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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses recent efforts to use grants to fund projects to improve quality and encourage innovation in teaching in Australian universities, with a particular focus on the experiences of the Australian National University (ANU) at Canberra. Several projects are described, including a program to improve coordination of first-year units; a project to develop innovative approaches to curriculum, teaching, and learning; a seminar project on issues and practices in teaching, learning, and curriculum development; a quality management in teaching project; a collaborative learning project utilizing "structured conversations" to establish good practice in supervision; and a project to integrate information technology into teaching practice. It is concluded that the projects have helped to make teaching development a more publicly recognized and visible activity at ANU. Issues of process, outcomes, and the facilitation of change are also explored, focusing on tensions between competitive allocation and collaborative action, the role of discrete projects in incremental change or continuous improvement, tensions between strategies for improving teaching and for promoting innovation, and ways to establish who owns any change agenda. (Contains 24 references.) (MDM)

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THEME

Funding and supporting educational/faculty/TA development projects within departments

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ABSTRACT

Recently government and universities in Australia have introduced various initiatives including programs for funding projects to improve the quality of teaching, and to encourage innovation. Innovation has been strongly identified with the use of information technology. The experience of such projects at the departmental level will be reviewed drawing on reports and case material within one institution, and with reference to national programs. Issues concerning processes, outcomes and the facilitation of change in teaching and in departments will be explored.

Introduction

Grants programs have been used as a strategy for change for many years in various countries. For example in the USA, Weimer and Lenze (1991, pp. 312-316) detail institutional schemes, but lament the lack of substantiated outcomes. In addition both the United States and the United Kingdom have major government and privately funded programs in place to stimulate change and improve teaching. In Australia the strategy of funding projects has been used extensively in the past in schools and the technical and vocational education sector, and, since the mid-1980s a competitive grants scheme administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC) has been the main mechanism for allocating research funds to universities.

The extensive use of project funding for teaching improvement and innovation in universities is recent in Australia and the subject of some controversy. Concerns that individual initiatives funded or not, have minor or no impact because 'pick up' is limited, have led to an emphasis on strategies for embedding project outcomes in departmental practice. This paper addresses some issues which arise when the aim to improve quality and encourage innovation in university teaching in departments is foregrounded. Issues include: tensions between competitive allocation and collaborative action; the role of discrete projects in incremental change or continuous improvement; tensions between strategies for improving teaching and for promoting innovation; and establishing who owns any change agenda. These issues are drawn from the experience of one institution but used to explore the more general issues of effective educational development and change management which is grounded in departments and disciplines. Reference will be made to the national funding programs which have been the source of much of the institutional and departmental project funding and the subject of some review (Hayden and Speedy 1995; Moses and Johnson 1995; NBEET 1995).

In the concluding discussion a distinction is made between change strategies for strategic institutional change programs, and those to encourage the generation of initiatives in teaching improvement and innovation from within departments. Support for the latter it is suggested can come from strengthening departmental communication and planning processes so that teaching improvement becomes part of managing a wider departmental change agenda.

The Australian Experience

At the national level government initiatives have included program funding for institutional development, quality improvement, teaching development grants, staff development, policy research, and the recognition of excellence in teaching and student services (Appendix A). The government programs have provided a context, a source of funds, and a spur to institutional action. Many universities used the external discretionary funds (particularly the Quality funds) to set up internal grant schemes where they did not have any, and/or to fund major projects to enhance teaching practice. As an example of various projects, and grant schemes which have contributed to the improvement of teaching and teaching innovation at the institutional level some of those initiated at the Australian National University (ANU) are provided to contextualise my perspective, but I am very aware that many other institutions have carried out exciting and valuable programs and projects.

The ANU is a research-based university (59% of the faculty are research only) and has seen itself as providing high quality teaching to a small undergraduate population, and a comparatively (for Australian institutions) sizeable graduate cohort, with an emphasis on face-to-face interaction, small classes and superior student services. The programs described below were introduced in a context of significant institutional change as regards recognising teaching in promotions procedures, the introduction of a teaching award scheme, and the restructuring of some courses and faculties.

A The Quality Support Grants Program (1992-1993)- *Responding to Changing Student Needs: Enhancing Teaching Practice* (Akerlind et al, 1993).

• *The Coordinators' Project:* a group of academic co-ordinators led by two CEDAM staff identified and piloted effective strategies for improved co-ordination of first-year units, large classes and skills development for tutors.

• *The Innovations Project:* funding of $100,000 was allocated to eleven individual academic staff within the University for projects to develop innovative approaches to curriculum, teaching and learning, in ITA, Philosophy, English, Physics (2), Forestry, Mathematics (2), Law, Commerce, and Computer Science. Many participants have since been involved with the special interest group Teach-IT set up as part of a later project (http://www.anu.edu.au/CEDAM/teachit/).

• *The Departmental Seminar Project:* staff in 10 departments were funded either to visit other institutions to discuss curriculum development processes, to look at various teaching strategies for teaching and, on their return, to offer departmental seminars relating to what they had discovered; or to bring in colleagues from other institutions to offer seminars on issues and practices in teaching, learning and curriculum development.

B. The Quality Management and Evaluation in Teaching (QMETL) Project 1992-1993 ($150000, 1994) was a scheme similar to the Coordinators Project already described, but more firmly grounded in 5 departments through a consultative process. CEDAM staff worked with groups of academics in each area to identify particular issues and develop 'good practice' in quality management in teaching and learning. The conceptual framework used was based on a generic model already being developed by Boyle and Balla (1993).

C *'Structured Conversations'* is a more recent collaborative action learning project whereby 'Structured Conversations' were held between groups of supervisors and

groups of PhD students to establish 'good practice' in supervision for supervisors and for students.

D University Funded Teaching Development (1994-1997)
Following the earlier experience the University continued to fund teaching development projects from Quality funds, and then from internal sources (1994/5 $80000; 1996/7 $100000; 1997/8 $50000, 1998/9 $50000 to be allocated (Donovan 1996).

E ***The effective integration of IT into teaching practice*** has been promoted through projects funded from the CSDF: *The 1995 Developers-in-Residence Program* (Barritt et al, 1996); and *The Applying New Technologies for Teaching and Research Scheme* which funded projects for enhancing IT skills after extensive consultation. The intent of this scheme is now incorporated into the small grants component of the Teaching Development Scheme which in part provides a platform for applying for CUTSD grants.

Positive Outcomes:

- The 'Innovations Project' made visible for the first time the amount of active experimentation in teaching and interest for this at the grassroots, and assisted to build networks. Many faculty had been 'heroic innovators' working in isolation.

- Teaching development has became a more publicly recognised and visible activity, and the interest in using IT is in a context enriched by prior attention to teaching practice.

- With hindsight the diversity of the programs has been valuable as it has allowed different academics and departments to pursue different interests, and involve themselves in project approaches which attracted them. In this way involvement in such development has been widespread and growing incrementally across all faculties.

- All projects confirmed the importance of effective departmental leadership.

Issues of process, outcomes, and the facilitation of change
Exploring how these programs and schemes are played out at the departmental level raises many issues of process, outcomes, and the facilitation of change, some of which are discussed below. The issues are complex, especially as the department is a site of tension between external pressures for change and those which are generated spontaneously by academics individually and collectively in response to their changing environment.

- ***tensions between competitive allocation and collaborative action***

The teaching development schemes at the national level are competitive, or submission-based, and the CUTSD guidelines have strengthened the similarity with procedures followed by the ARC for research grants which are highly competitive and prestigious. The goal has been to raise the prestige of the awards, and therefore the prestige of teaching. A parallel development has been greater emphasis on more professional approaches to preparing applications, with a demand for sufficient pedagogical rationale and acquaintance with the literature and scholarship on teaching and learning. This latter demand is meant to encourage attention to the scholarship of teaching. However it can also reinforce the traditional academic culture of individual autonomy with reliance on ex-institutional (metropolitan) peer referencing which is based solely on merit criteria, rather than strategic departmental concerns.

This development has the potential to conflict with efforts to improve quality in teaching through more collaborative departmental action. As argued by Dill in a review of quality management in higher education (1993), where academic programs are organised as if:

> each student's education is crafted by an individual faculty member, rather than acknowledging the reality that each student's education is a product of the uncoordinated work of many teachers, as well as other influences....[.then] Such a system invites substantial variation in academic quality, and encourages the inefficient use of resources (p. 76).

In addition the trend to 'professionalise' the discourse of higher education pedagogy could exclude those who find that alienating, or who do not want to cast their concerns and issues into the language of educationalists.

- ***the role of discrete projects in incremental change or continuous improvement***

While on one hand we know that departments already engaged in a process of incremental change are more likely to provide conducive settings for long-term project implementation (Haydon&Speedy 1995, p. 21), such departments can find that the demands of project application frustrating if not disruptive. For it requires the group to 'package' part of the whole into something discrete. The discomfort can be higher if the guidelines want achievable, visible outcomes, it appears at the expense of those of the department. It is through such dynamics that grant programs with short time frames, and tight guidelines, can inadvertently encourage the least interesting and marginal development activity (Akerlind et al., 1993).

Yet we also know that project development can be a useful discipline. It is easy for supposedly incremental change to meander along with less actually happening than we think. The need to identify some goals or milestones, and clarify a rationale, is a learning process which some academics appreciate as a benefit of applying for grants even when they are unsuccessful. Where change requires expensive resources as in areas such as multimedia then a project basis is essential. Some early experiments in this area led to cost overruns, ever-expanding time frames, and sometimes no products. The situation is exacerbated too by the lack of appropriate project management skills.

At issue is not however just skills deficit. Good management of projects which affect more academics than one teacher and her class may demand a level and style of collaboration which can be alien to many academics (Pearson 1996). In an early report on a major study on 'Academic Departments and the Quality of Teaching' in Australian institutions Benjamin relates a range of approaches and perceptions which teachers report on working together in a teaching team - a delegation model, co-operative sharing, coordination through an agreed framework, and building the curriculum around existing strengths so that each teacher operates independently (Benjamin 1997). Establishing commitment to collaboration and some experience in enacting it could be seen as prerequisites for effective projects which seek to make significant changes to practice at the departmental level.

- ***tensions between strategies for improving teaching and for promoting innovation***

'Good' teaching is not necessarily different teaching, but rather teaching of a desired standard. Raising the quality of teaching can require attention to day-to-day teaching and how it is managed, and attention to matters such as assessment and its congruence with goals. Innovation can be read as meaning the reinvention or enrichment of practice, or radical change, and new products (new teaching methods, new technologies, resources and so on). The routine alliance of the two goals of improvement and innovation in one sentence, as if the alliance is unproblematic, leaves unexamined the potential tension, and can lead to confused signals for participants in any grant program. For some a stress on innovation leads to an expectation that innovative means 'novel'; an expectation which will be re-inforced where the focus is on teaching process defined as novel teaching techniques, and the choice of the novelty can be driven by what it is anticipated that the funding body wants, not what is significant or salient for the applicant/department.

It could be such factors that explains the large number of applications and grants for computer-based projects for teaching resources (in CAUT and our internal schemes). The development of teaching resources using new technologies is more easily conceived as a discrete project, than say a project on 'ways to improve the learning climate'. Teaching resource projects can be agreed to more readily by a department or the head, as a low risk change strategy - if the resource is produced then it may be used, and if not nothing is lost. The funding is external and did not require serious prioritising of departmental resources, or the allied disruption of established patterns of resource allocation. This line of thinking is of course a problem for any

use of discretionary funding as a lever for change, but particularly can be a difficulty where the costs are high as is the case for developing the use of new technologies. Projects which are based on such assumptions can appear to have departmental commitment but this may not translate into support later if there is the requirement for additional departmental funds or change in departmental practice that affects those not involved in the project.

It could also be argued that whereas teaching improvement needs to be departmentally-based, this is not always the case for significant innovation. Innovation may flourish better in hybrid or specially created spaces. Discussion of subsidiary approaches to change, especially for IT-related programs is discussed in Yetton (1997) . Some institutions have created special organisational units to provide entrepreneurial flexible programs. Swinburne University trialled and developed the expertise for resource-based learning on a separate campus (Jeffrey 1997).

- ***establishing who owns any change agenda?***

Although teaching development projects however well conceived may be a useful strategy for change, they are still based on a presumption that the need for change is unproblematic. Clark (1996) argues that change in research is driven by the growth of disciplinary specialisation and complexity, which he calls 'substantive growth'. It is this growth which has led academics in the past to spawn speciality courses, particularly at the senior levels. In contrast funded teaching development for quality improvement and innovation has been driven by what Clark calls 'reactive growth' consequent on the move to the 'massification' of higher education and government economic and social priorities. Teaching improvement is no longer purely a process of incremental change left to the professional academics to pursue voluntarily, it has now become part of a much larger agenda driven by pressures external to the universities.

In Australia there has been a Federal government agenda to expand the university sector which hitherto had been small and elite. In 1989 the government abolished the binary divide between non-research institutions and the established research-based universities, creating a 'national unified system' with common funding mechanisms and industrial conditions. More recently there have been trends to greater deregulation and privatisation. Accompanying all these changes has been an interest in ensuring the maintenance of quality in teaching while expanding the system; and an interest in harnessing technology and distance education approaches to reduce the unit costs. In addition some of the pressures of global competition based on the use of new technology have the potential to de-professionalise university teachers (Lindsay 1996).

In such a politicised environment there will be diverse interests and attitudes. Some academics will want to minimise the impact of reactive growth, others to use it as a means to the transformation of the teaching program which they have already been hoping for. However increasingly teaching improvement is inescapably linked to others issues of department survival. Departments cannot afford to have teaching programs stagnate or loose student numbers. The pressure on resources means that there needs to be efficiencies created across the teaching and research activities. Outreach becomes a more significant factor in student recruitment and industry-linked research and courses. It is in this context that teaching improvement and innovation for the department may become central, but the goals of a department may be different from those espoused by a grants program, (or those of educational development experts).

Discussion and conclusion

Modifying grants programs can improve their effectiveness, but their impact will be limited by many other factors. Particularly the issues of how to facilitate departmentally-based change are more complex than that which can be addressed by finetuning grant guidelines.

Dunphy and Dick (1981) cite as the characteristics of successful change programs: clear objectives, realistic and limited scope, good timing, participation, support of key power groups, use existing power structure, competent staff support, integration, diffusion of

successful innovations, and continuing modification. These are in some ways taken for granted assumptions and criteria underlying many aspects of the programs discussed in this paper. However the appropriateness of some of these criteria for teaching improvement and innovation in departments can be challenged; these criteria are those of rational planning, 'planned' change management and top-down change. While such change programs may be an effective strategy for an institutional agenda for strategic purposes (eg. meeting the needs of non-traditional students) I would argue for complementary but different approaches for robust departmentally-based teaching improvement and innovation which aims to reinvent or enrich practice. In earlier work on classroom research Cross&Angelo (1988) in addressing the difficulties of development based on laboratory research stated that: 'The research most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by teachers on questions they themselves have formulated in response to problems or issues in their own teaching.' Similarly robust departmental change projects will be those which grow out of the felt needs and interests of the department, and are articulated and owned by them.

Cross&Angelo also discussed the gap between research and practice which they stated:

> has posed a major problem to those funding research in education. "Development" and "dissemination" have been the presumed answers, but the fact is that those two stalwarts of converting research in the laboratory into practice in the field have not worked as well in education as in agricultural extension, the model upon which "R&D" in education is based. (p. 2)

While many in the field of higher education may now see themselves as following different developmental models, the instrumental approaches often underlying funding schemes for teaching development may still have more in common with agricultural extension approaches than is at first obvious. Perhaps we have lost the 'R' but kept the two 'D's with similar attendant problems. For more participatory approaches such as action research/action learning projects in higher education do not produce outcomes which are necessarily transferable. It could be that we need to distinguish more clearly between the role of 'dissemination' of ideas and the 'diffusion' of 'best practice'. In a insightful account of the implications of the 'new science' (post-Newtonian) for management theory, Wheatley (1992) suggests that poor communications and the urge to control information in organisations are in part due to our misperception that information is a 'thing' or commodity to transfer from one place to another. Instead she sees the need to open the gates to ever increasing flows of information, to information which disrupts accepted ideas, and which produces increasing ambiguity and complexity through iterations of exchange. This flow will keep an organisation an open system and adaptive through self-organisation. It might be useful to apply this insight to teaching improvement and innovation, and interpret the cry for better dissemination as being about the need for more information flows and conversation about teaching of any kind, as the mechanism for learning and growth for the institution, the department and the individual, rather than focussing on emulation and adoption. From this would come a range of funding initiatives designed to generate ferment and information flows through exchanges, visits, conferences and all forms of collegial activity.

Yet such ferment could still leave us with the very variability which Dill indicates leads to uneven quality in teaching. For me this indicates a parallel need to assist departments be effectively adaptive, and to operate collaboratively. There are various approaches possible to strengthen departmental leadership processes and to counter academic fragmentation by building collegiality. Some successes and difficulties have been documented in Wergin (1994). In Australia there has been extensive use of action learning models (Zuber-Skerritt 1992; Timpson & Broadbent 1994). Another approach could be to think of the department as a community and look at community development models which focus on community empowerment (eg. Sadan&Churchman 1997). My preferred approach is to structure various forms of departmental planning, strategic planning, curriculum planning, and program evaluation as processes to strengthen departmental cohesion and shared understandings (though not necessarily full consensus) about their collective responsibilities in teaching, research and outreach. Once such processes are underway the department can more successfully tap into funds for projects which suit their purposes, and engage in collaborative activities with other areas and institutions. In addition where departments and individual members are participating

in various initiatives which lead to learning and growth, institutional strategic programs are likely to be more effective, because they are less likely to be seen as a threat from those who are open to change, and confident in their ability to manage it.

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APPENDIX A

Australian Government Funding Programs in Higher Education for Teaching and Staff Development

All such programs are submission-based and/or competitive, requiring applicants to bid for funds/awards against various criteria. They have included:

- the Quality Support Grants program (QSGP), funded from a National Priority (Reserve) Fund established in 1988 to support restructuring of the system, which aimed at developing and implementing processes which would improve good teaching practice and management throughout an institution and complement those already in place;

- the Quality Assurance Program 1994 - 6, which allocated funds to institutions according to their rankings for the quality of their teaching, research, and outreach;

- the Commonwealth Staff Development fund 1990 - 5, which was established to develop the skills of academics facing transition to a unified system following the ending of a binary divide between universities and colleges of advanced education;

- the Evaluations and Investigations Program which funds projects in specified areas of interest such as the development of performance indicators, or the impact of internationalisation, with the intention of promoting a climate of critical self-assessment within institutions and to encourage the development of evaluative skills. (pp. 4-8, NBEET, 1995);

- a National Teaching Award Scheme

- the Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) which has been established for three years with a mission of identifying and promoting good teaching, learning and assessment practice in higher education, and the fostering of innovation in higher education teaching. As with its predecessor the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) 1992-5, the intent is to raise the status of teaching in universities where research has been dominant. CAUT funded a range of programs: National Teaching Development Grants (NTDG - 1557 applications in 3 years and 341 grants); Regional workshops; a National Teaching Workshop, 1994; National Teaching Fellowships

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