

Operational learnings of ALTC project holders December 2008

Introduction

The Grants Scheme has been fully operational since 2006, building upon several pilot projects initiated in 2005. In order to improve our understanding and implementation of the Grants Scheme and to better support project holders and institutions in achieving the objectives of their projects we have attempted to draw together shared operational challenges, learnings and some of the successes experienced by project holders to date. By highlighting the challenges and learnings we hope that both current and future project holders may be more aware of the potential pitfalls and also be better placed to seize opportunities as they arise.

This document draws upon the day to day operations of the program, the reported experiences of grants scheme project teams, and feedback from the sector, over the years 2006-2008. It summaries the key operational issues specific to project holders highlighted in a recent study of Key learning of the Grants Scheme 2006-2008.

Operational Management/Issues

An analysis across programs revealed the following five key learnings and challenges for project holders, as reported by project teams:

Key Learnings

- Ensuring senior-level executive and institutional support for the project
- Having effective dissemination strategies in place at the outset which promote the embedding of findings and outcomes
- Ensuring effective and sustainable communication and collaboration within and external to the project team
- Systematic and carefully planned project management
- Continuous and critical reflection on the project progress and capacity for flexibility with regard to project management, activities and outcomes

Key Challenges

- Staff recruitment and staff turnover on the project team
- Ensuring project recognition, endorsement and uptake
- Dealing with unexpected costs and delays
- Managing ethics approvals
- Ensuring effective and continuous collaboration and communication with project partners

On a programmatic level some key learnings and challenges were highlighted more strongly program to program. In Priority Projects, the importance of stakeholder engagement and the 'know-how' of effective dissemination was repeatedly emphasized while the key learnings across Competitive Grants projects largely revolved around project management/planning and communication and collaboration.

Communication

Both more established projects and newer projects equally highlight the importance of effective communication not only within the project team and their own institution but also with partner institutions and reference groups.

Maintaining communication within and beyond the project team is critical and face-to-face meetings have proven to be the best method for joint construction of benchmarks and to allay fears of unhealthy competition between the universities in the project. Systems can minimise fragmentation of the project team over the course of the project as the frequency of meetings quite often drops at later stages while the activity at sub-group level increases. A number of project holders found that consistent communication and collaboration across (and sometimes within) institutions, whilst essential, is often difficult, especially during the end of semester, when workloads increase significantly.

For newly established projects, achieving the uptake and official recognition for the project can be difficult. Harnessing interest in the project and being inclusive is critical for its success: one project met this challenge by creating a 'national consultative group' and maintaining regular e-communication. In this regard, a 'National Consultative Workshop' was held in order to provide interested parties with the opportunity to contribute ideas and resources.

Collaboration

Collaboration is an important means for the development, sharing and adoption of best practice and principles, and for the dissemination and embedding of outcomes more broadly. The sector has taken up this challenge and many project teams have come together across institutions for the first time. There have been reports from those involved of the value in terms of personal and professional development of being part of a high profile activity.

Despite much of the positive reporting, difficulties arising from new partnerships in project implementation have been regularly reported by project leaders. It is important that all partners are represented on the project team and actively contribute to the project. In the context of changing university environments, with staff movement and workload constraints, collaboration between institutions is a significant challenge.

Collaboration is not easy. Even when projects try to address the issues in formal ways difficulties can arise:

'The simplest of collaborative contracts can result in legal issues at some institutions'

Project team experience highlights the need for well planned communication and coordination strategies, and ensuring realistic objectives and timeframes and very strong project management.

Key challenges faced by current project leaders include partner institutions withdrawing, less than expected level of participation by partner institutions, and unforeseen internal restructuring or work-load changes for team members. The ALTC requirement for written endorsement by project partners for all proposals submitted in 2008 aims to ensure high level support for partnership commitments.

Project Management

One of the recurrent themes amongst projects revolves around project management and, in particular, the systematic and detailed planning of project activities and processes. Above all this includes the need to clearly understand the scope of the project, identify and document explicit project objectives and deal with the finite timeline of implementation and evaluation of the work. Furthermore, there is a clear benefit to having a defined management structure, with a precise division of tasks. Even so, one project reported:



'While it's easy to set up schedules and team members' consent, it is harder to get the action to secure the desired outcomes.'

To achieve this level of planning requires that sufficient time is spent on developing a shared understanding and a consistent approach to the project, as it was found that project teams with a common purpose and strong personal commitment can effectively identify obstacles and overcome impediments. In this regard the value of having an effective and competent project manager cannot be underestimated.

In order to ensure the project is progressing towards the agreed outcomes, and planned activities and processes are still appropriate, there is a need to constantly and critically reflect on the project, to regularly monitor progress (including progress against the budget) and to respond to feedback both from inside and outside the project, so that objectives can be refined or timelines and milestones be rescheduled should the conditions require that.

Staffing

The issue of difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified staff, staff turnover, people changing roles and general availability of project team members appeared to be one of the striking challenges and was reported repeatedly by both more established and newer projects and in many cases very experienced project teams. One challenge resulting from non-availability of people, e.g. owing to teaching commitments or leave, is the difficulty of obtaining commitment to engage in activities and conduct face-to-face meetings. In the longer term this often leads to delays in the project.

Nearly a third of all projects reported the difficulty of dealing with staff turnover, withdrawal of project team members and absence of people owing to a variety of reasons such as study leave or teaching commitments. This is problematic in that it challenges the flow, momentum and rhythm of the projects. Too few projects recognise this risk in project planning or plan for the downtime for staff that is likely to occur.

The story of one project: 'Two original partner institutions have pulled out of the project and two new institutions' representatives have to work hard to catch up'.

Budgets & Finances

One recurrent challenge across projects was financial management. Logistical and cost demands can quite easily delay project activities and completion, e.g. the need to cover unexpected costs (conferences, travel, etc. but also emergent discoveries). Project teams have found it necessary to adjust the initial budget during the project's progress and monitor expenditure closely.

Linked to this is the occurrence of costs that were not accounted for in the original budget, e.g. for employing extra staff, significantly higher than estimated costs for forums and the like or to accommodate project extensions when the project is delayed. Requests to the ALTC for additional funding in these events are generally not supported.

Timeframes

Unexpected delays can slow the project's progress or necessitate changes to the initial planning. Delays in the commencement of projects was common, owing to administrative issues such as obtaining ethics approval (this was stressed by a number of projects, particularly regarding ethics approvals from partner institutions which often have very different processes), staff appointment, negotiating formative evaluation, Christmas and New Year closures, and the time taken for partner institutions to sign off on legal agreements regarding allocation of funding. Having a project manager to deal with these problems improved the process. Project holders also experienced delays due to project members' teaching loads and additional demands on their time. There is a need to ensure institutional support in both the practical issues and in recognising the project members' extra activities.



In terms of timelines, it was found that it is advisable for project teams to allow for a significant window between notification of the success of an application and project commencement to secure ethics approval, recruitment of project staff and to plan for time release of academics if they are to be involved. Realistic timeframes with some allowance for unforeseen delays is essential for projects completing within the scheduled period. Tight timeframes with no room for flexibility in the event of adjustments in activity schedules or unforeseen delays are likely to run into difficulties.

Ethics Approval

Obtaining ethics approval was constantly raised in relation to difficulties and delays. Ethics approval in some institutions appears to be a more difficult process than others. Many project holders commented that ethics committees do not understand learning and teaching projects. In some cases teams do not believe they need ethics approval other than to allow them to publish the results of the project as there are no issues of ethical sensitivity. In these cases the delay while waiting for ethics approval has been particularly frustrating.

Sourcing and building technical capacity

Almost all projects with high technical requirements such as integrating innovative technologies have encountered problems. For example one project was reliant on software which is now not available. In another project the technical expert required to undertake the work has moved on and it is proving difficult to replace that expertise. Engagement with technology will create more complex project management, though it seems many projects need to work with new technologies. Quite often the expertise required is not just technical, but along with the technical, a high level of disciplinary expertise is required.

Drawing upon the expertise developed in other projects may be a means of resolving technical hitches.

There is a developing expertise in the sector among those engaging with technological development for the purpose of learning and teaching. While project teams need to be alerted to consider the complexity and not over reach, the project teams are developing new skill sets that are essential to the future given rapid technological development. Delays will be inevitable when the skills are in short supply and this is likely to be an ongoing and frustrating part of these projects. The engagement in projects that are heavily dependent on new technologies are providing new learning and teaching resources, while also building capacity in the sector to work with new technologies for learning and teaching. With the rapid rate of technological development many of the resources developed will have a relatively finite life, whereas the capacity to engage in further development of technology to support teaching and learning will be more enduring.

Dissemination

Ensuring awareness of the outcomes of projects requires sophisticated project design and implementation strategies. Despite resources available to assist project holders, dissemination remains a challenge. Dissemination in the ALTC context often requires additional strategies to those that would traditionally be used in research.

Experience to date suggests that some project teams have been successful in disseminating outcomes utilising sophisticated broad based strategies. In other cases project teams have been equally successful through very narrow strategic networks in gaining the attraction and use of resources. In the latter case these networks can quickly identify new developments, understand the potential applications and distribute through their networks, as in the case of *PhysClips*.

Completed leadership projects in particular emphasised the importance of disseminating project findings, preferably in ways that promote the embedding of findings and outcomes as well as structural and strategic change. This necessitates not just appropriate infrastructure



but also mechanisms to ensure academic leaders continue to be informed about further developments in order to sustain and build on project outcomes.

One project team noted:

'It became evident to the team after attending the Carrick Assessment Forum that it is never too early to have a well developed plan to communicate and disseminate project results to your target group. Timing is critical when planning focus groups and surveys that require the involvement of students and staff at universities.'

Conclusion

A great deal has been learnt during the first three years of the Grants Scheme and the early signals of success for the programs are positive. Many challenges are being addressed during projects with many of these resulting from an attempt to move beyond resource production, identification of good practice and new understanding to effecting change in learning and teaching.

The ALTC contribution and approach to ensuring program and project success will focus on capacity building and providing the infrastructure and opportunity for project teams to share their work, challenges and solutions.

