

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: reflections on the conclusion of a major policy initiative to enhance teaching and learning in higher education in England (0111)

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Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Background to this research

The establishment in 2005 of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) was the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) largest ever single funding initiative designed to support the development of teaching and learning. The initiative comes to the end of its funding period in 2010.

In phase one of this research Gosling and Hannan investigated the responses of individual bid-writers, educational developers and university managers to this policy initiative (Gosling and Hannan 2007; Gosling and Hannan 2007).

Aims of this research

This paper reports on new research conducted during the final period of CETL funding. The research is investigating the extent to which the personal aspirations of the participants have been met, the barriers that have been encountered and what respondents believe to have been achieved. We are particularly interested in the extent to which the respondents believe the aims of the CETL initiative have been met for example relating to raising the status of teaching and learning within their institutions, promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning and rewarding excellence. The aim of the research is to explore the ways in which individual agents with a commitment to enhance teaching and learning in higher education have interacted with and interpreted a major initiative designed to support and reward teaching excellence.

Research method

The principal research method is in-depth structured interviews, supplemented by analysis of the self-evaluation documents submitted to HEFCE. At the time of writing 16 interviews have been completed relating to 14 CETLS, all of which are in institutions which participated in earlier phases of this longitudinal research. Where possible, those who participated in earlier phases have been re-interviewed or, if those individuals are no longer available, we have interviewed their successor.

We are working within a critical socio-cultural theory of action, which explores how individual agency (actions and beliefs) interact with and are influenced by socio-historical, cultural and structural factors within the higher education environment (Trowler, Fanghanel et al. 2005; McLean 2006; Trowler 2008).

Preliminary findings

The CETL initiative was based on the assumption that departments and individuals judged to have provided evidence of excellence in teaching and learning should be rewarded with substantial funding. Our findings support the suggestion that the notion of 'rewarding excellence' is complex (Skelton 2005). Some individuals who have maintained continuity with their CETL for the duration of the project have indeed furthered their career through

their involvement but in other cases the academics being 'rewarded' have moved on and the original idea of the CETL has needed to evolve in response to changing realisations about what is possible. Reward mechanisms have tended to focus on individuals through, for example, teaching fellowships and small project funding, rather than achieving structural change in institutional attitudes towards teaching and learning as a route to promotion (Young 2006).

The second form of reward discussed by respondents has been associated with programmes to provide financial support for conference attendance and/or to facilitate research into an aspect of individuals/course teams teaching practice. Various examples of such programmes featured in the majority of participating CETLs and, in line with similar national and international schemes such as the Carnegie Scholars Programme (D'Andrea 2007), appear to have provided much needed space for individuals to reflect, explore and innovate. But in many cases the staff involved were new to pedagogic research and the extent to which new knowledge was being created that is transferrable to other institutions has been variable.

Several respondents have highlighted a lack of research expertise at the time their CETLs' were established. They subsequently addressed this issue directly through investment in research studentships to enable them to create a critical mass of educational researchers within their discipline. Respondents also acknowledged the persistence of the discipline vs. pedagogic research divide, which resulted in individuals engaged in pedagogic research not gaining appropriate recognition (e.g. through inclusion in the recent Research Assessment Exercise) for their research outputs. While respondents cited the pressure on CETLs to produce and present knowledge in a format recognised by universities, others have focused on alternative ways of recording and presenting the innovative practice which has been core to their CETLs' work, particularly those who have not prioritised pedagogical research. There is a sense therefore, that many of the recognised challenges surrounding the promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning remain.

Another emerging issue is whether HEFCE's strategy of allowing CETLs to take risks with little intervention, support or demands for accountability has been successful. Whilst CETLs have appreciated the opportunity to have large funds at their disposal with few forms of accountability many freely admit that it took up to two years before they became productive, many had little experience of running educational development projects or engaging in pedagogical research. In the early years they struggled to achieve engagement with other academic departments or with individual academics. However, at the end of five years CETLs are saying that productive partnerships have been established, but that there is 'much more to do' at a time when funding is either being withdrawn or is being severely reduced. There is evidence of interesting shifts in project leaders' perception of *time* as a resource through the lifetime of their CETL.

Although HEFCE placed considerable emphasis on a narrative which foregrounded universities having responsibility for achieving sustainability for CETLs in return for the substantial amount of funding being awarded, it is clear this narrative has little resonance five years later in very different economic circumstances. A minority of CETLs which have been successful in bringing in an income which will allow them to become self-funding in the foreseeable future are able to survive, but our findings suggest that in this sample few CETLs will continue as separate organisational units, although all would claim that their work will be continued within their institutions in some form.

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