

Editorial

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Within the last two decades in Sweden, Australia and the United Kingdom, there have been several important governmental initiatives designed to support undergraduate teaching in our universities. The main thrust has been both to raise the awareness of academic staff to the problems of how to promote learning in their students, and to persuade them that teaching is a professional activity that is as worthy of their full attention as their research. An important part of these schemes is aimed at stimulating consideration of teaching issues and at providing practical assistance for those academics wishing to try new teaching techniques. The earliest historically was the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI) in the UK, followed by the UniServe Australia clearinghouses and the Swedish Council for Renewal of Higher Education (previously known as the Council for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education).

This has fitted in well with the change in style of the universities. In the UK most Polytechnics have changed to university status and in Australia the Colleges of Advanced Education have been amalgamated into a Unified Tertiary System. In a sense, university education is increasingly becoming a continuation of school education, where the quality of the teaching really matters.

Things are now changing again. The report produced by the Dearing Committee in Britain in 1998 is now leading to some significant changes there, not least of which is the closing down of the CTI service and the establishment of new services to support "learning and teaching" in more general terms. Probably the most important new activity is the setting up of what will be an independent "Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education" (ILT) which is designed to become the professional body of academics. This Institute was established over the summer of 1999, with its headquarters in York. As with other professional bodies, membership will be carefully controlled, and there is no doubt that within a few years the teaching quality of a department will be assessed by many, as the proportion of its academics who are members of ILT.

Since ILT is a very young organization, it is mainly concerned at this stage with establishing its presence, and setting up a membership of established practitioners. It is soon expected to establish links, however, with equivalent organizations in other countries for the exchange of

information, research results, etc., and when better established it will also probably offer an international membership for those wishing to take advantage of this.

The higher education systems in both Australia and Sweden will watch with interest how this new initiative develops.