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Cultivating innovative cultures: a change challenge for higher education institutions (0026)

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In response to an ever-changing external environment, universities are increasingly asking their staff to be 'innovative practitioners'. The definition of innovation, however, is not clear cut; there are competing definitions and different understandings. As part of a larger study on the diffusion of innovation, the research reported here sought to investigate the meanings of innovative learning and teaching practice for a sample of higher education 'innovators'. The study explored where innovative ideas come from, how they move through an institution and the extent to which they become embedded into routine practices. Data from sixteen in-depth interviews revealed drivers for innovation and the institutional factors that can facilitate or impede it. The findings raise questions about whether it is possible to cultivate an institutional culture which both supports and manages innovation and still maintains the flexibility and freedom that innovators need in order to be creative.

Cultivating innovative cultures: a change challenge for higher education institutions

Higher education institutions, like many public sector organisations, have traditionally evolved in a stable and slow environment (Osbourne & Kelly, 2005). They are steeped in traditions, values and responsibilities (Barnett, 2000); they may lead change externally but are less keen to change themselves (Elton, 1999). External pressures, however, have forced changes on universities in recent times. These outside drivers for change are well rehearsed and include such motives as: massification and lifelong learning initiatives; borderless education and increased competition for international markets; technological advances; changes to government funding arrangements; and education that prepares students for the global knowledge economy. In order to deal with such 'a state of flux' (Cowan, 2006, p.135), there are calls on higher education institutions and their practitioners to innovate.

The term 'innovation' is pervasive in higher education discourse. It can be found in the title of the UK's government ministry responsible for higher education, people's job descriptions, and the strategies that shape the ways we practice. Innovation, however, is a contested term (Johannessen et al, 2001; Wolff, 2008). 'New process' or 'new product or service' (Clegg et al, 2008, p.374); 'an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new' (Rogers, 2003, p.12); 'planned or deliberate changes' (Hannan & Silver, 2000, p.10) all define innovative practice. It is clear that innovation is a term that requires further understanding if we are to cultivate cultures that support innovative academic practice.

This paper reports on a preliminary study which is part of a larger research programme around the diffusion of innovative learning and teaching practice in higher education. The study aimed to explore what a sample of higher education practitioners in a large post-1992 Scottish University understood by the term 'innovative practice', where their innovative ideas come from, how the ideas travel through the institution and the extent to which they become embedded into routine practices. The study draws on the transcribed data from sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting between 50 and 90

minutes. The interviews sought to probe into understandings of innovation, barriers, facilitators and triggers to innovative practices, and the support systems drawn upon during the innovation process. An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that although they have a sequence of themes, there is also sufficient flexibility to follow up interviewees' responses and explore areas that were not on the schedule (Kvale, 1996); this leads to rich and deep data. The sample was drawn from staff who had participated in centrally-organised events around learning and teaching innovation. This purposive sample comprised people who already saw their work as innovative and therefore made discussions around innovative practice more concrete and productive than a randomly selected sample would have achieved. The focus on 'innovators' also helped to paint a rich picture of the beginnings of the innovation diffusion process, where 'innovators' operate (Rogers, 2003, p.281).

The findings from the interviews suggest that these 'innovators' have a broad understanding of innovation. The interviewees saw innovation as something that was situated within their own practice and discipline area and recognised that it would look different in different parts of the university. They described it as 'being creative' or 'doing things differently' or 'improving things for students'. There was an emphasis on technology as a vehicle for innovation, with the Internet being cited as having radically transformed higher education practices. Many of the drivers for innovation mapped the drivers for change noted above: pressure on increasingly scarce resources (staff members, space, specialist equipment), policy drivers (such as the Quality Assurance Agency's Scottish enhancement theme initiative) or the changing student body. There were, however, many more personal reasons for innovating: personal interest in an emerging technology, curiosity or the desire to do things better. Ideas for innovative practices were often the result of discussions with people. These could be colleagues met at conferences or through web forums, discussions with educational developers or coffee-time chats with friends. The interviewees felt that certain institutional conditions made it easier to innovate: being given protected time to work on new ideas, receiving funding through internal competitions, educational development expertise, the backing of more senior staff members and robust evidence that the innovation works (already published or gathered through pilots). Conversely, there were barriers to innovative working. These included: a lack of recognition for the time and effort that innovation requires, the rapid pace of change when compared to the rest of academic life, lack of technical skill or infrastructure and limited resources. In terms of spreading innovative ideas, respondents talked about adopting conventional methods of dissemination through conferences, peer-reviewed papers and seminars combined with more novel web2 technologies, such as blogs and YouTube. There was, however, some ambivalence to the notion of diffusing the innovative practices too widely as widespread practice would reduce the novelty-value of the innovation and its subsequent impact on student motivation. A second impediment was the desire to publish the results of pilot projects; sharing too much information about the innovation might well lead other institutions to 'copy' the innovation and win the publishing race.

These findings raise interesting questions for higher education institutions. As the interviews show, innovative learning and teaching practices are being used successfully as a means to respond to the changing nature of higher education. These innovations are implemented by individuals within institutions. Their practice is 'stimulated, facilitated and enhanced – or the opposite' (Kanter, 2000,

p.167) by the structural and social conditions in which these innovators work. The structural and social conditions that support and impede innovation were outlined by the interviewees. Universities need to cultivate a culture of innovation, which is not 'risk averse, which encourages exploration and learning and which rewards innovation' (Osbourne & Brown, 2005, p.180). Concurrently, higher education institutions face the dilemma of needing to 'manage' innovations to ensure that they are sufficiently spread in order to change more than one individual's practice. To two do not necessarily go together. The challenge for universities, then, is to shape the innovatory environment without stifling creativity (Clegg et al, 2008) or disabling innovators (Findlow, 2008).

1000 words

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