

Royaume-Uni : the teaching of philosophy in the UK

George MacDonald Ross, professor (University of Leeds)

Philosophy in schools

In order to give an account of the teaching of philosophy in schools in the UK (which is in fact very limited), I need to explain how the UK educational system is organised. By the end of my brief explanation, I am sure my francophone readers will consider terms such as 'system' and 'organised' to be wholly inappropriate descriptions.

First, we must distinguish between 'public' schools and state schools. Public schools are sometimes described as 'private' schools, because they charge fees and are independent of the state. This looks like a contradiction, because 'private' and 'public' are opposites. However, historically the contrast was between private education, when wealthy families would employ a tutor to teach their children at home, and public education, when families would send their children away to a school which was open to anyone who could pay the fees or obtain a scholarship. Most public schools are charitable foundations, with large endowments which enable them to charge less than the full economic cost of the education they provide, and to subsidise the education of some poor but able pupils. Nevertheless, the fees are very high, and only the wealthiest 8% of the population can afford to send their children to public schools. It is generally accepted that the best public schools are better than the best state schools, and there is much political debate about how to counterbalance the educational advantages that can be bought by money. Simply abolishing public schools is not an option, because of the European Declaration on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to opt out of state education.

State schools are mostly funded by around 100 local authorities, although much of the money comes from central government rather than local taxation. For the past 20 years or so, schools have been granted ever-increasing independence from local authorities over how they spend their budgets, to the point that the local element is now perceived by many to be an unnecessary and expensive tier in the bureaucracy.

Although what is taught and how it is taught is technically the responsibility of the head teacher and the board of governors of each individual school, in practice they operate within tight constraints.

First, central government has taken over many of the functions which used to be at the discretion of local authorities - and more besides. For example, it has imposed a 'national curriculum', which specifies a minimum number of subjects which must be taught at certain ages; it has introduced compulsory testing in subjects such as literacy and numeracy at ages when there have hitherto been no public examinations; and it has set performance targets with published league tables, thus encouraging teachers to 'teach to the test' rather than to educate.

Second, a body called Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education) is required to inspect schools at regular intervals, and it has immense power to impose its own views as to what good teaching consists in on practice in individual schools.

Third, there are a number of largely autonomous examination boards (though not as many as there used to be), which set and mark the examinations certifying the skills and knowledge attained by pupils at the ages of 16 and 18. They are subject to an overriding Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), but the details of their curricula are their own responsibility. They earn their keep by the fees they charge, and examinations in subjects with a low uptake are liable to be discontinued as uneconomic. Since schools are evaluated on their success in these public examinations, they have a vested interest in adhering strictly to the assessment guidelines issued by the examination boards. There is some evidence of schools choosing examination boards with high pass rates, and commercial pressures of this nature are liable to lead to a general lowering of standards.

Within the state system, there is a wide variety of types of school. Historically, schools run by local authorities were either grammar schools or secondary modern schools. Grammar schools selected pupils on the basis of intelligence tests - known as the 'eleven plus', because selection took place at the age of eleven or twelve. The curriculum was heavily academic, and grammar schools enabled bright children from poor backgrounds to proceed to university. Other children went to secondary moderns, where the curriculum focussed more on training in non-academic skills. In the 1960s, successive governments encouraged a process of 'comprehensivisation', whereby grammar schools were merged with neighbouring secondary moderns to form large 'comprehensive' schools, teaching pupils of all ability levels together. However, decisions had to be made by local authorities themselves; and although most local authorities eventually opted for comprehensives, there are some areas which have retained the old distinction between grammar schools and secondary moderns. The largest such area is Northern Ireland; and opponents of comprehensivisation note that the average academic performance of all schoolchildren in Northern Ireland is significantly better than that of English children.

In addition, there are many schools, 'called 'voluntary' schools, which are governed by independent organisations (mostly religious) and subject to relatively loose local authority control, but are funded in the same way as state schools. The majority of these are Protestant or Catholic, but there is a growing number of schools from other faiths, especially Jewish and Muslim. It is the policy of the present Government to encourage such developments.

Finally, successive governments have recently experimented with new kinds of state school ('foundation schools' and 'city academies'), with better funding and more independence, and in the case of city academies, specialising in a particular area of the curriculum.

Let us now turn to the question of the teaching of philosophy. It is evident from the description I have given of the UK school system, that there is a great diversity of kinds of school, and their degree of independence from local authority control. Although central government has always seen the need to

set the broad legislative framework within which schools operate, it has generally refrained from interfering with the details. Even the national curriculum only specifies a minimum number of subjects which must be taught at various ages, and the rest of what is taught is at the discretion of individual schools. Similarly, although central government determines the structure of public examinations, there is virtually a free market in what subjects are offered by the examination boards, and the syllabuses they specify for each subject.

In common with other Anglophone nations, there is no tradition of the compulsory teaching of philosophy at school. However, the very diversity of the school system and the lack of central control means that schools can include an element of philosophy teaching if they so wish - and some do. Here we need to distinguish between philosophy as a non-examined, extra-curricular activity, and philosophy as a discipline leading to a public examination.

The best known method of teaching philosophy to younger children is the Lipman method, devised by Matthew Lipman of Montclair State University in the US - he calls it 'Philosophy for Children', or 'P4C'. He has written a range of novelettes on different themes, and geared towards children of different ages, in which the characters raise philosophical questions. The children take it in turns to read passages out loud in class, and they then debate the issues. Importantly, they are given rules for debating, which they must follow. For example, no assertion is to be made without providing a reason for it; any point made must refer to what was said by the previous speaker; only one person is to speak at a time - and so on.

Many years ago, I observed a class of 11-year-olds from a comprehensive school in a poor area of Manchester, and I was most impressed by the quality of their discussion: everyone contributed, and no-one dominated; they focussed on the point at issue; they produced reasoned arguments and imaginative examples and counter-examples; and they handled deep disagreements on moral issues with sensitivity and tolerance. It was a better debate than most I have conducted with philosophy students at university. However, this is not to say that the Lipman method can or should be transferred to the university context as it stands. There are many reasons why it is more difficult to generate a lively and constructive discussion among university students: they are more self-conscious about making a fool of themselves; they are primarily motivated towards acquiring information which will give them good grades in examinations; the material they are dealing with is much more difficult; and, perhaps most importantly, their experience of secondary education has given them inappropriate learning habits, such as memorising what their teachers tell them; writing notes in class; working in competition rather than in co-operation with fellow students; and sticking to the model answers or checklists by which they expect to be assessed, rather than thinking for themselves or using their imagination. Nevertheless, there is much to be learned from the Lipman method.

I simply don't know (and I don't think anyone knows) how many children are exposed to the Lipman method in the UK. The numbers are small, but they are almost certainly increasing, thanks largely to an organisation called SAPERE (the Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in

Education) - see http://sapere.net/main_file.php/. Lipman is insistent that people who use his method should be formally trained. SAPERE is part of a world-wide organisation called the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children, and it is accredited to train teachers in the UK (it currently has 29 registered trainers, who provide 2- or 3-day courses at frequent intervals throughout the UK). I think it is fair to say that the Lipman method is practised only in the small minority of schools where there are one or more teachers employed to teach something else, but who are enthusiastic about the educational value of the method, and succeed in persuading the head teacher to make space in an already overcrowded timetable for philosophy classes. As I have already implied, there would be no philosophy in schools at all in the UK if the curriculum were wholly determined by central government or local authorities, and it is only thanks to the autonomy (albeit limited) of individual schools that the teaching of philosophy is possible.

Lipman does not have a monopoly on engaging schoolchildren with philosophy, and the same freedom means that individual teachers can use slots in the timetable set aside for citizenship, personal and social education, or religious studies to introduce discussion of philosophical ideas. One of the most remarkable initiatives is at a primary school in the village of Caol, near Fort William in the Highlands of Scotland. Here the pupils, aged 12 or younger, have been given a room (called Room 13), and a budget which they control. They themselves employ an art teacher, who gives them classes in philosophy among other things. The pupils are allowed to spend as much time as they like in Room 13, provided that they don't fall behind in their other lessons. See <http://www.room13scotland.com/ideology.html>.

Let us now turn to public examinations in philosophy. In most of the UK, there used to be a kind of baccalaureate: the School Certificate taken at the age of 16, and the Higher School Certificate, taken at the age of 18. A pass in the latter was the minimum qualification for entry to university - though UK universities have always operated a numerus clausus, and high marks were required for entry to the more prestigious universities (and Oxford and Cambridge set their own entrance examinations). Philosophy was not a component of either certificate, although there was an examination in logic. In 1951, the certificates were replaced by separate examinations in different subjects, called Ordinary Level and Advanced Level General Certificate of Education, usually known as O-levels and A-levels. Their distinctive feature was that candidates could take any number and combination of subjects, and no subjects were compulsory (except in so far as individual universities or departments made certain subjects an entry requirement - e.g. English and maths at O-level, and the subject to be studied at university at A-level). For students intending to go to University, it was normal to take about 10 O-levels at the age of 16, and 3 or more A-levels at 18. Since 1951, there has been a substantial rise in the number of people taking A-levels, getting high grades, and going to university, with the result that the academically most able now take four, five, or even six A-levels, in order to differentiate themselves from others with three A-levels at the top grade.

In 1988, O-levels were replaced by easier examinations, called GCSEs; and in 2000, A-levels were replaced by examinations called AS ('Advanced Subsidiary') and A2. The idea was that an AS

(normally taken at 17) plus an A2 in the same subject (normally taken at 18) would be the equivalent of one A-level; and an AS alone would count as half an A-level. This would enable students to broaden their education by taking, say, five subjects at AS, and continuing with their best three subjects at A2. At the same time, the syllabus were divided into three modules at each level, with separate, one-hour examinations at the end of each module, instead of two 3-hour examinations after the end of two years, as under the old A-level system. But no sooner had these reforms been implemented, than a public enquiry was set up to consider the future of the school examination system. It has been proposed that GCSEs, ASs and A2s be replaced by an overarching diploma, with certain compulsory elements, and the whole of which must be passed - very similar to the old pre-1951 School Certificate, and to the baccalaureate or the equivalent in other countries. The Government is due to announce its response to the proposals early in 2005 - but it is known to be in favour of retaining A-levels as free-standing qualifications.

The Scottish system is different from that of the rest of the UK. The nearest equivalent to A-levels are called 'Highers'; but students take more subjects and in less depth. They sit the examinations at the age of 17, and they enter university a year younger than in the rest of the UK. On the other hand, the minimum time for studying for a Bachelors degree with honours is four years instead of three.

Although there is no philosophy examination at GCSE level, one of the English Examination Boards (The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance, or AQA) does offer an AS/A2 examination (and there is a broadly similar Scottish Higher). Two of the Boards which were merged to form the AQA had already offered A-levels in Philosophy for many years, and the AQA designed a new AS/A2 to replace them. The new AS was first offered in 2001, and the A2 in 2002. The syllabus consists of a mixture of philosophical themes and extracts from major texts, culminating in a 'synoptic study', in which candidates study themes from the earlier modules in greater depth. The full specification of the syllabus can be downloaded from <http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gceasa/phi.html>, but the following extracts give a clear picture of what is studied and how it is assessed:

1. Syllabus

1.1. AS Level

Module 1: Theory of Knowledge (empiricism and rationalism; knowledge and justification; knowledge and scepticism; and knowledge of the external world).

Module 2: Either Moral Philosophy (normative ethics; practical ethics; and meta-ethics: cognitivism and non-cognitivism), or Philosophy of Religion (the meaning and justification of religious concepts; arguments for the existence of God; faith, reason and belief; and the implications of God's existence).

Module 3: One text chosen from Plato, *The Republic*, V, 474c to VII, 521b; Descartes, *Meditations*, I, II, III, V, and VI; Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part 1, and selections from Parts 2 and 3; or Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*.

1.2. A2 Level

Module 4: Either Philosophy of Mind (approaches to mentality and the nature of mind; the mind body problem; knowledge of self and self-consciousness; knowledge of others; and persons), or Political Philosophy (political ideologies; freedom; law; authority; and the state), or Philosophy of Science (scientific method, the nature of scientific development, scientific knowledge and the aims of science; the objectivity of science; and natural and social science).

Module 5: one text chosen from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I, II, III 1109b30 to 1115a4, VI, and X; Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sections II to VIII; Mill, *On Liberty*, Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Sections I, II, II, V, VI (209-213), and IX (257-270); Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chapters 1-10, 14; or Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Chapters 1-4 and 6.

Module 6: Synoptic Study. The purpose of the synoptic study is to integrate the knowledge and skills acquired in the other modules, and it should be undertaken after the work for the other modules has been completed. It takes the form either of a Comparative Study, comparing two contrasting philosophers on the same theme, or of a Complementary Study, assessing the contribution of one author to one of the set themes. In each case, candidates can choose between 6 titles selected by AQA each year.

2. Mode of Examination

Modules 1-5 are each assessed by a one-hour sat examination, in which candidates have to write one essay on a choice of topics. In the case of the synoptic study, candidates are allowed up to four hours supervised class time in which to write up an essay of 3,000 to 4,000 words, on the basis of rough notes of up to 1,000 words prepared in advance, and submitted to the examiner along with the essay.

For AS candidates, the three papers carry equal weight. For A level candidates, modules 1-3 carry 16.6% of the total marks each; modules 4-5 carry 15% each, and module 6 carries 20%.

3. Assessment Criteria

There are four assessment objectives: knowledge and understanding; selection and application; interpretation and evaluation; and quality of written communication. The last is not assessed separately, since it is inherent in the assessment of the other objectives. Interpretation and evaluation is given a lower weighting than the remaining two in all modules except modules 5 and 6.

Appendix A provides detailed grade descriptions for performances at grades A, C, and E. Appendix C provides an even more detailed breakdown of performance at 6 levels under the three assessment objectives for the synoptic study.

The introduction of the new AS/A2 has resulted in a considerable increase in the number of school students studying philosophy for a formal examination in philosophy. Under the old A-levels, total

numbers were a little over 1,000 a year. In 2004, there were 4,677 candidates for the AS examination, and 2,101 for the A2. Nevertheless, numbers are still very small in comparison with traditional A-level subjects such as English or History.

In addition to Philosophy AS/A2, there is a substantial philosophical component to examinations in Religious Studies offered by a number of Boards (in particular, philosophy of religion, and ethics), and these are taken by many more students. Recently, the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) Board has offered an AS in Critical Thinking, which was taken by 11,146 candidates in 2004.

Finally, schools are entitled to enter their students for public examinations other than AS/A2s, and a growing number have opted for the International Baccalaureate (IB), which universities accept as an equivalent qualification. One of the distinctive features of the IB is that there is a compulsory paper on Theory of Knowledge, which exposes all candidates to at least some philosophy; and philosophy itself is available as one of the options for study in depth. In 2004/05, 65 schools were offering the IB Diploma, though I do not know how many students are involved.

Philosophy at University

The emergence of different kinds of university in the UK is as complicated as the different kinds of school. Until the 19th century, there were only seven universities in the UK: Oxford and Cambridge in England, and (despite its much smaller population), Glasgow, St Andrews, King's College Aberdeen, Marischal College Aberdeen, and Edinburgh in Scotland. In line with tradition, philosophy was an integral part of the curriculum at all of these.

Many new universities were founded during the 19th century and early in the 20th century. Most of them grew out of pre-existing medical schools and/or technical colleges; but, whatever their origins, they all considered it necessary for philosophy to be taught if they were to be worthy of full university status. After a period of relatively slow growth, there was a large expansion in the 1960s, including the foundation of completely new universities, mostly built in the grounds of rural stately homes which their previous owners could no longer afford to keep. All of them still considered it unthinkable for a genuine university not to have a philosophy department.

However, around the same time, the Government decided to elevate a number of technical training colleges, called Colleges of Advanced Technology, or CATs, to university status. This move fundamentally changed the perception of what it was to be a university, and virtually none of them saw any need to introduce philosophy into the curriculum. The elevation of CATs to university status left a gap in provision for higher level vocational training, and this was filled by the creation of 29 polytechnics in 1970. They were formed by amalgamating various training colleges into a single institution. Generally, the only philosophers present were philosophers of education in teacher training colleges. The polytechnics were owned and controlled by local authorities, but they were enabled to offer degree-level courses through a body called the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which tightly controlled the quality of teaching and assessment to ensure that they

were at least of the same standard as at conventional universities (and in my experience as an assessor for the CNAA, I would say that the standards were in fact higher). Given the superior status of degree-level teaching, it is fully understandable that philosophers of education, where they were present, should re-invent themselves as philosophy departments, teaching the subject in the same way as at universities. This motivation was reinforced by a later decision of the Thatcher government to remove the philosophy of education as a compulsory element in the training of schoolteachers (she believed that it consisted of indoctrination into Marxist ideology). Philosophers of education would be out of a job unless they found a new role teaching straight philosophy.

In 1992, the Government suddenly decided to convert all polytechnics into autonomous universities. They were freed from local authority control, and they had the power to grant their own degrees without the supervision of the CNAA (which was immediately abolished). As far as philosophy is concerned, this meant the creation of a new group of universities with a primarily vocational mission, and it is only by accident that some of them had philosophy departments.

Quite apart from the polytechnic sector, there have long been many colleges which teach and assess students for a degree awarded by a university, under close supervision from that university. Such colleges can apply to be granted the power to award their own degrees, and ultimately to apply for full university status. A number have succeeded in becoming autonomous universities, but very few of them have included philosophy in their provision. Interestingly, although all universities have effectively been secular institutions since religious bars at the ancient universities were abolished in the late 19th century, we are now seeing religious foundations, such as the Catholic Liverpool Hope University, joining the ranks of state-funded higher education institutions.

The picture I have painted so far is of a university sector in which the traditional view that philosophy is essential to a university has been diluted by the creation of new universities whose mission is largely vocational, and in which philosophy has no place. The actual situation is more depressing, since philosophy has also disappeared from a significant number of more traditional universities. Apart from Oxford, which has for long had by far the largest number of philosophers on its staff, most philosophy departments have been relatively small. During the 1980s, there was a massive financial squeeze on university funding, which resulted in the closure of many small departments as uneconomic, including half-a-dozen philosophy departments in traditional universities. Since then, university managements have become even more cost-conscious, and departments which do not perform satisfactorily in terms of recruitment of students or research productivity have either been closed, or merged with larger units.

The loss is particularly severe in Northern Ireland, where there are only two philosophy departments, with about ten members of staff between them, many of whom are nearing retirement age. There could soon be no teaching of philosophy at all in the province. In Wales, half the philosophy departments have already been closed, and it is likely that provision will soon be confined to the South East, close to the border with England. The situation in Scotland is rather different. It was the

Scotsman Adam Smith who described the English as 'a nation of shopkeepers', meaning that the English, unlike the Scots, were not philosophically inclined, but judged everything in commercial terms. Adam Smith was part of the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment, when Scotland was the world centre of philosophical progress. Philosophy was central to the university curriculum, and until the second half of the 20th century, all students had to take courses in philosophy. Under English influence, the compulsory requirement to study philosophy was dropped, and Scottish philosophy departments faced a serious crisis because of the loss of students. But despite temporary cutbacks in staffing, all the Scottish philosophy departments have emerged with renewed strength.

Despite the closure of departments, there has in fact been a steady rise in demand for philosophy degrees. The reality is that departments with high prestige have increased their intake of well qualified students in order to maintain their financial viability, at the expense of departments with lower prestige. High prestige departments have expanded faster than the increase in the pool of applicants to study philosophy, and departments which cannot compete are faced with closure. The likely outcome is that, instead of having small departments of philosophy in every university, as used to be the case, there will be a relatively small number of universities with large and viable philosophy departments. I regret this change, because I strongly believe that philosophy is essential to a university education as such. However, I have to admit that, when I was Head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Leeds, I saw that the only way to survive was to expand, even if it was at the expense of other philosophy departments. We are now the largest philosophy department in the UK in terms of undergraduate student numbers, and second only to Oxford in staff numbers. We have intimate connections with all the faculties of the university, and it is inconceivable that we could be closed without serious repercussions for the rest of the institution.

What philosophy is taught

The Government does not control what is taught at university or how, and there is a strong tradition in the UK of university autonomy. There does exist a body called the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA); but it has very limited powers, and it is mainly concerned with ensuring that individual universities have proper procedures in place for ensuring the quality of teaching. What is taught and how is ultimately a matter for individual departments, subject to any requirements imposed by their own university (and some universities have much more liberal policies than others). However, a few years ago, in order to provide some agreed standards by which individual programmes might be judged, the QAA published a series of 'benchmark statements' drawn up by leading academics in the different disciplines. The benchmark statements are not intended to be prescriptive, but departments which deviate from them are expected to be ready to give good academic reasons for doing so. The philosophy benchmark statement was deliberately designed to be as all-embracing as possible; nevertheless it gives a good picture of the consensus among UK philosophers as to what a philosophy syllabus should cover, how it should be taught and assessed, and what sort of standards should be expected of a philosophy graduate. See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/philosophy.pdf>.

The philosophy taught in the UK is mainly in the Anglo-American tradition, with a lower historical content than in most other countries. The typical core syllabus covers logic, philosophy of language, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, ethics, political philosophy, and the history of philosophy (at least up to Kant). However, a few departments focus on recent continental philosophy. For example, there are two relatively small departments in Manchester: the one at the older University of Manchester provides little on continental philosophy; whereas the one at the former polytechnic, now Manchester Metropolitan University, provides little on recent analytic philosophy.

In addition, departments offer a range of more specialised options, depending on their particular tradition, and on the interests of their staff. A major growth area in recent times has been applied ethics, often taught to students of other departments as well as to philosophy students. Professional bodies in disciplines such as medicine, law, business, bioscience, and engineering are increasingly making it a requirement that students spend part of their time studying ethics, and philosophy departments are well placed to provide the relevant courses (preferably in co-operation with specialists in the discipline concerned). Another area where there is scope for philosophy departments to provide service teaching for others is that of critical thinking (though this is much less advanced in the UK than in the US).

Some departments are more cosmopolitan in their outlook, and include courses on non-Western philosophical traditions, such as Buddhist philosophy. There are increasing pressures on other departments to follow suit, in order to avoid alienating cultural and religious minorities with a wholly Eurocentric syllabus (the same tendency is to be found in the recently published draft UNESCO Strategy on Philosophy: <http://www.feto.fi/ajankohtaista/Strategy.htm>).

How philosophy is taught

In the UK, there are about 50 philosophy departments, or groups of philosophers in larger units, and very roughly 600 full-time teachers of philosophy. Some groups of philosophers are very small, with as few as two or three members; most are in the range 5-15; and only two have more than 25 members (Oxford and Leeds). There is also a wide variation in the number of students per member of staff: A small number of departments have fewer than 10 students per member of staff, whereas others have over 30. Both these factors affect the way philosophy is taught and the atmosphere of the department. Some are almost like a large family, where all the staff know all the students individually; others are more impersonal.

Apart from Scotland, the traditional teaching methods of UK universities derive from the model of Oxford and Cambridge. At Oxford and Cambridge, teaching was (and still is) based on a close relationship between the student and an individual tutor or supervisor, with lectures playing a subsidiary role. Students write an essay on a different topic each week, and discuss it at a meeting with their tutor. However, because of vastly increased student numbers over the past few decades, universities other than Oxford and Cambridge have mostly abandoned individual tutorials as too expensive in staff time, and have replaced them with seminars of anything between five and twenty

or more students. Even at Oxford and Cambridge, individual tutorials have mostly been replaced by groups of two or three students, and they are beginning to introduce larger seminars as well. In Scotland, teaching mainly or only by seminar has a much longer history, particularly for 'honours' students in their final two years. But now there is less differentiation between parts of the UK, and the normal (though by no means universal) model is that each course is delivered through weekly lectures, supplemented by discussion in smaller groups, often at less frequent intervals.

In addition to recommending set texts and giving students supplementary reading lists, it is now standard practice to provide them with handouts written by the teacher, giving additional information to assist their learning - for example, descriptions of the objectives of the course, the criteria for assessing student work, advice on reading and writing, summaries of lectures, and explanations of points not covered in lectures. Increasingly such materials are made available electronically.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, students were assessed by an oral examination at the end of their studies. Oral examinations were then replaced by written examinations - though with the possibility of an additional viva voce examination if there were any doubt about the written performance. It is still the case at Oxford and a few other places that a student's degree class depends on a series of written examinations taken at the end of their final year, even if the course on which they are examined was studied in the previous year. However, the normal practice is for students to be examined at the end of the course, and since most universities have adopted a semester system, this means that students sit examinations twice a year. (Many would argue that students are now over-assessed, and that continuous assessment disadvantages students who improve towards the end of their time at university).

It has long been understood that written examinations are not a satisfactory way of assessing student learning, because they encourage memorisation rather than thinking, and reward students who can write quickly and clearly, but without any deep understanding. Their main merit is that they are largely (though not entirely) immune to cheating. But because they are so unsatisfactory, there has been an increasing tendency to assess students on work written during their own time. In some cases, marks are awarded for one or more essays written during the course, and further marks for a sat examination at the end; in other cases, all the assessed work takes the form of essays written outside the examination room (and a few universities have abolished sat examinations altogether). For those who are worried about the possibility of cheating, I have written an article called 'Plagiarism in Philosophy: Prevention Better than Cure' - see <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/plagiarism>.

The picture I have given of the teaching of philosophy in the UK is one of a rather narrow diet of methods - didactic lectures supplemented by written handouts, discussion seminars which may or may not in fact encourage students to debate philosophically, and assessments which focus on the writing of essays, whether or not under examination conditions. This is probably a fair picture overall,

but it leaves out of account a wide variety of innovative methods of teaching and assessment which have been implemented by some departments, or, more usually, by individuals in an otherwise conservative department. Some examples are: discussion groups led by senior students; assessing students on their performance in presentations or discussions; self- or peer-assessment by students; dividing students into small groups during lectures; using a personal response system so that students can answer questions anonymously in lectures; and case studies and group projects (especially in areas such as applied ethics). Increasingly, departments use computers to improve quality and variety in student learning, by creating electronic discussion rooms; putting texts and running commentaries on computer networks; providing automated comprehension tests; using search facilities for locating key terms in texts; using commercial or locally produced software for teaching subjects such as logic; and receiving and commenting on written work electronically (and running it through plagiarism detection software).

The Higher Education Academy

In order to encourage developments such as these, and to make successful innovations more widely known, in 2000, the four councils which fund UK universities (one in each of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) established a body called the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). The LTSN consisted of a central administration and a Generic Centre at the University of York, and 24 Subject Centres at various universities throughout the UK. The idea was that academics would be more interested in exchanging ideas about good teaching if they related to subject-specific issues, rather than the more generic issues covered by professional staff developers. Some of the Subject Centres were responsible for a single discipline (English, for example), whereas others were responsible for a range of smaller, related disciplines. I am Director of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS), which is based at Leeds. It covers philosophy; the history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine; theology; and religious studies.

In 2003, there was a thorough review of the LTSN and other organisations concerned with improving the quality of teaching. It was decided that the LTSN had been very successful, and that it would become even more effective if a number of small organisations were merged with it, and if its funding were increased. The outcome was a new body called the Higher Education Academy, which came into existence in 2004. It is still based at York, and the Subject Centres are largely unaffected by the change (apart from the increased funding).

The activities of the PRS Subject Centre include: keeping a database of philosophers; visiting departments; organising local workshops and national/international conferences; maintaining a consultancy service; carrying out research into teaching methods, and commissioning research by others; helping departments and individuals to obtain funding for pedagogical research from other sources; reviewing published literature on the teaching of philosophy; translating the outcomes of generic research into a style and language appreciated by philosophers; maintaining a website which has more resources on the teaching of philosophy than any other in the world; and publishing a

twice-yearly hard-copy journal called Discourse. The journal is also published electronically on our website at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>.

It is also part of our brief to establish and maintain contact with other organisations promoting the teaching of philosophy in the rest of the world. Despite differences in the sorts of things we teach, we all have similar ideas about the qualities of a good philosophy graduate which we aim to bring about through our teaching - and we can all learn from each other. The PRS Subject Centre is organising an international conference on teaching philosophy, at Leeds on 1-2 July 2005, and anyone is welcome to attend. Further details of the conference and our other activities are available on our website, and we would be pleased to receive any enquiries about what we are doing at enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk.