

**Exploring Difference: Strategies To Make University Teaching Count**  
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**Executive Summary**  
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**Strengths and Challenges Across Countries**

**Canada** recently increased its commitment to access to higher education. Currently over 53% of Canadian adults have received some sort of post-secondary education, higher than any other OECD country. University is publically funded, with funding that comes from the provinces. The challenges include expanding class sizes, with some first-year classes comprised of 500 to 1,000 students. Universities are trying to keep up with the pressures of incorporating technology into higher education. In Ontario, the Ministry has created a \$50 million proposal for online and blended learning.

The **U.S. system** is large and complex, with 4,500 higher education institutions and 20 million students. Throughout U.S. history, there's been an increasing focus on teaching and institutionalizing new initiatives. Yet many students are not graduating with large gains in critical thinking skills. Some teachers are worried about teaching too rigorously because they don't want to be judged too harshly in return. There's a need to actually learn from the many different cultures found in U.S. education rather than just figuring out how to teach them, said the panelist. The U.S. has a diverse student body but it could be even more diverse.

Some universities in **the Netherlands** such as Maastricht have a problem-based philosophy to learning. A larger number of Dutch Masters programs are in English than in the past. Universities are changing from a study grant to a study loan system. In return, there's a worry that students will work too much now in order to pay for their education. Another challenge is the enormous influx of young people looking for a place to study. In 1998, there were 28,000 students at Dutch universities; last year it increased to 50,000. More Dutch young people will in turn look for spots outside of the university. The university received a large increase of applications from British students after the tuition increase in the U.K.

The quality of teaching has never been higher on governmental agendas across **the U.K.** than it is today. There have been a number of policy reforms centered around the enhancement of quality. Yet there has also been a steep rise in fees, particularly in England, to drive quality and marketize the sector. Over the course of five years, 350 million pounds were awarded to specific institutions that could claim aspects of excellence. There is a strong emphasis on the "student as consumer," issues of value for money, and student satisfaction as measures of quality. The "student as partner" is another growing notion: learning two way process, where it is as much about what the student puts in as the teacher provides. There are challenges around retention, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, but by the time a student reaches their third or fourth years, it's most likely that they'll finish.

There are limited public resources in **Germany**. There are increasing student numbers but neither staff nor the amount that they are paid is increasing. German universities are currently trying to identify what quality education means: Universities there attract a diversity of students, but they need to better cater to this diversity. There's a focus on teaching but it's a challenge to really make it work; there's a lot of talk about the quality of teaching but not as much on learning. It's a struggle to shift attention from the teacher to the learner. There's a need for improved information channels.

### **How can good teaching be evaluated and improved?**

-- The panels noted that **students are some of the best judges in recognizing good teaching**. Yet they are often not asked the right questions in evaluations. For example, students are often asked how much they knew before a class, but not how much they know after one.

-- A big question is whether students **are learning something relevant**, said the panelists. Are they prepared for the job they are currently doing, or the job they would like to do? Before students begin a course, are they making an informed choice? Quality teaching means bringing out a student's passion, talent and identity.

--Peer reviews are often done by **going into a classroom and making observations**, which is an imperfect measure of examining teaching. The process needs to be accompanied by student evaluations.

--Teachers should **take ownership** of what can be improved rather than blaming it on institutional issues, said the panelists. It's important to de-link the notion of leadership from authority, as leadership can come from anywhere in an institution. When teachers encounter resistance from the top administrators, there has to be "an ability to mobilize a groundswell of interest from below," said one of the panelists. Through discussions and collaboration among their peers, educators can then inform administrators about what can be changed.

### **Striking a Balance between Research and Teaching**

--At some universities, particularly in the U.S., there's an emphasis on **research over teaching**. In U.S. university manuals, research is supposed to be excellent whereas teaching is often just supposed to be sufficient, said the American panelist.

--Faculty in the U.S. **possesses a great deal of autonomy**, which allows them to experiment with new teaching strategies.

--In the U.K., there's a focus on **bringing teaching and research closer together**. Recently there have been initiatives to promote undergraduate research and to involve more students in inquiry-based learning.

### **What does quality teaching mean?**

--**The institutional culture affects teaching**, mentioned some of the panelists. Class sizes could be made smaller in order to accommodate more students and aid their learning process. Mission statements should focus on teaching quality in addition to research.

--**Better policies can be made from actually listening to young people**, said the panelists. Both faculty and students could be involved in establishing a curriculum.

--Teachers should make themselves more accessible, said some of the panelists. Often it's **one-on-one interactions** between students and teachers that stand out.

--Bringing **students from diverse backgrounds and abroad** enriches the learning and educational process, mentioned the panelists.

--The panelists shared a consensus that **teaching quality is not a matter of national boundaries**, but rather a matter of institutional goals and statement.

--When we talk about excellence in education, "it must be more than just educating the excellent," said one of the panelists, pointing out that quality education must also focus on educating those that did not already enter the university with a high skill set.

--Quality means bringing out the best in students, **but also setting the bar high enough** for students to take risks and fail. Their education is a unique time to experiment with new ideas in a safe setting.

### **How can the learning process best be aided?**

--In the Netherlands, there is **an increased focus on academic advising**, where students meet regularly in order to reflect on the learning process. The country is exploring having more of an open curriculum structure.

--The panelists agreed that universities need distributed leadership, with **decision-making taking place in the middle through top portions** of the administration.

--In Canada, universities often **feed answers to students rather than eliciting them to ask good questions**. They have to have more opportunities to ask them.

--In the U.S., universities often have **first-year seminars** that place students in smaller groups and help them better acclimate. Courses are often framed by a question that needs to be solved.

--In order to bolster critical thinking skills, there is a need for **writing intensive work**, student-based work, and problem-based learning in the classroom, said the panelists.

--Some of the panelists emphasized that **more technical tools** should be used in order to assist a student's learning process. For example, the use of blogs in the classroom allows students to produce work that can also be read and evaluated by their peers.