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The Philosophical and Religious Studies Learning and Teaching Support Network (PRS-LTSN) is one of twenty-four subject centred networks covering the range of subjects studied at the university level. The LTSN centres have been set up by the public bodies that administer funding for higher education in Great Britain. They were launched in 1999 and became fully operational in 2000. The twenty-four centres cover everything from engineering to media studies. These subject centres — together with a Generic Centre that deals with issues cutting across subject boundaries — are coordinated by an executive based in York. A [central web site](#) gives access to all the subject centres and to the overall aims of the network. These aims include becoming the primary information and advice resource for academics and related staff and actively seeking to import and export information and resources internationally.

This teaching initiative comes at a time of rapid increase in the number of students in higher education — an increase that has brought a new awareness of the need for academics to reflect on how this impacts on their teaching. Almost all higher education institutions in Britain are funded by the government, which means both that government has a direct interest in the quality of teaching provision, and that national schemes can be more easily implemented. Every higher education department in the country, for instance, is being reviewed and assessed for its teaching provision under the auspices of the separate Quality Assurance Agency. There is a real change in the emphasis on teaching as an aspect of the career of an academic that requires reflection, training, and constant development.

As part of this wider development, the Philosophical and Religious Studies LTSN covers not only theology and religious studies, but also philosophy and the philosophy and history of science — areas which may be of interest to members of AAR. This wide range is exciting and challenging, but it does leave us with a rather cumbersome title!

Where and Who We Are

The main office of the PRS-LTSN is based at the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, but the centre is a partnership between Leeds and the University of Wales, Lampeter. In itself, this kind of partnership between universities is a relatively novel venture. Leeds is one of the biggest universities in Britain, situated in a thriving city with a long industrial past and a very religiously and ethnically diverse population. Its large and successful Theology and Religious Studies department was one of the first in Britain to offer a degree that explicitly bridges the two subjects. Lampeter, part of the federal University of Wales, is a smaller and older institution set in an attractive country town in beautiful Welsh hill country. Its highly respected Theology,

Religious, and Islamic Studies department is a major component of the university.

Partly due to its location, the Lampeter department has a long tradition of teaching courses by distance learning. It has also built up a body of expertise on widening access to learning. Mature students and those without standard qualifications are an important constituency, raising issues of accessibility for students with a range of different abilities. The department is also able to provide translated material for Welsh-speaking students and staff, thereby acknowledging an important part of British diversity. Between them, the two institutions represent complementary aspects of British higher education.

The staff of the PRS-LTSN are all experienced teachers and researchers in their respective disciplines. The Director is George Macdonald Ross, whose own speciality is Philosophy. Hugh Pyper, Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the University of Leeds, is directly responsible for Theology and Religious Studies. The Associate Director at Lampeter, Dr. Bill Campbell, is another Biblical scholar and a Reader in the Department there. He is a specialist in Pauline Studies, with a long experience of teaching and administration in a variety of institutions. The office team, based at Leeds, are also academics — coincidentally, all with a background in Buddhist studies. Simon Smith manages the Centre, Nik Jewell is responsible for the IT aspects of the work, and David Mossley is the information officer. A number of other colleagues work with the Centre: full details can be found on the web site.

Every department in Britain has been asked to nominate a contact person to act as a channel of information between PRS-LTSN and departmental staff and students. Events to discuss topics of interest or to share good practice are organised by both the Leeds and Lampeter sites, but institutions and practitioners around the country are also encouraged to run regional events that can be sponsored by PRS-LTSN. One particular target audience is the new teacher — either just appointed or the postgraduate who is being inducted into leading seminars. There is no membership fee for participation in the PRS-LTSN's activities, and we welcome wide (including international) participation.

The Subject Centre's Activities

The purpose of the Subject Centre is to promote and communicate good practice in subject specific teaching activities. This raises an interesting debate about what are subject-specific rather than generic learning and teaching issues. We have identified a number of areas that, though not unique to teaching theology and religious studies, are more prominent here than in other subjects. How do we teach with respect and with academic integrity in a context where people may have deep personal commitments to a particular faith community? On the other

hand, how do we rekindle interest in a subject to which some students may feel they already have the answers, or with which they have no wish to engage? How do we enable students to come to grips with ancient texts that demand close reading and a breadth of background?

These questions raise issues of assessment. The old joke has it that a teacher of theology will not know how successful she has been until the Last Judgment. That raises the question of how we assess a student's academic ability rather than faith commitment. What are the particular skills and knowledge base to be assessed, and how can this best be done? It is not the business of the PRS-LTSN to pronounce authoritatively on such matters to the community of scholars, but rather to act as broker for the discussions that are already going on.

Part of that role is to make the results of scholarly discussion of these matters available to our clientele. Once we began looking, it became clear that the amount of published writing available on the pedagogy of theology and religious studies at the university level is quite small, and specifically British reflection even more so. What material does exist is not always very accessible nor widely distributed. The LTSN is concerned to make such materials more available and to provide critical guidelines for its assessment.

The web site now contains a substantial number of reviews of the literature, providing a quick way to locate and evaluate information. We expect the digest of already existing materials to be fully comprehensive by the end of the summer. At the same time, through commissioned articles or as an outcome of conferences and consultations, a new body of material is being generated and disseminated. We have produced a number of original documents to pump-prime discussion and further research within the subject communities, and more are in the pipeline. We are eager to encourage teachers to record and reflect on their practice for the benefit of their colleagues, and are hoping to be able to offer small grants for such work. Contributions may range from descriptions of successful class sessions to philosophical pieces raising general questions.

One of our central aims is to foster and develop a scholarship of teaching. British academics, in particular, are under pressure to publish material that will be counted towards the national Research Assessment Exercise, which affects departmental funding. This could reinforce a long-standing feeling that reflection and writing on teaching is not "proper" research. Wisely, however, the Research Assessors are happy to encourage such publications. The opportunity exists for an academically respectable discussion to develop.

As part of this, we can serve as information brokers. The LTSN does not exist to be a centre of expertise on every aspect of teaching, but it can act as a repository for information, and as a clearinghouse. If you have a question about any aspect of teaching, we will try to put you in touch with other people dealing with the same issues, or point you toward relevant literature. This service is primarily designed for the British environment, but all are welcome to make use of it.

Teaching Theology and Religious Studies in Britain

The articles in this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* describe in more detail aspects of teaching theology and religious studies in modern Britain. At present, we have links to forty-seven institutions offering degrees in some aspect of theology and religious studies.

Departments vary widely in their size, specialities, and course structures, but there has been an increasing trend towards the combination of theology and religious studies. Leeds has taught a degree under that title for over thirty years. Partly, this reflects pressure from students but it also reflects developments in the understanding of education in the field. Put positively, it means that students are required to combine both the study of religions as human and social phenomena with some attempt to inhabit imaginatively the worldview, inner life, and intellectual development of at least one tradition. For historical reasons, this tradition has tended to be Christianity.

Most departments attempt to combine lectures with small group teaching, but most are also in a situation where the ratio of students to staff is increasing, making small group teaching more difficult to sustain. At the same time, the amount of money allocated per student by the funding bodies has steadily decreased. The use of innovative self-directed teaching strategies may help. There is a place for the Internet and e-learning, although at times the pressure to take these cost-effective and timesaving routes needs to be resisted. There is a great deal that can be learned from discussions about the different strategies departments have adopted to optimise the use of their resources, and the points at which educational provision risks being damaged.

In most British universities, students already know the subject in which they wish to major when they apply. Increasing numbers of part-time students are coming into the system, however. The recent introduction of student tuition fees and other economic factors have inevitably had an effect on recruitment for subjects that do not have a clear vocational relevance. This, too, has accelerated the need for university teachers to consider the relevance of what they teach, and how to argue the case for its value.

A recent initiative that has sharpened awareness of such comparative discussions is the so-called “Benchmarking” document by a team of subject specialists under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency. It sets out a broad description of the current provision of theology and religious studies in British institutions and gives indicative markers of the kinds of skills and knowledge that students should acquire during their degrees. The benchmark document is deliberately inclusive, so as to reflect the diversity of provision. It could provide a very useful checklist for theological and religious studies educators who maybe designing or assessing courses well beyond Britain. It is available on the Web at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/> . We at the LTSN hope to provide a forum for discussing translation of the benchmark standards into classroom practice in specific situations and subject areas.

There is a great deal of good and exciting teaching going on in Britain, in an ever-changing social and educational environment. PRS-LTSN seeks to provide a place where views can be exchanged, experiences shared, and common problems faced. The following articles will, we hope, help both to fill out the picture of the teaching of theology and religious studies in Britain, and raise points of comparison with the situation in the US. To comment, or for inclusion in discussion groups, e-mail This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it .