

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #6

Towards a cultural shift in
learning and teaching
Thematic Peer Group Report

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March 2019

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all European University Association (EUA) member institutions and their representatives who took part in the work of the Thematic Peer Groups in 2017 and 2018 and whose work this paper is based on. Special thanks go to the coordinators, chairs and other members of the groups that contributed to authoring the group reports.

We also wish to thank the members of the EUA Learning & Teaching Steering Committee and our colleagues Thérèse Zhang and Luisa Bunescu for their comments on a draft version of this paper.

Introduction

Universities operate in an ever more intricate environment, educating skilled professionals and active citizens shaping today's and tomorrow's society. Changing demographics have led to a more diversified student body, and labour market demands are becoming more complex as well. This has resulted in an increased emphasis in higher education on transversal skills in addition to disciplinary knowledge and competences.

The 2018 edition of EUA's Trends reports, a series monitoring the development of the European Higher Education Area, found that attention to learning and teaching has increased in Europe both at national and institutional levels, as the sector is exploring how higher education can meet multiple and rapidly evolving expectations. Moreover, it found that there is strong convergence in universities' approaches to this (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 77). The discussions by universities across the continent in EUA's Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Groups (hereinafter 'the groups', see further information in Box 1) confirm these two findings.

So how can universities ensure that their education provision continues to meet the expectations of a continuously evolving society? What kind of challenges do they face in developing their teaching to ensure effective and sustainable learning, and how can these challenges be overcome? These questions have been at the core of the groups' work and, indeed, one lesson learnt is that universities encounter many of the same challenges. What is more, even when they come from quite different institutional, local and national environments, there is a striking consensus on key principles for ways to address these challenges.

By the beginning of 2019, the groups have worked on a diverse range of topics. While each group has been invited to explore ways to address challenges associated with a particular theme, there is a set of cross-cutting topics that arise from the work of several groups. Some of these were already highlighted in the conclusions of the 2017 groups (Loukkola and Dakovic, 2017, p. 24) and were then pursued as topics of groups that followed. They also served as inspiration for an EUA position paper on learning and teaching, outlining key messages to guide EUA's work (EUA,

2018a). The work since has confirmed that these messages prevail, but has also brought up additional aspects.

This paper discusses these cross-cutting themes, with a focus on a cultural shift for which the group reports advocate. Its aim is to shed light on the change process that should take place or is already taking place at universities, as seen by university actors, and thus to provide inspiration to institutions interested or already involved in this process. The paper is based on the group reports, but uses some other sources to complement them, including the discussions at the 2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum.¹ The paper is structured into three headings: student – teaching staff² – organisation, to which one of the reports refers as the “golden triangle” (McIntyre-Bhatty and Bunescu, 2019, p. 3) of education.

Box 1: EUA Thematic Peer Groups in 2017 and 2018

The EUA Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Groups gather a selected group of EUA member universities each year to discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching at the institutional level. They also identify good practices to address the theme assigned to the group. Key outcomes of the discussions are presented in short reports for further dissemination, while the meetings focus on the sharing of experience and mutual learning.

The themes discussed in 2017 were:

- Improving the link between research and teaching
- Empowering students for their future professional life and civic engagement
- Addressing larger and more diverse student bodies ensuring success
- Fostering engagement in developing learning and teaching

In 2018 the themes were:

- Promoting active learning in universities
- Continuous development of teaching competences
- Career paths in teaching
- Evaluation of learning and teaching

A total of 70 universities from 23 countries took part in the work of these groups.

Students' learning at the centre

Recent changes in demography and labour markets have affected universities' student cohorts, which now come from more diverse generational, social and regional backgrounds. Consequently, lifelong learning is a more ubiquitous concept, and a majority of European higher education institutions provide lifelong learning opportunities as part of their learning and teaching strategy or policy (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 51).

In parallel, there has been a growing understanding that not every student learns the same way or to the same effect, and student-centred learning has been promoted as a way forward by European and national policies. A recent example are the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), which include an expectation for higher education institutions to ensure that their education provision is delivered in a student-centred manner.

The Trends 2018 study shows that a growing number of institutions is adopting measures in this direction. Similarly, several groups refer to student-centred learning as a means to address diverse challenges related to learning and teaching. The group reports provide different perspectives on how education can be transformed into being more student-centred, mirroring the broad range of potential approaches to student-centred learning identified also in a study by the European Students' Union (ESU, 2015). Among these approaches are the facilitation and recognition of flexible learning paths and different teaching methods, as well as institutional structures and processes that include student participation in university governance and decision-making.

In order to put students' learning at the centre of education processes, the groups argue for flexibility in the curriculum design and a personalisation of learning experiences reflecting the diversity of student populations. To complement these recommendations, the group reports furthermore suggest recognising informal learning and investing in support services. The learning environment is considered a crucial variable contributing to the achievement of learning outcomes. Therefore, it is proposed that evaluations aiming to enhance the overall

learning experience need to also look into the quality of facilities and student services, such as the diverse learning spaces on campus and, e.g., career counselling for students (Dewhurst and Gover, 2019, p. 6).

Further, student-centred approaches to learning – e.g. in the form of research-based and -led, and inquiry- and problem-based learning – are considered to provide multiple benefits to both institutions and students, as well as other higher education stakeholders. The group reports argue that these approaches encourage students' understanding of and active involvement in their own learning and foster valuable professional and transversal skills such as critical thinking and creative problem-solving. On a similar note, one group stresses that “the value of learning and teaching should be highlighted by emphasising the learning process, not only the outcome” (Christersson et al., 2019, p. 5). Student-centred learning is also seen to have the potential to foster citizenship skills and a knowledge-based society, as students obtain a proactive, self-directed and critical attitude to the creation of knowledge.

Finally, many groups highlight that student-centred learning requires changes in the student-teacher relationship: their arguments favour a partnership on equal footing between students and teachers. This may be a vanguard vision for mainstream higher education at the moment, but there is evidence of universities adopting more active learning pedagogies (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 53).

In line with changing the relationship between students and teaching staff and establishing students as co-creators of their learning, the groups also advocate for an involvement of students in decision-making processes that are traditionally the domain of university and teaching staff, such as the design of evaluation processes, courses and the learning environment. In this regard, there seems to be still some work ahead to make this a widespread reality according to a recent ESU study, which found that there is great diversity in how this is done across higher education systems and institutions (ESU, 2018, pp. 6-7).

Teaching as part of the academic profession

With students expected to adopt an increasingly active role in their learning, many groups point to the role of teaching staff changing from traditional providers or transmitters of knowledge into facilitators of learning. This means teaching staff need to re-think their role as members of the academic community and universities need to invest in skills development and professional prospects for teaching staff.

At the same time, the groups advocate for strategic measures to tackle the disparity of esteem between research and teaching. This is a challenge also addressed by the Trends 2018 study (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 22) and by the EUA-led EFFECT (European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching) project's feasibility study on how a forward-looking European dimension for teaching enhancement in higher education can be best promoted (EFFECT/EUA, 2019).

Continuous professional development is seen by the groups as a path towards valuing teaching as part of the academic profession on a par with research. Measures include institutional investment in staff development beyond initial teacher training, for example in the form of learning and teaching centres promoting the innovation of teaching practices (Loukkola and Dakovic, 2017, p. 17). The Trends 2018 study shows that universities are indeed investing to an increasing extent in these efforts (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, pp. 15-19). The group examining linkages between research and teaching also underlined the potential of research-based learning in alleviating the imbalance of esteem between research and teaching (Loukkola and Dakovic, 2017, p. 5), an effect that would further encourage teaching enhancement.

Another crucial step towards consolidating the value of teaching within academia brought up by the group reports is rewarding achievements and efforts to improve teaching. In this regard, teaching prizes are a much-debated measure to publicly acknowledge good teaching. A recent mapping of

teaching prizes shows that institutions awarding them consider them to be effective in highlighting the value of good teaching (whereas institutions not awarding teaching prizes remain sceptical). However, at the same time it is reported that these prizes have little effect on institutions' recognition of teaching enhancement (Efimenko et al., 2018, p. 103).³ A further aspect discussed in this context is the impact of engagement in teaching enhancement on academic careers. Many groups highlight that while incentives to engage in innovation and networks in research are well-established, such practices are not common for teaching. Importantly, the groups further note that personal efforts to improve teaching performance have a minimal effect on career prospects of teaching staff (see, e.g., te Pas and Zhang, 2019, p. 3). This is confirmed by some recent studies (e.g. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, p. 89; Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 71; Gaebel and Bunescu, 2018, p. 5).

What the groups advocate for is thus a comprehensive rethinking of the academic profession, including all its aspects: teaching, research, administrative work and third-mission activities. A more balanced career path for academics, which values and rewards good teaching at the same level as research outcomes, would require development of all of these aspects together and provide staff with enough flexibility and long-term support to focus on those parts of their profession they value the most at different stages of their career.⁴ In the Netherlands, for example, a recently launched joint initiative is currently seeking ways to implement this, with four major national higher education stakeholder organisations exploring new ways of recognising and rewarding academics (NWO, 2018).

Finally, the reports highlight that for any rethinking of the academic profession to be comprehensive, approaches consisting of multiple interconnected, strategic and long-term measures are needed.

Institutional and collaborative approaches

Regardless of the theme they address, all groups advocate for a need for institutional, university-wide frameworks, including strategies and policies, for learning and teaching. These policies are seen as crucial for enhancing the visibility of learning and teaching as a central mission of higher education institutions, but, even more importantly, as a vehicle supporting teaching staff and students in their efforts.

The group reports furthermore suggest that participatory approaches to designing and implementing these strategies and policies, involving all higher education stakeholders, are needed. Institutional policies, in turn, should be flexible enough to allow for innovation to unfold.

The Trends 2018 study shows that 86 percent of responding institutions have formulated institutional policies for learning and teaching (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 14) and that the implementation of these policies is increasingly supported by learning and teaching centres (ibid., p. 18).

In order to support institutions in making their vision a reality, the EFFECT project developed Ten European Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (see Box 2). The Principles aim to put a spotlight on the education mission of universities, but also to facilitate inter-institutional collaboration in enhancing learning and teaching by calling on institutional leaders, policy-makers as well as other key stakeholders to consider the Principles in their work.

Box 2: Ten European Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

1. The higher education learning experience nurtures and enables the development of learners as active and responsible citizens, critical thinkers, problem solvers, equipped for life-long learning.
2. Learning and teaching is learner-centred.
3. Commitment to learning and teaching is integral to the purpose, mission and strategy of the university.
4. Institutional leadership actively promotes and enables the advancement of learning and teaching.
5. Learning and teaching is a collaborative and collegial process involving collaboration across the university and with the wider community.
6. Learning, teaching and research are interconnected and mutually enriching.
7. Teaching is core to academic practice and is respected as scholarly and professional.
8. The university community actively explores and cherishes a variety of approaches to learning and teaching that respect a diversity of learners, stakeholders, and disciplines.
9. Sustainable resources and structures are required to support and enable learning and teaching enhancement.
10. Institutional QA for learning and teaching aims at enhancement, and is a shared responsibility of staff and students.

(EFFECT/EUA, 2017)

Many of the Principles and groups' findings come to similar conclusions. In particular, the group reports highlight three aspects related to institutional approaches.

First, an institutional focus on the programme as a focal point around which the planning, execution and evaluation of learning and teaching are organised would ensure a holistic and meaningful programme design, which involves all stakeholders, including support staff as well as students. This would also facilitate exchange and cooperation among diverse staff categories. The Trends 2018 study demonstrates that at most higher education institutions teaching is already a shared responsibility among different staff profiles (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, p. 62); establishing the programme as a common platform for exchange and cooperation among staff would enhance this tendency. It also has the potential to contribute to synergies between support staff and students.

Second and closely related to the first point, the group reports paint a vision whereby teaching is no longer seen as an individual/private activity, but as one in which institutions develop opportunities for teaching staff to work in a collaborative manner. This would have the effect of connecting peers and allow for exchange and evaluation in the same manner that is established in research circles. The Trends 2018 study points to a similar development, reporting that a majority of respondents provide their teaching staff with a framework for coordinating and collaborating in learning and teaching (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018, pp. 56-58).

In this regard it is important to ensure that measures to establish teaching achievements as criteria in career progression do not hamper teaching staff's motivation to work as a team. To achieve true team work, staff members need to see themselves and each other as a community working together and relating to each other's work. One group suggests that organising the evaluation of learning and teaching at the programme level could support this development as it would anchor teaching staff to a common platform and reference point (Dewhirst and Gover, 2019, p. 5).

Third, institutional frameworks that allow for more inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary collaboration in teaching enhancement would highlight common challenges and the sharing of good practice in learning and teaching. Such communities of practice could furthermore foster the development of an institution-wide quality culture (McIntyre-Bhatty and Bunescu, 2019, p. 7).

Despite all of these considerations, which are based on institutional experience, supporting developments in learning and teaching through institutional initiatives alone are clearly not sufficient. National initiatives are important as well, even though dedicated national strategies for learning and teaching are still not widespread (Bunescu and Gaebel, 2018, p. 7). Moreover, as academic staff become increasingly mobile and international, and thus less attached to one institution, broader frameworks to monitor and reward teaching accomplishments across institutions and their communities are needed (cf. te Pas and Zhang, 2019, p. 5).

Conclusion

The group reports provide readers with a vision of a cultural change taking place within and across universities. The reports advocate for an inclusive university teaching based on collaboration between all actors of the university community: leaders, academic and support staff, and students. This cultural shift is seen as a necessity, not only because it would better accommodate the long-term needs of students and staff, but also because it would help universities to fulfil their societal mission.

The exchange within the groups on their own experience with good practice examples attests to such a process of change taking place at universities across Europe. Nevertheless, cultural change takes time and changing culture is not a straightforward task, as the reports and the discussions at the 2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum show. Universities will need to find the right balance between institutional and national frameworks on the one hand, and flexibility on the other hand, that allows and fosters innovation as a means to accommodate diverse student populations and their needs. This need for flexibility concerns various aspects of academic structures and strategic matters, such as curriculum design, teaching methods, academic career paths, as well as the recognition of different kinds of learning.

EUA will continue to support the dialogue on these issues and collaboration among its members. Building on the work of previous groups, the Thematic Peer Groups of 2019 will explore further aspects of learning and teaching. They will focus on curriculum design and student assessment, which the previous groups have identified as areas where change is needed in order to complete the cultural progress towards a more inclusive and future-oriented academic environment. Another group will explore what kind of evidence-based approaches are needed to develop teaching, while a fourth one will discuss how internationalisation is shaping learning and teaching in higher education. As in the past, the outcomes of these groups will be shared with the higher education community to facilitate mutual learning, feed into the development of EUA's learning and teaching activities, and inform its involvement in key European policy discussions.

While all universities involved in the work of past and current groups have their individual and unique context to work with, EUA's work demonstrates that there is a certain level of common ground to build on and to advocate for national and European collaboration and dialogue.

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Endnotes

1 _____ The European Learning & Teaching Forum is an annual conference gathering institutional leaders, practitioners, students, policy-makers and other actors involved with developing learning and teaching in Europe. Its programme is based on the themes and work of the Thematic Peer Groups, as well as on a call for contributions.

2 _____ The following text refers to “teaching staff” on multiple occasions, which covers all university staff, who are either exclusively or partially engaged in higher education teaching.

3 _____ This paper uses the same definition of the term “teaching enhancement” as the report National Initiatives in Learning and Teaching in Europe, which understands teaching enhancement as “any kind of formal pedagogical staff development or training provided to teachers, in different ways and formats, such as e.g.,

initial teacher training and continuous professional development (CPD). The term should not be confounded with ‘enhancement of learning and teaching’, which can signify a wider array of measures to encourage, incentivise, support and improve learning and teaching, which could be teaching enhancement, but also other means such as working groups, consultation, teaching prizes etc.” (Bunescu and Gaebel, 2018, p. 6).

4 _____ Revisiting research assessment is another opportunity to rethink the incentive and reward structure that shapes academic careers and pursuits. With the advent of Open Science, processes to evaluate research that currently serve as a basis for career development are expected to adapt to the changing working culture (EUA, 2018b).

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides a unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.