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Abstract:

Innovations within Higher Education are often prompted through the capture of supportive funding. One of the largest examples of this arose from the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning initiative in England (2005-2010). Drawing on the experience of two such Centres, this paper analyses some of the consequences of that funding. It will explore and evidence the fact that whilst funding may incentivise innovation, there is not a simple cause and effect relationship. It will suggest that by offering flexibility in funding approaches innovation can be encouraged and it will propose that through the direct engagement of students a powerful and cost-effective force can be empowered to drive curriculum change.

Key words:

Collaboration; Innovation, Funding, Students as Partners; CETL, Risk, Flexibility

Introduction

One of the challenges of innovation, and the short term funding that often accompanies it, is to identify a means by which innovations in learning and teaching can be mainstreamed and embedded within the normal operation of the organisation. This paper seeks to share some of the insights gained from a £315 million initiative from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that sought to create Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) across 54 universities in England (HEFCE, 2005). It will draw on case studies from some of the universities that have achieved sustainability and show how collaboration, risk taking, evolution and flexibility have led to mainstream adoption.

Higher education is valued as a significant factor in the economic and intellectual standing of nations. However, English Universities are now facing the greatest financial challenges within memory, at the same time as HEFCE's largest ever learning and teaching initiative, CETL, has come to a close. The question many institutions will be asking is how they can now afford to invest in innovation in learning and teaching when they are seeking to cut back expenditure elsewhere.

Some may offer the counter argument that it is at this very time of austerity that the most innovation can and should take place. Universities now need to find new ways to manage and deliver programmes and those that will survive and flourish will be those that can evolve and embrace this change.

The experience of the CETL initiative offers a useful insight into the ways in which innovation can be supported in a more affluent time. However, the lessons of this period reveal that often the funding was not the key driver for innovation; rather it provided the validation or excuse that enabled innovation to take place. This paper will highlight those lessons and offer some insights into alternative ways in which innovation can be supported in financially stringent times.

Context

A shared vision for all of the CETLs was that they would lead to improvements in the student experience and that these outcomes would be disseminated for the benefit of the Higher Education community as a whole. HEFCE stated that their aims included rewarding excellence and investing for the benefit of all – students, academics and HEIs. The Universities and projects that gained funding covered all aspects of higher education including learning materials, ideas generation and capital building projects. Particular features of the centres included collaboration across institutions and disciplines through innovation and creativity.

The authors held leadership roles in two of these CETLs which ran from 2005 to 2010. Both CETLs were collaborative with employers and shared a vision for transforming the way the higher education sector engaged with the health and social care sector. Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) was a CETL that involved five universities, a Strategic Health Authority, 16 health and social care professions, dozens of placements providers and the users of their services, forming a large and complex partnership. The CETL was set up in 2005, following the award of a £4.8 million grant from HEFCE (£2.5 million of revenue funding and £2.3 million of capital funding).

ALPS' mission was to ensure that students graduating from courses in Health and Social Care were fully equipped to perform confidently and competently at the start of their professional careers (ALPS 2010). The work that supported this aim included the development of assessment tools, common competency maps, innovations in mobile learning, the engagement of people using health and social care services and the promotion of interprofessional learning and working. Much of the funding rewarded staff for their involvement though dedicated secondment opportunities, fellowship roles and staff development. The capital funding was used to improve learning spaces, the purchase of hi-tech simulation equipment and mobile technology with its related infrastructure and airtime.

The CETL at Birmingham City University has evolved over its lifespan to move from a faculty based operation to one that has a core function at the heart of the university through its engagement with students. In 2005, the Faculty of Health secured a £4.2 million grant for the Centre for Stakeholder Learning Partnerships which specifically sought to promote opportunities for learning partnerships that would create new learning opportunities at the interface between the university and the National Health Service (NHS). Successful and continuing collaborations with organisations such as Birmingham Children's' Hospital NHS Foundation Trust were developed. However, in 2008 the CETL was moved into the University's central learning and teaching development team. The remit for the CETL (BCU, 2010) was broadened to encompass all subject areas with a new remit on improving prospective and present student engagement with the university. The new Centre for Learning Partnerships works with students at the University and those aspiring to progress to University as it seeks to develop its distinctive student engagement offer.

What we have learned

The CETLs were a large scale and relatively long term programme that offered a complex and exciting opportunity for exploring new ways of working. Each CETL was required to conduct detailed evaluations of their progress, against their own aims and objectives, and against evaluative guidance from HEFCE rules for financial management. In addition ALPS had particular interest in the impact of collaboration, so it developed an evaluation project to investigate this area. Following ethical approval, data was gathered from reflective statements provided by key partners, semi structured interviews, documentary analysis of evaluation reports and focus groups (Hargreaves et al 2010). In order to bring an external focus, colleagues from the Birmingham City University CETL were invited to join the research team; they conducted the focus groups and became pivotal to a number of critical conversations about the nature of the data, and our collective experience of collaboration. As a result, this critical appraisal, incorporated with evidence from the evaluation data to HEFCE, led to the two CETLs discovering that they had arrived at similar conclusions around two major learning points. Some of these conclusions were surprising and led them also to reflect on issues around change and sustainability.

The two key learning points were firstly, that some of the most productive outcomes did not correlate with the areas of most significant funding and, associated with this, that recognition of ideas appeared of more importance to staff than the finance associated with the projects. Secondly, that standard staffing resourcing models are not always the most effective way to develop and implement change and that by engaging students as paid partners it is possible to get enhanced returns through the generation of better and more relevant ideas.

Recognition vs funding

The CETL at Birmingham City University staged two rounds of project funding in its first three years. The first round took place in the Faculty of Health and offered support for collaborative health and social care projects. The second round was a university wide call that sought collaborative projects that would enhance the student experience at the University.

Table 1 shows the funding allocation for the first project phase of £99,300 and funding for the second phase that totalled £65,000. In each instance the allotted funding was not spent by those receiving the awards. The figures reveal an average under spend of 23% and 27% respectively. This suggests that for every four pounds invested by the CETL one pound was not utilised. This resulted in the remainder of funds being allocated to new projects.

The under-utilisation of funding by a project was not an indicator of project success. Only one project in each iteration of project funding failed to deliver outcomes and in both cases this was due to that member of staff leaving the University or moving to another position which would not enable the project to be fulfilled.

This was a valuable lesson for all concerned as it demonstrated to the CETL that such underspend was not just likely, but was an inevitability and that processes to monitor and reallocate funds were vital to ensure effective use of funding. The staff, in receipt of funding, also learnt from the experience as for many of them it was the first time they had bid for and been awarded funding. Many revealed that they had not really anticipated the difficulty of managing and delivering an additional project alongside their more routine activities and that they often found it easier to do the work themselves rather than spend a great deal of time trying to find someone to hire to do the work for them or replace their teaching commitments.

Insert Table 1 here (available at the end of the document for insertion)

The impact of staff remuneration at ALPS also varied. Funding was allocated on a pro rata basis to each of the five universities, relative to the number of students who could benefit from the programme. Within the parameters of meeting the CETL's aims each institution had a degree of autonomy in the way they managed their budget. Some offered significant secondment opportunities with backfill for the person's full time post; others offered a change of title in name only, with little reward in terms of time and a small annual stipend. Other funding was made available for staff development, including fees for a number of related part time PhDs. All posts had their successes but again this success did not seem to be reliant on dedicated time for development. Analysis of budget management showed that where funding was allocated for specific purposes it did not always get spent, despite the fact that the work was successfully completed. Evaluation of the projects showed that the people involved would not have embarked on the line of work without it, but the actual money was not instrumental to achieving the desired outcomes.

As at Birmingham City, ALPS partners re-allocated funding when a surplus was identified. Varnava (2002; p77) identifies that financial skills are not the most attractive part of educational development manager, but at these CETLs they were key. In ALPS it led to a successful cascade of additional project strands. For example, for one of the ALPS partners, the University of Huddersfield, the strategy was to use a significant amount of the financial allocation to fund time for staff to be seconded out of the regular academic duties. One secondment where support in the form of time became difficult, led to the funding being used as a budget by the secondee to support the development of inter-professional learning. This resulted in a jointly funded spin off project involving a partnership between the university, the secondee, a number of families with severely disabled children and a film company (Balen, 2009: p44). The DVD, 'sharing real lives' that was produced illustrated that by flexibility in the way the money was used, giving a budget rather than backfill, a better outcome was achieved.

Both CETLs also experienced variability in the level of staff engagement with funded initiatives. The need for staff to buy in to concepts and see the possibilities of innovations, especially those involving technology, varied greatly. For example a significant work stream for ALPS involved the purchase of mobile technology with a fixed one off capital spend of £1.25m. This included mobile devices, air time, shared IT infrastructure, support from commercial partners to develop learning tools and a help desk. The benefits from this were equally available to all partners but were adopted much more within some professions and in some institutions, than with others. Funding was not a key factor with regard to adopting the new technology. It became evident that ingenuity, flexibility and determination of participants all played a more significant part in change management and the acceptability of the mobile devices within various practice settings, than funding. The experience at Birmingham City University validated the view of the ALPS CETL as similar capital intensive funding around the purchase of simulation equipment for health care education at the university revealed innovators and early adopters (Moore, 1991; p11) who were quick to see the possibilities and embed change within their curriculum. However, there remained a section of the staffing population who did not feel invigorated by the process and appeared reluctant to fully engage.

Students as partners

One of the key learning points for both CETLs was that the most obvious partner for collaboration was not necessarily the best one to choose. Work with other universities, employers and staff was high on the agenda for both CETLs, but some of the most compelling and rewarding work came from that with students.

The fact that staff sought the affirmation of having been awarded a project, rather more than funding was quite a revelation for CETL managers at Birmingham City University. It also provided an opportunity as it released additional funding that could be utilised elsewhere. This led to some funding being reallocated to a student engagement initiative called the Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme. The SAP scheme employs students to work alongside staff in the co-creation of the curriculum. The collaborative programme is offered through the University and Birmingham City students' Union and encourages staff and students to identify a project that will improve the learning experience. The project idea can be identified by students or staff, but they have to work in partnership to deliver the outcome. The students work on developing the solution under the supervision of the member of staff, although it has quickly become apparent that those that are student led tend to offer the greatest impact. This innovative scheme won the Times Higher Education award in 2010 for outstanding support for students (BCU SAP, 2010).

However, a question could be asked as to whether students were any better at claiming their money than staff. In 2009/10 the first iteration of the scheme saw 30 projects being supported with a total funding award of £45,000. By the close of the projects £6,184 was unspent meaning that 13.7% of funding could be reallocated to other project areas. It would therefore appear that students are slightly better at spending their award funding than academic staff, but there still remains a significant under spend. It is interesting to note that one student refused to claim his funding after numerous requests for him to claim it. His response was that he had not achieved the desired outcome and therefore did not feel he should claim. This would appear to offer some connectivity within this student's mind of the SAP paid work with his other assessment led activities in his programme of study and is something the SAP team will need to investigate further.

The second iteration of the SAP scheme had over 70 projects in operation and employeds over 160 students, supported by over 90 members of faculty. This created a significant cohort of change agents across the whole provision of the University. The ability of this group to work collaboratively rather than as individuals is now a significant focus for the SAP project team.

The ALPS CETL from its outset believed that students should be active partners. At every stage in the development of learning and assessment tools, and in the development of a mobile learning strategy, it sought to engage students in design and evaluation. There were a number of research strands where students were invited to volunteer to be participants (Dearnley et al, 2010; p352-366). ALPS wanted to fully embed its innovations into the curriculum but unless this could be done for all students there were issues of equity. Asking students to engage in use of the technology required significant extra effort, but where this was part of a research strand motivation in the form of payment was discouraged as this was seen as influencing the students. Thus, when a funding stream to explore the use of an e-portfolio was agreed, the decision was made to run this as a development project, rather than research and thus to advertise engagement as a 'job' with a minimum number of guaranteed paid hours (Howes et al 2011)

As with Birmingham City, this proved to be a very successful strategy, with good student engagement and the forging of positive partnerships between staff and students.

Adverts were sent to all students for a ‘job’ which involved the review of how ePortfolios were used in health and social care and the identification of the functionalities and features that they would want in their ideal ePortfolio. In doing so they fully engaged with the project as partners which it may be argued is a more equal, collaborative relationship than that of research subject. Interestingly, a further observation of this work, and a similar outcome to that in Birmingham, was that a number of students have failed to submit any claim forms for the hours they worked. Many of the students involved in the ePortfolio project commented that the money was not the main motivation for them. They made it clear that they had joined the project because they felt it would also contribute to their *continuing* professional development, understanding of the technology and reflective practice.

> “if I hadn't seen any benefit to myself I wouldn't have joined”
> (Howes et al 2011, p 27)

Implications for the institutions

Through critical discussion and review of the collective experience it became clear that there were more subtle influences involved than the simple cause and effect of funding. Successes were related to a number of factors. Good leadership, at strategic and operational levels, meant that funding was well used and reallocated when possible and that the people involved were rewarded through recognition and prestige. Shared desires for success that transcended professions and institutions overcame barriers that money alone could not. For example, in ALPS service user and carer involvement tapped into networks that were already in existence and led to sustainable and vibrant collaborations.

This lesson is echoed through the work of the Birmingham City CETL as the project costings table clearly demonstrates that whilst staff will request funding they often find great difficulty in spending it. The evidence would suggest that people who apply for funding are motivated individuals, who are only too happy to take on extra work that will provide benefits for their students and their own working lives through some aspect of greater fulfilment. These conclusions support the findings of Turner et al (2008; p441-448), who researched the ‘reward and recognition’ aspects of the HELP CETL. Participants are motivated by a genuine wish to develop their role and scholarly abilities, as well as gain self esteem and confidence. They too, found that buy out of staff time often could not be arranged effectively, but that the under spend of budget did not mean the project outcomes were not achieved. Both CETLs found that funding was often requested to pay for visiting teachers to take away some of the project team’s work so they can concentrate on the project. In many cases this visiting teacher could not be found, but this did not prevent the project being completed. This results in the workload for the staff member increasing and the project funding being unspent.

This case study leads to a conclusion that the money itself does not lead to success. Rather, the symbolic prestige that it bestows on the fund holder validates the quality of the work, gives permission to undertake the work and rewards engagement. The funding acts as a badge for the people and institutions, showing they have the capability to deliver and that their contribution is valued.

The CETLs also revealed that there are alternative ways to encourage innovation that may not be so costly. A motivated student can be an excellent advocate for an innovation and provide a member of staff with a resource which will ensure work is completed whilst also offering a fresh perspective. As a consequence, Birmingham City University now has 70 student led projects running across the University for the equivalent of the CETL phase two funding which only supported 13 staff funded projects. The generation of such a wide spread number of student led projects, through the SAP scheme, creates a cohort of change agents amongst students and academic staff. The renowned educationalist Professor John Cowan talks of innovators possessing the ability to be contagious. This model has been adopted by Birmingham City University (Bartholomew et al, 2009; p84) and the innovation contagion has now infected directly over 200 students and 100 members of faculty. Indirect infection rates are under investigation as this SAP cohort continues to mix with students and staff from across the University.

At the University of Huddersfield follow on ALPS project money is also specifically being used to employ students as collaborators in the development of a range of learning and teaching initiatives around competence in practice and disability as a direct result of the success of this strategy in the earlier work. In both cases the initiative that was created to encourage innovation and change, has also demonstrated that it can develop and enhance employability in students.

Butcher et al (2011: p29-40) researching a partnership between higher education and the secondary school sector in Australia, identified five factors for success including shared purpose, collaboration and trust, as well as sufficient resources and an openness to learning and change. It would seem that the engagement of students as collaborative partners, rather than as the subject of research had the potential to achieve these elements.

The engagement of students through paid work was a risk, but one that the funding allowed. The fact that effective leadership and financial management enabled both CETLs to have detailed knowledge of their funding status and enabled resources to be reallocated put them in the position to take this risk. In today's uncertain times there is a natural inclination to move slowly and safely forward. However, the authors would argue external financial pressures should not inhibit calculated risk. When an organisation has funding it should be brave enough to back its own judgement and take the risks that enable it to make significant strides forward.

Conclusions

The Higher Education sector in England faces unprecedented change, in which the nature and amounts of funding will be altered. In this climate the lessons learned from the CETL experience could be crucial for continued success.

Understanding the most effective ways to motivate and support change is important. Organisational culture and strong leadership will do more to incentivise change than funding alone. Whilst money, particularly as it gives permission to spend time on a particular project will always be important, the potency of the funding may lie in its symbolic, rather than actual value to the fund holder. Through being named as a person worthy of funding, and thus having a privileged position of leadership and authority, peoples' perceptions of the value of the endeavour are changed.

Secondly, change can be encouraged through calculated risk taking. Innovators must not feel stifled through a safety first approach that "counts the beans" of limited funding. To support innovators, funders should be innovative in their funding approaches and look at alternate models that could include funding students rather than staff. There is a need for fund holders and project leads to be flexible and adaptive to situations and opportunities as they arise, rather than being tied to the goals and ambitions set out in the original proposals. This seems to me to be particularly important given the fast pace of change in technology enhanced learning and the desirability of supporting the interests and enthusiasm of the faculty and students who engage with the projects.

Whatever approach is taken it may be wise to adopt bold approaches, rather than safety first ones. In such financially stricken times, the only way to attract further funding is through demonstrating excellence rather than the ordinary. Being cash poor does not mean that we cannot be innovation rich.

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Table 1: CETL learning and teaching project funding at Birmingham City University

Phase One CETL project funding				Phase Two CETL project funding		
Project Number	Support agreed	Funding unspent		Project Number	Support agreed	Funding unspent
1	£1,104.00	£919.86		1	£5,000.00	-£95.20
2	£75.00	£3.70		2	£5,000.00	£4,751.50
3	£2,140	£0.00		3	£5,000.00	£2,500.00
4	£565.00	£0.00		4	£5,000.00	£0.00
5	£1,050.00	-£0.66		5	£5,000.00	£100.00
6	£2,500.00	£1,695.50		6	£5,000.00	£0.00
7	£600.00	£0.00		7	£5,000.00	£5,000.00
8	£700.00	£0.00		8	£5,000.00	£0.00
9	£600.00	£300		9	£5,000.00	£170.55
12	£5,000.00	£0		10	£5,000.00	£1,067.22
13	£4,721.00	£0.00		11	£5,000.00	£1,344.37
14	£7,100.00	£2,912.99		12	£5,000.00	£2,992.15
15	£21,430.00	£8,335.53		13	£5,000.00	£0.00
16	£5,411.00	£1,320.50				
17	£500.00	£380.00				
18	£1,475.00	£1,475.00				
19	£480.00	£0.00				
20	£618.00	£218.00				
21	£12,200.00	£0.00				
22	£280.00	-£1.97				
23	£8,640.00	£0.00				
24	£3,114.00	-£214.06				
25	£14,810.00	£4,434.01				
26	£3,516.00	£0.00				
27	£1,950.00	£1,275.54				
28	£1,491.00	-£229.25				
Total	**£99,930.00**	**£22,824.69**			**£65,000.00**	**£17,830.59**
		23% funding unspent				**27% funding unspent**