

# Consultation paper

## Educational innovation and its embedding in UK HE

November 2002

### 1. Introduction to this paper

Nationally funded projects in higher education have had variable success in embedding their outcomes into institutional practices. This consultation paper explores where such embedding has been successful and raises some potential areas for enhancement in terms of national funding and support mechanisms.

The paper has emerged from a review of selected projects and feedback on its findings by representatives from a number of national funding bodies and support organisations. The projects informing the findings are all funded by UK higher education funding agencies and are generic educational development projects that specifically involve ICT (Appendix 1), although the findings have wider applicability. The review report<sup>1</sup> highlights in more detail the project approaches that worked well and identifies potential areas for enhancement at several levels.

A focus group approach was used to investigate operational contexts for educational development in UK HE and to consider those areas that relate to national policy, funding and support to projects and to institutions. While the review incorporates the experiences of those working on projects and in the institutions in which those projects were based, this consultation paper presents the collective views of representatives of national funding and support organisations (Appendix 2). It aims to assist in (i) informing national policy and service groups, (ii) developing future funding programmes and, (iii) enhancing the guidance and support provided by national bodies to projects and to institutions. A number of points of discussion arise from the findings and some key recommendations are highlighted.

### 2. Purpose of the projects review

The LTSN Generic Centre funded the preparation of a study to draw out lessons learned from a number of generic national projects. This involved reviewing and analysing the outcomes and experiences from a number of technology-related educational development projects working at institutional and cross-disciplinary levels. From project reports, evaluation studies and interviews with key staff, we have extracted those factors that influenced successful embedding of project innovations and approaches within institutions. The projects included in the study are predominantly TLTP3 projects, but also include three SCOTCIT projects and one FDTL3 project that incorporates a significant ICT element.

Most projects funded by TLTP3, FDTL and similar programmes develop within a specific context, but at some stage in their development will look to the wider applicability of their approaches. Most therefore locate themselves within the complexities of embedding innovation at institutional level. Some of the issues are well known to educational developers and learning technologists across the sector, but have rarely been documented and are usually evidenced on the basis of individual projects rather than generic studies. Since institutions vary immensely in their structures and working practices, the operational context that supports and integrates teaching development into its core academic business is a fruitful area to explore in terms of transferability.

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<sup>1</sup> A review of successful project approaches to embedding educational technology innovation into institutional teaching and learning practices in higher education (2002). Study funded by the LTSN Generic Centre. <http://www.telri.ac.uk/Transfer/ltsngc/ltsngc.htm>

The depth of analysis required of such institutional contexts is generally beyond the scope of individual projects. While funding programmes should continue to allow for each projects to evaluate broadly the relevant institutional and disciplinary contexts in order that development is appropriately targeted, we are grateful to the LTSN Generic Centre for funding this study that allows us to synthesise lessons learnt across funding programmes. We hope the outcomes may guide future national programmes and support activities and focus on areas of greatest need.

### **3. What 'embedding innovation' means**

By its very nature, innovation involves a shift away from traditional practices to embrace new approaches. With respect to academic development, this might involve harnessing novel approaches that will ultimately reshape teaching and learning practice at the institutional level. The fast pace of development in information and communications technologies (ICT) especially presents new opportunities to enhance and expand in this area.

Whilst located within the broader context of staff and educational development, it would probably be fair to say that supporting innovation in teaching and learning most likely involves supporting the enthusiasts, above and beyond the requirements for developing teaching competence. However, successful innovation rests on the ability to "embed" effective approaches from one innovation into wider institutional practice, encouraging the 'early adopters', and to understand how this is best achieved. With respect to ICT-related innovation, this is particularly a process that needs to operate across traditional boundaries of University policy and practices that are not necessarily well integrated in organisational terms. These pressures have made embedding e-learning a strategic imperative across the HE sector.

The meaning of 'embedding', however, is ambiguous. It contrasts significantly with 'innovation', which involves a shift away from traditional practices, even when this is modest and local (Hannan & Silver, 2000). One might therefore argue that embedding involves these once-novel practices becoming commonplace, although academics mean a range of different things by the term (Oliver & Dempster, 2002). There are, however, two common features. One is the emphasis placed on the difference between embedding (focusing on use) and simply disseminating practice. The other is the distinction between micro-level embedding within specific interactions to the naturalisation of technology throughout the institutional culture.

The study incorporates a review of the literature to ascertain current thinking about the nature of innovation, organisational management, institutional change and the development and increasing professionalism of academic practice in teaching and learning, particularly in UK HE.

In the context of the review of projects outlined in the next section of this paper, it should be noted that there were some distinctions in project aims between innovating and embedding. Some projects explicitly set out to develop and innovate (and where embedding was often a second order objective) whilst others were developed with the express purpose of embedding existing materials in new contexts and were funded accordingly. The extent to which either type of project is perhaps part of a discussion about the limits of what can be achieved with a "project" based funding mechanism.

#### 4. Review of projects' experiences in embedding

This section aims to outline the key findings about what the projects themselves experienced in institutional embedding. The study is based on a review of the project literature from ten national generic projects and on 17 telephone interviews held with purposively sampled project staff (project directors, managers and developers) in September 2002.

The focus of the study was not so much whether and how the projects successfully met their intended outcomes, but rather how they successfully effected change within their home institution or within collaborating institutions. The aim was to explore where projects have successfully embedded aspects of their work into institutional strategic development and to identify common features of these projects that may have facilitated this. With regard to their projects, two broad dimensions could be discerned: in-reach and out-reach.

**In-reach** is where the project has embedded its ideas or approaches or tools within the institution and informed academic practice. This has not always proved easy for projects. If achieved, it has been difficult to sustain beyond the lifetime of the external funding. Ideas and approaches have been cited in this regard, materials and tools seem to have been less widely taken up. Successful embedding of project approaches might therefore best favour a model of research and development far more than one of implementation.

**Out-reach** is where the project has influenced change elsewhere. Some of the projects reviewed felt that they had actually "failed on home territory" and yet they were certain that their influence had been significant in other institutions. In the final reports, much evidence of out-reach activity is provided. There is a significant volume of dissemination activity. The extent to which these activities influenced practice or had longer-term resonance at other institutions is, however, difficult to determine. Many project directors suggested that projects had been important in assisting or even opening debate about teaching and learning, or aspects of it, and the role of technology in these processes. The influence of the project nevertheless frequently became entangled with general trends and movements in an institution.

There were a number of factors that were common to most projects in both reports and in interviews, which appear to be key drivers in determining impact within the institutions. These factors fall across three broad motivations for involvement in projects: external (response to national initiatives or funding streams), internal (response to institutional or department strategy or targets), and self-directed (personal interest of project innovators). Where these motivations converged within a project, there seemed to be the greatest likelihood of successful embedding of the ideas and approaches within institutions. In these cases, the outcomes have the potential to be long-lasting, are embedded within staff development programmes and have informed the strategic direction of the institutions of the project.

Support for the projects in terms of project management by the external funding or support agencies was generally commended. The main disjunctive area was felt to be inter-project collaborations. There was dissatisfaction expressed over the co-ordination of project outcomes and concern over longer-term survival of the project work. Some measures have been taken to address the issues by maintaining a central database of project outcomes, although it was recognised that this does not address the loss of impetus after funding has ceased.

## 5. National involvement in supporting projects and institutions

This section presents a synthesis of the views and suggestions of those representatives of national bodies participating in a focus group event held in October 2002 to explore the findings from projects reviewed in the study. The aim was to identify areas in supporting projects and institutions during development and in embedding successful outcomes, which national bodies might enhance or extend. Participants were drawn from the funding councils, teaching and learning development programmes, national support bodies and member-based practitioner associations (Appendix 2).

The factors deemed significant in successful embedding broadly followed those identified by projects. This is not surprising given that many of the participants now working at national level were in former roles involved in some way with planning, development and evaluation at the project level. There were five key areas that influenced embedding of project ideas and outcomes that cut across project, institutional and national level activity:

### 5.1. People

*"People are desperately influential."*

The role of the individuals in projects was unanimously seen to be one of the most crucial components to ensuring success. Remarks included: *"individual enthusiasm"*, *"effort of the people"*, *"people as champions"*, *"dedication and hard work [of the people involved] despite short term nature of the funding"*, *"incredible energy and commitment of the individuals"*. It was felt that projects very much relied on this for their success.

### 5.2. Timing

*"Timeliness is crucial and impacts a lot."*

Good timing was also seen to be a vital characteristic of successful projects. It was noted, however, that *"actually behind this is quite a lot of hard work, which is not always visible ... the timing works because much of the ground work has already been done."* Good timing was also expressed in terms of the project meeting *"an immediate need"*, *"a specific need"* or *"an institutional need"*, that it *"hit an area of increasing interest and need ... supported very strongly by a national initiative [in this area]"*.

### 5.3. Funding

Linked to timing was funding. Participants particularly noted that the TOEF money for learning and teaching strategies had been timely and helpful in embedding developments from project work. Competitive bidding for project funding was viewed as an inefficient and unreliable mechanism for achieving policy aims and other possibilities were discussed, including the targeted establishment by funding bodies of working groups or consortia based on expressions of interest.

### 5.4. Buy-in

There were three main strands offered in relation to institutional buy-in of developments by project work. Firstly, the importance of institutional buy-in was emphasised, especially where ideas challenged the status quo. Initiatives had worked best where ideas had been *"unchallenging"* or *"non-controversial"*. The need for buy-in by senior managers was particularly mentioned as a key factor; these individuals were very much the power elite yet seemed often unaware of projects within their own institution. The establishment of an institutional task force as a primary development group was one example of successful buy-in.

Secondly, the impact of projects on institutional practice appeared patchy with subtle hints of successful embedding. Small scale development had the greatest impact within their own domain, often projects experienced far more impact outside the lead institution than within, and a subversive approach to change management was seen to work quite well. It was noted that some elements were embedded not as a whole but in parts. Evaluation was seen to be very

much a part of buy-in; as well as *"showing examples and practical ways forward for lecturers"*. Participants felt that here *"re-purposing was key"*.

A third strand centred on communication that linked policy, practice and leadership and the need for *"connecting with academics"* and *"listening approaches"*.

### **5.5. National networks**

Many projects that had been successful at embedding had built strong links with national organisations and were felt to be *"willing to go and share ideas with others"*, *"happy for [their] materials to be used and adapted"* and *"out there for the common good"*. Having a *"networking mentality"* was a key characteristic of such projects. Given the opportunity at the programme level, they were willing to share their experiences both of successes and of those areas that had not worked so well.

With regard to the relationship between funding programme teams and projects, there was mention of *"a slight dichotomy of trying to get help from those who are policing the project"*. The need for a dedicated support team at national level across all funding bodies and programmes was a strong view, linking people but particularly agencies with a view to forming some kind of national 'knowledge' centre.

### **5.6. What national level support to projects and institutions works well**

There were several areas that were felt to be working well to support projects and institutions as indicated by feedback to funding bodies and national support organisations. The main view was that good co-ordination, guidance, dissemination and light touch monitoring were key elements of effective programme support. The role of some support bodies was unclear. Several areas of improvement were identified to enhance support to projects. At the project level, many built on existing approaches and provision, including the funding of opportunities for networking and sharing of practice beyond that required for collaboration.

### **5.7. What national level support to projects and institutions could be improved**

With respect to funding models, the short termism of project work was a significant constraining factor in most cases. However, it was noted that short term funding was good for enabling innovation, although the time periods for some projects was too short and joining up projects across programmes and between programme phases was patchy. Where it had happened, or where strategic institutional elements were made explicit in project bids, there were clear benefits. In order for embedding to be supported, it was felt that funding for institutionally focussed development had the greatest impact across an institution. However, the way that funding is allocated means that often the institution is not involved *"holistically"* as *"money tends to disappear to the person who currently holds the VC's ear"* and *"to those who were in the know rather than to innovators or real practitioners"*. The relationship between funding models for teaching and for research were seen to be divisive in most cases. There were differences of opinion as to whether top slicing for project funding and programme support for teaching was a useful approach for effecting institutional change.

### **5.8. What needs to change**

The relationship between funding bodies and institutions was seen to be often dysfunctional as the *"institutional hierarchy gets in the way"*. Communication channels between institutions and funding councils *"need to be broader and deeper"* and that *"projects should be meeting real needs and having an impact holistically"*. Ensuring real senior management commitment might be verified through demonstrable championing of projects, improving steering group effectiveness, involving heads of departments as key change agents, linking project involvement to Subject Review and visits by funding councils at various stages was seen as strengthening the links. *"Project funding should be evaluated for its strategic potential prior to, during and after being given – a checklist could be developed for this."* Institutional audits linking strategy and project funding was suggested as a means to *"tie in and buy in"* as a return to funding councils.

At the funding level, the need for tighter cohesion between collections of programmes was seen as a priority to avoid "*getting caught up in ownership and management issues between projects and co-ordinating bodies and between funding councils*". Additional and more substantial funding for transferability was favoured – "*scaling up rather than new ideas*". In particular, a real need was identified for specific and targeted evaluation and transfer of knowledge from project work at the programmes level. The need to capture expertise of those who have worked in projects was highlighted. Dissemination also featured strongly in these discussions with a view that national bodies take a stronger role in disseminating the outcomes of projects that have finished. The formation of a "*platform for dissemination*" was suggested, perhaps in the form of a national repository. A directory of projects across the programmes and funding bodies – online, searchable by subject, institution, funding body/programme – was welcomed. A dedicated support team was suggested as a means to serve projects and institutions across all agencies.

## 6. Recommendations

Collectively, the factors detailed above help to highlight those national funding structures and support practices that currently influence the impact and legacies of funded projects. The findings from the review activities as a whole provide valuable insight into the perceived effectiveness of programme co-ordination and mechanisms of support to projects, institutions and national service providers, which has to date not been formally documented.

The result of this study is also to identify additional areas of co-ordination and support that would significantly assist in transferring knowledge and expertise across projects, programmes, institutions and the sector as a whole. A number of solutions were identified that would address many of the limitations of current national structures and practices. These might helpfully be grouped into three possible developments.

### i. **A live, combined repository of national initiatives, programmes and funded projects in UK HE is highly desirable.**

This facility would provide access to brief details of all funded projects in a publicly searchable archive - including funding body, aims, participating organisations or institutions.

Incorporated within this are requirements for:

- **Evaluation**, synthesising lessons learned from projects across funding programmes.
- **A knowledge pool**, collating evaluation findings, project outcomes, expertise, networks and contacts.
- **Networking opportunities** for funded projects facilitated across funding initiatives.

### ii. **Project funding bodies need to pursue the institutional commitment further.**

Clarification and reinforcement of "institutional support" would assist in ensuring the active participation of institutions in which projects are based. This might be achieved through:

- Institutional and/or departmental visits by representatives of the funding agencies.
- Annual audit of funded projects within the institution, including face to face meetings with senior and departmental management at the outset of the project or during the bidding phase.

- A formal statement of how the project supports the implementation of the institutional learning and teaching strategy (as appropriate).

### iii. Model of generating expressions of interest around an important theme or area.

Funding announcements might usefully be in the form of "expressions of interest". A national group should be responsible for:

- co-ordinating responses,
- building an appropriate consortium to carry out the work,
- co-ordinating and assisting in dissemination and evaluation, and
- passing outcomes back to the funding bodies.

## 7. Conclusions

Given the outcomes of the review activities in this study, it is interesting to reflect on the ways in which projects are an effective approach to developing and embedding new practices in teaching and learning in HE.

Firstly, the research and development networks that projects establish within and amongst institutions seems to be an area that endures beyond the lifetime of the project, the programme and its funding. The networks drive change in institutional practices through cross-fertilisation of approaches and ideas.

Secondly, the project and their innovations provide a "*supportive playground*" that is valuable in priming institutions to be ready to respond to the next wave of external and internal drivers. In most of the present cases, this was the explosion of Virtual Learning Environments. In a few projects, the development still has to strike in HE: namely re-useable learning objects. A couple of project teams confirm in interview that their work is "*ahead of its time*" in practical terms.

Finally, a much-repeated refrain from most projects concerns the useful insights those involved had gained from their participation in the project. Retention of the people with those insights, remains, however, problematic. Even where project staff are retained by the institution, their expertise is not necessarily appropriately deployed as their achievements are often ill-fitting with an institution's promotion criteria.

**It is the overall conclusion of this study** that the above recommendations address many of these outcomes from projects that can otherwise be overlooked. They suggest an attainable and significant set of 'value added' components of current and future funding programmes adopted as a mechanism for harnessing, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and learning development across UK HE. The recommendations require a cross-sector co-ordination role to be established as a matter of urgency and modest resources to be deployed to undertake the work.

It is believed strongly that through these additional services, the impact and effectiveness of projects in bringing about appropriate and sustained change in teaching, learning and assessment practices will be significantly enhanced.

## Appendix 1 National projects reviewed in the study

|     | <i>Project</i> | <i>Funding programme</i>                                 |
|-----|----------------|--|
| 1.  | TELRI          | TLTP3: Teaching and Learning Technology Programme        |
| 2.  | ASTER          | TLTP3:   |
| 3.  | SoURCE         | TLTP3:   |
| 4.  | ELEN           | TLTP3:   |
| 5.  | EFFECTS        | TLTP3:   |
| 6.  | TALENT         | TLTP3:   |
| 7.  | ANNIE          | FDTL3: Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning |
| 8.  | SESDL          | ScotCIT: Scottish C&IT programme                         |
| 9.  | ELICIT         | ScotCIT:   |
| 10. | NetCulture     | ScotCIT:   |

## Appendix 2 National representatives participating in the focus group event

|     | <i>Name</i>      | <i>Role</i>                           | <i>Organisation</i>  |
|-----|------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1.  | Kathy Wiles      | Senior Adviser                        | LTSN GC<br>(also involved in SCOTCIT)  |
| 2.  | Alison Holmes    | National co-ordinator                 | TQEF NCT   |
| 3.  | Paul Bailey      | Programme manager<br>Project manager  | JISC Learning and Teaching<br>(Formerly EFFECTS: TLTP3)  |
| 4.  | Rhonda Riachi    | Director                              | Association for Learning Technology  |
| 5.  | David Beards     |                                       | Scottish Funding Council   |
| 6.  | Hamish Macleod   | Evaluator                             | SCOTCIT evaluation team  |
| 7.  | Martin Oliver    | Institutional partner, UCL            | EFFECTS & ASTER projects: TLTP3  |
| 8.  | Liz Beaty        | Director                              | HEFCE Learning and Teaching<br>(Formerly Centre for HE Development,<br>Coventry University)        |
| 9.  | Mark Childs      | Educational developer                 | ANNIE project: FDTL3<br>(ARCHES project: JISC X4L)   |
| 10. | Jay Dempster     | Project manager                       | TELRI project: TLTP3<br>ANNIE project: FDTL3   |
| 11. | Peter Jackson    | Project director                      | RESULTS project: JISC DNER 5/99  |
| 12. | Frances Deepwell | Project officer<br>Consultant adviser | RESULTS project: JISC DNER 5/99<br>Centre for Higher Education<br>Development, Coventry University |