas others are directed towards the funding councils, to be delivered in a more top-down fashion.

Funding for UK universities ultimately comes from the UK Treasury, and the Treasury is rightly concerned that the taxpayer's money should be well spent. It has long been noted that the only profession for which there is no certificated training is higher education teaching, and there is a widespread view in Government circles that academics are mere amateurs as teachers, even if they are fully qualified as researchers. Under pressure from the Treasury, the funding councils have for many years diverted funds away from employing teachers towards employing education development professionals whose task is to help teaching staff to improve the quality and efficiency of their teaching. But the view of most academics (fairly or otherwise) has been that the courses provided are too generic to be of much relevance to the actual problems they face in their teaching.

In the late 1990s, the funding councils called the academics' bluff, and set up a new organisation called the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). This would consist of an administrative headquarters based at the University of York, and 24 Subject Centres at various universities across the UK, each covering either one major discipline, or a number of smaller disciplines deemed by bureaucrats to be related. The idea was that, by concentrating on subject-specific issues, subject centres might succeed where educational development units had had limited impact. Bids were invited from institutions to host and direct the subject centres, and my bid to direct the Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) Centre from Leeds was successful. The Network formally came into being on 1st January 2000.

After a few years, the funding councils became concerned at a proliferation of organisations concerned with improving the quality of student learning, and in 2004, the Learning and Teaching Support Network was merged with some smaller players to form the Higher Education Academy, still based at York. The Academy is a charity<sup>2</sup> owned by UUK and SCoP (the organisations representing the heads of universities and higher education colleges), but financed mainly by the four funding councils. The network of subject centres has been largely unaffected by the move to the Academy, apart from re-branding.

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies covers the disciplines of philosophy; philosophy of science; history of science, technology, and medicine; theology; and religious studies. We currently have an annual grant of 366,000 British pounds (roughly \$700k), supplemented by a subsidy from the University of Leeds, and additional funding for particular projects, such as promoting the employability of our graduates. The main expenditure is on staff salaries: myself as half-time Director (I think it is crucial that I set an example by continuing to practise and develop myself as a teacher), a Centre Manager, a Computing Manager, an Information Manager, Subject Co-ordinators for the individual disciplines (though some of these roles are shared), a Resource Development Officer, a Centre Assistant, and some part-time support staff.

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<sup>2</sup> See previous footnote.

Our main activities are:

- visiting individual departments, and providing customised workshops;
- running national or regional workshops and conferences;
- maintaining a mailing list of nearly 2,000 academics in the disciplines, and sending them monthly electronic bulletins;
- issuing questionnaires to establish what academics want from us, and to provide information about the state of the disciplines (for example, information about syllabuses, teaching methods, the use of part-time staff, student:staff ratios, and other statistical information);
- keeping staff informed of national and international developments which may have an impact on how they teach in future;
- maintaining a website with a growing database of resources specific to the disciplines (<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>);
- publishing the journal *Discourse* twice a year, and distributing it free of charge to UK academics (it can also be downloaded from the internet);
- distributing a six-monthly bulletin about our activities to senior managers (the *Discourse Supplement*);
- making grants of up to 3,000 British pounds (about \$5k) to individuals or teams, for research projects, the outcomes of which are published in *Discourse*;
- obtaining additional funding for specific projects, such as the employability of graduates, entrepreneurship, guides to dealing with students of different faiths, the needs of students with disabilities, the teaching of applied ethics in different disciplines, developing the skills of postgraduate students, and the distinctive methodologies of research in our disciplines, and how they can best be applied to pedagogical research;
- translating the outcomes of generic pedagogical research into a form and language which is relevant and accessible to teachers in our disciplines;
- identifying and producing subject-specific materials which will be useful to teachers, whether they are new or experienced, and full-time or part-time;
- summarising and reviewing the existing literature on teaching the disciplines in higher education (in the case of philosophy, the richest resources are the journal *Teaching Philosophy* and the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*);
- establishing partnerships with other subject centres where we have interests in common;
- fostering international links, so that we can learn from others and others can learn from us;
- reaching out to students through focus groups and essay prizes, since our mission is to improve *their* learning experience, and their views are as important as those of academics.

With this level of activity over a period of five years, one might expect a noticeable change in the way philosophy is taught in the UK, and in the quality of the student experience. However, I don't think any readers of this newsletter will be surprised to learn that the actual impact of our activities has so far been somewhat limited.

In the US, the movement to engage academics actively in learning and teaching issues has a far longer history, going back at least 30 years. Yet the number of academics who participate in conferences and contribute to journals and newsletters is a small fraction of the number of US philosophers. The APA membership of over 10,000 probably underestimates the number of US philosophy teachers, because not all are members. But only a few hundred are active in the scholarship of learning and teaching. In the UK, the number of philosophy academics is about one-twentieth of the number in the US; so if we scale down the numbers, the Subject Centre is doing quite well if it has engaged more than a dozen or so. We have in fact done better than this, but we still have a long way to go if we are to make a substantial impact on students' learning experience across all institutions.

Philosophers are a particularly difficult constituency to reach, for a number of reasons:

- unlike subjects which are also taught at school, there is little or no tradition of pedagogical research to build on, when considering how to teach philosophy at university;
- philosophers are highly individualistic, and have a culture of disagreeing with one another, rather than working co-operatively;
- philosophers invest their own personalities and opinions into their teaching, and are reluctant to take advice from others (in contrast with the US, philosophers in the UK are even reluctant to use textbooks written by others);
- there is a widespread feeling that, despite its progress, philosophy as a discipline has remained essentially the same for two and half millennia, and tried and tested teaching methods are as valid now as they were in the past;
- philosophy offers less scope than other disciplines for many of the innovations promoted by educationalists — problem- or work-based learning, multiple-choice tests, websites with jazzy graphics, and so on;
- philosophers are confident of their ability to criticise and reject out of hand the concepts, theories, and language of educationalists.

In addition, there are two major factors which affect all academics in the UK: time, and research.

One of the consequences of prolonged underfunding and the inability to solve the problem by raising tuition fees, has been a massive increase in workload. When I started teaching at Leeds in the early 1970s, we had a student:staff ratio of about 8:1, whereas now it is approaching 30:1. Although some departments are still fortunate enough to have quite favourable ratios, the increased load at Leeds is more typical. Most academics simply do not have the time to attend workshops, conduct experiments, or write articles about teaching methods. I sometimes feel that the only way of getting more academics involved would be to discover the Holy Grail of a teaching method which would *both* improve the quality of the students' learning experience, *and* substantially reduce the input of staff time. This is unlikely in a subject such as philosophy, where personal interaction between teacher and learner is paramount — nevertheless, there are ways of increasing the effectiveness of such interactions, which can yield some savings in contact time.

As far as research is concerned, there are some significant differences between the UK and the US academic cultures. The UK was rather late to adopt the idea of the university

as essentially a research institution, and in the humanities in particular it was only around the middle of the 20th century that a ‘publish or perish’ culture began to pervade academia. However, it soon became definitive of a university that all staff were expected to be active in research as well as in teaching, with an increasing emphasis on the former. This helps to explain the apparent paradox that many of the most innovative philosophy teachers are in their 60s: they entered the profession at a time when the primary mission of a university was still considered to be the teaching of undergraduates. It’s a pity that all these teachers will soon reach the compulsory retirement age of 65.

In the UK, we never had the US distinction between liberal arts colleges offering undergraduate degrees, and research universities. The distinction we *did* have for a while was between universities and polytechnics. Polytechnics concentrated mainly on vocational subjects, and research and the teaching of the humanities were largely peripheral to their mission. However, in 1992 all polytechnics were granted university status, and since then they have striven to build up their research profile, in line with the older universities. So we now have a higher education system in which *all* institutions with degree-awarding powers have a strong focus on research. (This may not last, because it is the policy of the present Government to concentrate funding for research into a small number of ‘world-class’ institutions, thus reinstating the divide between teaching-only and research universities.)

Ideally, there should be a close connection between teaching and research, with each invigorating the other. As it happens, there is no evidence that better researchers are better teachers, or that better teachers are better researchers; and a number of educationalists are working on ways to improve the teaching/research nexus. However, the large majority of academics see teaching and research as in conflict for their time, and the greater rewards for research success mean that teaching, let alone research into teaching, takes second place. During my visits to the US, I have noticed that most of those active in learning and teaching issues are employed at colleges whose primary mission is teaching. Although staff are up to date with current research and themselves publish, there is clearly less pressure to neglect teaching, and thinking about teaching, in favour of the publication rat race. The proportion of staff in research universities who research into learning and teaching seems to be very small — and, as I have said, *all* higher education institutions in the UK regard themselves as research universities, which means that we lack a dedicated core of teachers whose first interest is in teaching.

The concept of ‘publish or perish’ is an import from the US to the UK; but the education bureaucracy of the UK has elevated it to a status undreamed of in the US. When we had a binary system of universities and polytechnics, the polytechnics complained that they had a lower level of funding per student, and the universities responded that their higher level of funding was to support research. The Government decided to resolve the issue by making a clear distinction between funding for teaching, and funding for research. The idea was that both types of institution would have the same level of funding for teaching, and that research would be accounted for separately. As always, the Treasury insisted that institutions had to be accountable for how they spent public money, and the result was the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), through which every department is periodically assessed on the quantity and quality of its research publications. Each department is given a rating, and a change in rating from one exercise to the next can mean an increase or a loss of funding of hundreds of thousands of pounds. The next RAE will take place in 2008, and academics throughout

the UK are frantically trying to get books and articles into print by the cut-off date of 31 December 2007 — anything published after that date simply does not count.

Parallel to the RAE, there has been a regime of teaching quality inspection, carried out by a body called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which is owned by UUK and SCoP (the organisations representing the heads of universities and higher education colleges). However, poor outcomes have not resulted in loss of funding, because an unsatisfactory learning environment is often the result of a lack of resources and excessive teaching loads, and financial penalties would make the problems even worse.

Putting the two together, departments have little incentive to improve the quality of their teaching, apart from the damage to their reputation and student recruitment caused by a low rating in comparative statistics published in the press and other sources of information. On the other hand, they have a huge financial incentive to focus on subject research at the expense of teaching. It is therefore hardly surprising that some people have told us that they would like to write for us about their teaching methods, but have been *forbidden* to do so, because it would detract from their subject research efforts. Similarly, we have often been rebuffed in our attempts to organise sessions on teaching at philosophy conferences (building on the APA model), on the grounds that thinking about teaching would spoil the research atmosphere of the occasion.

Previous Research Assessment Exercises have made it clear that pedagogical research would be acceptable, but no such research appears to have been submitted in the last exercise, at least in the case of philosophy. It is really important that pedagogical research should be taken seriously, and I hope that the next Research Assessment Exercise will include some serious publications on educational research, and generate funding for further research.

Another recent development has been the setting up of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The Government has recognised that UK academics are underpaid relative to other professions, and to academics elsewhere. However, it is not prepared to foot the bill to restore parity across the board. Instead, it had the idea ('thought up on the back of envelope', admitted the Minister responsible) of rewarding about 70 departments or teaching teams by designating them as Centres of Excellence and giving them very large sums of money. Bids were invited for amounts of up to 500,000 British pounds (about \$900) a year for five years, plus up to 2 million British pounds (nearly \$4m) in capital funding. I won't go into the absurdities of the scheme here — in particular its divisiveness, and the problem of financing any increased salaries after the end of the five-year period. The Higher Education Academy was concerned from the start that Centres of Excellence, which will have a very narrow focus, were being funded at a higher level than its own Subject Centres, which have UK-wide responsibilities and a much broader agenda. The one saving grace is that Centres of Excellence are required to work closely with Subject Centres in disseminating their excellent practice more widely — so some good may come out of the scheme, even if the large sums of money could have been put to better use. The outcome of the bidding process will be formally announced in January 2005, but it is already known that only one philosophy department has been successful — my own department at Leeds will be leading a Centre of Excellence concerned with teaching professional ethics across the disciplines.

In this article, I have dwelt on the difficulties we face in getting our colleagues to spend more time sharing ideas about how to teach philosophy more effectively — difficulties which are common to readers of this Newsletter, though in a somewhat different educational context. I do not wish to end on a pessimistic note. Although we have found it hard to attract people's attention to what we are doing, once we have succeeded, our services are warmly appreciated. Our journal *Discourse* grows from strength to strength, and our website (about to be extensively re-vamped) is the largest electronic repository for materials on teaching philosophy in the world. The outcomes of a number of major projects (the faith guides, employability of graduates, disability, and entrepreneurship) will be published early in 2005, and we expect to have an even higher profile from then on. Despite its flaws, the UK higher education system has many merits, of which the Higher Education Academy is one.

Finally, to celebrate our fifth anniversary, we are organising an international conference on teaching philosophy, at the University of Leeds on 1–2 July 2005. We hope that as many readers of this Newsletter as can will attend. Details are at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/philosophy/events/conference.html>.

### **Postscript**

The Editor of the Newsletter has suggested that readers might be interested in a little more detail about research projects and the journal *Discourse*.

Because of the nature of our funding, we can award grants only to academics employed in UK higher education institutions. We have a competitive bidding process, and bids are assessed for their relevance to learning, teaching, and evaluation; their potential benefit to others in the discipline; an effective dissemination strategy; procedures for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the project; and value for money.

At present, we are very open about research methodology, because we believe that current educational research is too restricted to social science paradigms. One of our ambitions is to articulate a methodology which is more appropriate for research into the teaching of philosophy, and which will exploit the special research skills of philosophers. When we have built up a substantial body of precedents for what is accepted as good philosophical research into the teaching of philosophy, we may become more prescriptive.

Projects funded so far include topics such as various aspects of e-learning in philosophy, teaching applied ethics, aids to teaching logic, the use of personal development portfolios, evaluating oral performance and other innovative methods of grading students, the use of personal response systems in lectures, helping students to read difficult texts — and so on. Most projects give rise to articles published in *Discourse*.

*Discourse* is not restricted to UK academics, provided only that articles are relevant to the teaching of philosophy as practised in the UK. For example, the latest issue (volume 4, number 1) contains an article by Marvin J. Croy of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte ('Making useful comparisons of traditional, hybrid, and distance approaches to teaching deductive logic'). The criteria for acceptance of articles are broadly the same as for research projects — will their publication be helpful to UK

academics who wish to improve the quality of their teaching by building on the experience of others?

The articles in the latest issue are typical, except that there is an accidental bias towards philosophy, at the expense of theology and religious studies, and the history and philosophy of science (in some previous issues, philosophy was under-represented).

Apart from some news items, the issue contains:

- The text of the Subject Centre's annual lecture by Keith Ward (Regius Professor of Divinity, Christ Church, Oxford), on 'Why theology should be taught at secular universities';
- My own up-date of an earlier article on 'External pressures on teaching', outlining national and international developments which affect the context within which we teach;
- An article by Dan O'Brien of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham on 'Shakespeare and the analysis of knowledge' (about Gettier-type scenarios to be found in Shakespeare's plays);
- An article by Anne Gunn of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Kent on 'Practical suggestions for teaching students to think for themselves';
- A report by Emma Tomalin of the PRS Subject Centre on a project on 'Supporting Cultural and Religious Diversity';
- A report by a group of Leeds philosophers on a project on 'Healthcare ethics scenarios';
- A 'Focus on formal Logic' — a group of papers on teaching logic by Paul Tomassi, Brendan Larvor, Peter Milne, and Marvin J. Croy.

There are detailed 'Notes for authors' at the end of each issue (see also: <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/journal/authors/>).