

A RESPONSE TO THE WHITE PAPER SENT ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ENGLISH (CCUE)

CCUE is the national subject association for English in Higher Education with a voluntary membership of 90% of UK Departments of English in colleges and universities. There are around 45,000 students currently studying English in UK HEIs.

Remit

The White Paper is a long and detailed document covering a great deal of ground. In what follows we highlight only those issues we see as of most urgent concern. Much that is worthy of comment is therefore missed out, including elements of the White Paper that command our support. We indicate some of these briefly from time to time in what follows.

1. The Relation Between Teaching and Research

From the point of view of English and, we suspect, many other humanities subjects, we strongly contest the assumption, evident in various places in the White Paper, that teaching and research are divisible entities. We believe that this derives largely from a science-based model whereas circumstances in the humanities are different in major respects:

- Infrastructural, opportunity and operational costs are significantly lower and more widely distributed in humanities research. The major investment essential to research in the natural sciences is therefore not so necessary in the humanities, and, as a consequence, high quality research in the humanities can be replicated much more widely through the sector at significantly lower cost. CCUE can see very strong arguments for increasing collaboration in Humanities research between HEIs rather than significantly narrowing the distribution of research funding.
- With this in view, it is important to note that the increasing provision of electronic resources and infrastructure is spreading access to major facilities; meanwhile the hospitality and accessibility of major research libraries and archives, and the mobility of individual researchers, make original research in English fast moving and inventive.
- The evidence of the RAE suggests research excellence and potential in English was very widely distributed. This includes distribution across the old binary line.
- There is a strong correlation between success in research and success in teaching as judged through RAE and TQA performance. Equally, there is no correlation between distinction in research and poor performance in teaching.
- To separate research from teaching on a large scale in English would put the UK outside the dominant pattern in the subject world-wide. The research on which the White Paper makes its assertions about the divisibility of research from teaching is 10 years old and fails to discriminate between subject groups.

There are strong arguments for linking teaching directly to research across most of the sector. These include:

- The existence of a large number of departments undertaking both research and teaching creates a dynamic subject culture based upon shared premises, good relations and common enterprise.
- It ensures the speedy passage of new findings within the community. These are made rapidly available to all students, all of whom deserve ready access to them.

- The nature of research in the humanities involves new findings; in large part it also involves new interpretations and assessments. These are developed across the participating community and would be adversely reduced by an abrupt division between research and teaching. Conversely, teaching in research-free departments would suffer from the slow, impeded or non-existent passage of new work. This would not be to the advantage of students studying in non-research departments.
- The generational cohort now entering the profession has, for the first time, come to maturity in a system relatively free from old, binary line divisions between researching and non-researching departments. There is plentiful evidence that this cohort sees undertaking research and developing their teaching as coherent and mutually reinforcing activities. This dynamism would be lost in a divided community. There is general agreement that, despite substantially increased student numbers, the quality of teaching in English has risen alongside the quality of the research effort.

We therefore recommend that research in departments of English continue to be supported alongside teaching across both the top and middle echelons of research performance, and that there are mechanisms and incentives available for all providers to engage in good research in the subject, as is currently the case.

2. Research

The White paper contends that the 'lone scholar' model for research is an anachronism. This is demonstrably false where English and related humanities disciplines are concerned.

The White Paper claims that 'modern research is less amenable to the "lone-scholar" model', and cites a 1994 survey that showed 88% of UK HEI papers were joint authored and 55% involved more than one institution (para. 2.8). The return from 5* Departments of English in the 2001 RAE reveals virtually the opposite picture. Of all the research submitted in English in this class, 88% were single authored. The proportion was the same in History. The figure for the Arts as whole was only a fraction lower at 87%.⁽¹⁾ These proportions are consistent across the ratings scale.

Collaborative research, including cross-institutional research of excellent quality, does occur in English (especially in English Language), but it is not the norm and it would be regrettable indeed if the White Paper sustained its false premise. The term 'lone scholar' is additionally unfortunate. Though researchers in English can work individually, they also work as part of a diversely interacting research community that is prompt and effective in sharing its findings.

This is one of the features that enable research to be fed effectively into teaching. Research in the humanities tends to rest on wide networks of association and communication. It depends less than in, say, the natural sciences on the immediate location of research in teams. As a result selectivity on the basis of 'critical mass', or assumptions about the importance of working in a close-knit team, have less validity in the humanities than in the natural sciences.

On other issues related to research, CCUE salutes the creation of the AHRC and the recognition of 'knowledge transfer' where that implies the dissemination of research findings through local cultures and communities. We would also support initiatives to enable greater collaboration, regional and otherwise, between departments, units and individuals in terms of both resources and intellectual networks. We are, however, ambivalent about the

'Promising Research Fellowship' scheme (para. 2.32). This, while encouraging connection between institutions, could also lead to sponsored 'asset stripping' and thereby inhibit the fluent connection between teaching and research within and between departments.

3. Teaching

We recognise fully the importance the White Paper places on the development of teaching and support and welcome its broad aims.

In terms of specific proposals, CCUE considers that the creation of Centres of Excellence needs further thought. The proposal to establish 70 Centres, for instance, seems on the low side if the aim is to achieve significant impact, and the planned funding for these centres appears excessive. In our view a greater number of more modestly funded centres is likely to bring greater benefit. We also note some uncertainty and lack of definition in the roles envisaged for them. In our view, greater clarity is needed about this before implementation. We would also like to know what evidence there is that such measures improve teaching generally, especially if their orientation lies in generic rather than discipline specific activity. In short, this model may not be the best way of spreading strong and innovative practice. We are concerned that, without a strong evidence base or clear definition of activity, these Centres will withdraw money from the system that might be used to better purpose in other ways.

The creation of a Teaching Academy appears a welcome rationalisation of a currently messy and disorganised provision. We particularly recommend the support and enhancement of the role of the Subject Centres as a significant success under present arrangements. We welcome the apparent reconsideration of the role of the ILT, which has not been a conspicuous success, and support in principle the enhancement of subject-oriented, as distinct from generic provision in these areas.

We welcome the proposed review of the Personal Development Portfolios and their implementation if it can be reliably shown that their use and impact is beneficial. Anecdotal evidence suggests a striking lack of positive impact by related developments to date in the English subject community.

We also welcome the role given to student opinion in quality assurance and quality enhancement as long as this opinion is reliably gathered and used in positive and constructive contexts.

More broadly, we recommend that these proposals should emphasise the need to be bureaucratically light and efficient in order not to compromise the worthy general aim of reducing the expensive regulatory and bureaucratic requirements currently placed on the sector.

4. Widening Access

CCUE applauds the principle of widening and enriching participation in higher education. But, like many, we are concerned that regulatory mechanisms should be sensitive to local, regional and institutional contexts. We have a concern about a 'broad brush' or 'sledgehammer' approach to an issue that the White Paper itself, in one of its best passages, recognises is complex and many dimensional.

5. Cross-Border Issues

As a UK-wide organisation representing a subject whose teaching and research community is by and large well integrated, CCUE has a concern that differentials between the component parts of the UK might weaken the subject at national and international level. Necessary differences between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales demand respect and due provision, but we should not erode the vitality of academic communities by disaggregation or severe differentials in, for example, pay and conditions of service that are not to anyone's long-term advantage.

Professor Rick Rylance

Chair, Council for College and University English
on behalf of the Executive Committee

(1) In English there are 14 5* Departments. 2105 items were submitted, of which 1845 (or 88%) were single authored and 260 (or 12%) were co or multi-authored. In History, the figures were: 8 5* Departments, 925 items, 810 (88%) single authored, 115 (12%) joint.