EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This project sought to find answers to one of the most pressing questions currently facing the university – and indeed the higher education sector more broadly in contemporary Britain. How can we maintain and enhance high standards of teaching and learning when student participation is widening and resources are decreasing? We sought to find answers that reflected the different contexts in which teaching and learning occur – subjects, levels and environments.

The research evidence was derived from semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 21 academic staff from across the university who had already been identified as gifted teachers. The interviews explored key themes that had been derived from a scoping study in which teachers identified key challenges they face and how they respond to them. These themes were teaching increasingly diverse and large student groups, keeping the curriculum up to date, assessment practices, helping students manage transitions, and how the institution can help teachers do better with less. Finally interviewees were asked to give examples of exceptional learning and the factors to which these could be attributed.

Responding to the increasing size and diversity of the student body

A wide range of different processes and techniques are adopted by teachers as they seek to respond flexibly and creatively to the increasing size and diversity of student groups. For some, teaching increasingly becomes a performance art as they try to engage the attention of large numbers and encourage more interactive learning. Collaborative and team teaching and the sharing of practice are becoming more commonplace. Teachers move from didactic methods to encourage more autonomous learning as group sizes diminish or students gain in confidence as they progress through the different phases of the programme. Specialist resources and student support services are enlisted to help students with particular learning difficulties.

It is clear there is no single blueprint for responding to the challenge of 'mixed ability' teaching. More creative approaches to both teaching and to assessment are being adopted. Personal tutoring has been introduced in some programmes as a way of monitoring and managing student progress. E-learning is used in imaginative ways to reach large numbers of students and to create a learning community among students (especially those who are dispersed through distance learning), and between students, teachers and others, such as employers, who have a stake in what and how students learn. Academic managers are encouraging teachers to share the lessons of their practice so that all may benefit.

Keeping the curriculum up to date

The curriculum is kept up to date by a combination of factors: teachers using their own research and that of others, undertaking continuous professional development by attending conferences where attention is paid as much to teaching and learning as to developments in the subject, and through employer engagement. Increasingly sector-specific employers are engaged in continuous discussion with academic staff about what is taught and how it is learned to ensure that the curriculum enhances employability. Teachers are also in constant negotiation with professional bodies to assure academic freedom and the development of intellectual curiosity in students while responding to the requirements of the world of work. Securing subject relevance and the interplay of theory and practice are on-going tasks, particularly in more vocational subjects.

Developing assessment processes

Teachers use assessment both to help students develop as autonomous learners and to check that intended learning outcomes are not only achieved but being applied. The assessment of the application of knowledge and skills is not only critical to countering plagiarism, but in helping students demonstrate to potential employers that they can make good use of what they know and can do in the work place.

Increasing use is made of formative assessment as a means of engaging students in reflecting on their development as learners. Technology is also used to develop assessment practices: Wikis, Blogs, Blackboard and Skype are all helpful tools when assessing and supervising students. Facebook accounts are set up to encourage critical commentary and feedback on students' work by teachers, employers and other students. Indeed there is a trend of more peer review and assessment. Peer marking is proving useful in getting students to engage more meaningfully with feedback. By making assessment criteria explicit and ensuring that students themselves understand and apply them, the grade or the mark becomes less important than the reasons for giving it. Overall, there has been a discernible shift to assessing the process of learning as much as the final product itself.

Supporting students through transitions

Helping students cope with transitions into, through and out of the university and into work is challenging. Setting out clear and explicit expectations from the very start – or even beforehand at school or college – is critical. This includes clarifying expectations about how students will learn and the degree of responsibility they will be required to take on. Some programmes are planned so that students experience an increasing gradient of learner autonomy as they progress, with higher levels of interactivity in the second year than in the first, for example. The support systems provided by the university such as services provided by the Transitions team, the library and CLaSS as well as personal tutoring play an important part in student success.

How the university can help

Interviewees reported that the university has already taken steps incorporating principles of flexibility and collaboration so as to maintain and improve students' learning experiences. Academic staff themselves are taking the initiative in exploring the best use of resources, including their own time, and in finding ways of best disseminating information and good practice. They believe that the university could help even more by giving greater recognition and value to excellence in teaching and encouraging staff to experiment, be innovative and take risks; and investing more in the uses of technology where appropriate, and in training and developing staff in the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning, assessment and the monitoring and tracking of students.

Excellent teaching is founded on a combination of the qualities (inherent and acquired) of students themselves, programme design, teaching methods and the judicious use of additional support.

The evidence base for this research comes mainly from the testimony of teachers. This seems to be corroborated by the few examples of evidence incidentally acquired from the students themselves. To gain a fuller picture of what constitutes outstanding teaching and excellent learning in different contexts and challenging times, a follow-up enquiry that highlights and captures the student voice would be both useful and timely.