

Departmental leadership for quality teaching - an international comparative study of effective practice

Graham Gibbs, Chris Knapper and Sergio Picinnin
University of Oxford

Background to the study

The focus of attention of this project was on departmental leadership of teaching in research-intensive university environments. By 'leadership of teaching' we mean all those activities undertaken by the chair of department or others that contribute to the teaching environment within which teachers operate, in such a way that teaching and student learning is enhanced. Our starting assumptions were that leadership of teaching is distinct from departmental leadership in general and that leadership of teaching in research-intensive departments is distinct from that in what might be termed 'teaching-intensive' departments. The second of these assumptions was not as well supported by our data as the first.

One reason for studying departments in research-intensive environments is that they are often characterised by 'traditional' teaching. While 'teaching-intensive' universities in the UK have made significant progress in implementing institutional 'learning and teaching strategies'^{1,2}, progress has been much less rapid, extensive or securely embedded in research-intensive institutions where the collegial organisational culture mitigates against bureaucratic and corporate approaches to management³. Previous case study visits to thirteen research-intensive universities in ten countries⁴ found that while there were some examples of institution-wide strategic development of teaching, in many contexts what teaching development could be seen was the result of initiatives within departments, partly or wholly independent of the centre. Furthermore, institution-wide initiatives tended to emerge from successful initiatives from within an individual department, rather than the other way round. Change in teaching was very often 'emergent' rather than centrally driven and this reflects literature describing 'bottom-up' change in teaching that develops from relatively small-scale local initiatives⁵. In higher education, and especially in collegial research-intensive universities with highly devolved organisational structures, departments and programmes are the key organisational units when it comes to understanding change^{6,7}. If we are to understand the development of teaching in such research-intensive contexts we need to study *departmental* leadership of teaching.

¹ Gibbs, G. (2003) *Implementing learning and teaching strategies*. Milton Keynes: Open University Centre for Higher Education Practice.

² Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, T. & Yorke, M. (2000) Institutional learning and teaching strategies in English higher education. *Higher Education*, 40, 351-372.

³ HEFCE (2001) *Strategies for teaching and learning in higher education: research report*. Higher Education Funding Council for England Circular 01/37a.

⁴ Gibbs, G. (2005) *Being strategic about improving teaching and learning in research-intensive environments*. Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Annual Conference keynote, Sydney, July 2005.

⁵ Huberman, M. (1993) *The lives of teachers*. London: Cassell.

⁶ Trowler, P. & Knight, P. (2001) Exploring the implementation gap: theory and practices in change interventions. In Trowler (Ed.) *Higher Education Policy and Institutional Change*. Society for Research in Higher Education & Open University Press.

⁷ Trowler, P., Saunders, M. & Knight, P. (2003) *Change thinking, change practices*. York: LTSN Generic Centre.