

Managing and Planning Educational Development projects: a critical overview of the large classes project¹

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this article I provide a critical overview of the process followed in a project to identify, support and fund educational development projects in four South African Universities between 2008 and 2013. It draws on my experience as project director in managing the process as well as the data collected to identify and respond to key challenges experienced along the way. Based on this experience I provide recommendations to facilitate the use of central teaching development funding effectively.

2 CONTEXT

Since the political transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994, there has been a pressing need to redress the legacy of the racial and gender inequalities of apartheid, and to ensure that the benefits of higher education are equitably spread across all communities. Studies into the performance of the higher education system have highlighted significant challenges in terms of the racial skewness of participation and success rates. The patterns indicate that the system has not been working effectively for the majority of the students in higher education (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007)

Many academics attribute these problems in higher education to the legacy of apartheid and the deficiencies in the schooling system, and do not see it as the responsibility of those in higher education to correct for these. The need to improve schooling in South Africa is not in dispute. However, it is unlikely that the school sector will, for the foreseeable future, have the capacity to produce sufficiently well-prepared school-leavers to solve higher education's efficiency problems.

Those working in higher education need to address those factors affecting student learning that are within their control. These include institutional culture, material and affective support for students, and the undergraduate teaching-and-learning process itself. Several decades of experience in Academic Development (that is, equity-related educational development) in South African universities has shown that innovative approaches to the educational process, based on sound educational principles, can be effective in accommodating student diversity and enabling educationally disadvantaged students to succeed in high-quality degree programmes.

The importance of Academic Development (AD) work has been recognised in South African national policy and provides a basis for significant improvement in dealing with diversity, but such work has remained on the margins in most institutions. The project reported here sought to foster positive innovations in mainstream university programmes and among regular academic staff.

In 2008 the Andrew Mellon Foundation approved the funding of a project with the following aim:

To improve student performance in South African higher education by identifying, piloting and disseminating innovative educational strategies, and building the educational expertise necessary to develop and implement such strategies in mainstream higher education curricula.

¹ This article is a revised and edited version of Chapter 1: A critical overview of the large classes project in Jawitz, J & Perez, T, *Managing teaching development grants: Experiences from the large classes project*, 2014, UCT, Mellon Foundation, OpenUCT.

The proposal was based on the view that raising the level of educational expertise through systematic, research-based knowledge of the teaching-and-learning process – was a necessary condition for fostering innovative approaches in mainstream higher education that could succeed in significantly improving graduate output. Developing and implementing such an approach depended on a higher level of educational expertise than existed at that time among regular academic staff. This does not imply that all academics should become educational specialists, but rather that such expertise should be developed within academic departments and programme teams, collectively or in individuals with special educational interest and knowledge.

What is needed to help produce effective change in teaching in higher education are incentives for academics to engage in gaining expertise and in systematic educational development. Such incentives should include funding but also needs to involve recognition of educational expertise and development as academically valid and intellectually challenging pursuits.

There are many possible strategies and models for developing educational expertise and raising the status of teaching in higher education. The proposal to Mellon was informed by local experience, and research on professional development needs done in South Africa (D'Andrea et al 2002) and elsewhere. There are good arguments for national professional development mechanisms and structures in South Africa, including the coordination and accreditation of professional qualifications and nationally coordinated funding for institutional or regional projects.

The use of Government funding to promote change in teaching and learning in higher education institutions is a relatively new development in South Africa. In 2007 Scott et al. proposed the establishment of a '*national education innovation fund for higher education*' in South Africa to '*enable priority development initiatives to be designed and implemented across the system in a co-ordinated way*' (2007, p.71). The current project was an attempt to help learn what challenges and possibilities might arise from such an approach.

At the time of the approval of our funding in 2008, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was discussing establishing a national system of Teaching Development Grants (TDG). The ability of the higher education sector to use such resources productively was regarded as a matter of concern. In 2010, the DHET approved the TDGs and resulting in significant funding becoming available annually to institutions for 'teaching development'. Since then we have seen the roll out of the University Capacity Development Grants (UCDG) which is responsible for funding national projects such as TAU.

3 ESTABLISHING THE PROJECT

The Mellon Foundation provided CHED at UCT with funding for three years (2009-2011), subsequently extended for two more years, with the following objectives:

- To **support and sponsor**, or where appropriate, **initiate and manage**, educational development projects in mainstream undergraduate curricula, in selected universities, that will contribute to improving student throughput and graduation rates and increase educational expertise among the faculty involved,
- To contribute to the growth of mainstream higher education development by **identifying, testing** in practice and **stimulating debate** on educational strategies that can effectively address diversity of educational background in the student body,
- To contribute to raising the level and profile of educational expertise in the higher education sector by **publicising and disseminating** findings for peer review and debate

The Dean of CHED, Associate Professor Nan Yeld, appointed me as part-time Director of the project, reporting to a CHED management committee. The first challenge was to identify educational

development projects at a range of institutions that would have institutional ownership and long-term sustainability. The management committee helped identify four institutions of differing history, size and location to be considered (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1: Profile of participating institutions

Institutions	Location	Enrolment (DHET, 2013)	History	Institutional type
University of Cape Town (UCT)	Urban – Cape Town	25 301	Historically white ² English medium institution	University
University of Fort Hare (UFH)	Rural – Alice Urban – East London	11 144	English medium institution originally designated for black SA's of Xhosa descent	University
University of Johannesburg (UJ)	Urban – Gauteng	50 528	Merged institution – Afrikaans medium university (RAU) with a Technikon (TWR) and two campuses of Vista	Comprehensive University
University of the Western Cape (UWC)	Urban – Cape Town	18 764	Dual medium institution originally designated for persons classified coloured	University

Table 1.2: Projects and Team Members

Institution	Team members	Project
University of Johannesburg Business Management	Mohammad Kara (Lecturer) Dr Jenny Underhill (Tutor development co-ordinator) Theuns Oosthuizen (retired lecturer) [withdrew in 2011]	<u>Tutorial Development</u> Develop a tutorial system to support first year course: Intro to Business Management (3000-4000 students).
University of Cape Town Accounting	Dr Ilse Lubbe (Senior Lecturer) Shelly Herbert (Lecturer) Assoc Prof Tessa Minter (Deputy Dean) Sumaya West (Lecturer) [joined in 2011]	<u>Materials Development</u> Develop a set of DVD and workbook resources for use across three Accounting second year courses (approx. 800 students).
University of the Western Cape Personal & Family law	Lea Mwambene (Lecturer) Latiefa Albertus (Lecturer) Dr Sherran Clarence (Writing centre consultant)	<u>Writing Development</u> Integrating writing development and support into the curriculum in first year Personal and Family Law (approx. 600 students).
University of Fort Hare Personal & Family law	Jacques Mahler-Coetzee (Senior Lecturer) Donna Jane Marais (Lecturer) [resigned at end of 2011]	<u>Materials Development</u> Developing video material to support a case based approach to teaching first year Personal and Family Law (approx. 300 students).

Between October 2008 and June 2009 discussions were held inviting the leadership responsible for managing teaching and learning at each of these institutions to submit a proposal to fund an intervention to improve student learning. Only the UJ submitted a proposal focussing on addressing

² During Apartheid tertiary institutions were restricted to serving students from particular racial categories.

the challenge of teaching large classes. The inability of the remaining institutions to identify concrete project proposals over the following eight months was unexpected.

As Director I was hesitant to intervene as I regarded institutional self-definition of the problem and the possible solutions as key to institutional ownership and hence to the successful outcome of the project. Concerns about the impact of increasing student numbers and the consequent large classes had been raised in initial discussions at each of the four institutions. In a change of approach the management committee suggested inviting the remaining three institutions to each submit a proposal aimed at improving student learning in the context of large class teaching. The institutions responded to this immediately, with each institution identifying a project based in a particular department or faculty. From this point onwards the project became known as the Large Classes Project (LCP). By the end of 2009 the four project teams had been formed and had defined their projects (Table 1.2).

In 2009 an Advisory Board was created consisting of representatives from HEQC, HELTASA, and Teaching and Learning centres at some of the institutions not participating in the projects, to facilitate conversations and critical reflection about the progress of the project across a range of stakeholders.

3.1 UCT PROJECT

UCT's teaching innovation involved the integration of the outcomes of three Accounting related disciplines. It aimed to demonstrate to students the inter-relationship of these disciplines and to enhance student understanding of the principles of accounting, the business use of IT, and concepts of auditing. It exposed them to practical examples via simulation, and the use of a computerised accounting package. The intervention combined some of the outcomes of two second year courses Financial Reporting 2 and Controls of Financial Information Systems through the introduction of a common workbook and projects that covered teaching and learning outcomes in both courses using the same set of source documents based on practical, real life documentation and transactions (for e.g. invoices and bank statements).

The UCT team had several elements from the outset that strengthened its ability to achieve its goals. The team leader was an experienced Accounting lecturer who had invested several years in acquiring knowledge of teaching and learning both informally and through a postgraduate qualification. She formed a team of new and experienced lecturers across the second year courses and had the support of the whole Department of Accounting. The team also worked within a supportive climate that encouraged discussion and the sharing of experience in the Faculty of Commerce.

Their project sought to address the lack of experience of the business environment amongst the majority of accounting students. The department did not have the resources to take large numbers of student to visit business enterprises to see how the business process worked in practice. They therefore developed a set of videos, each with a supporting workbook for use across three-second year courses. In this way students were supported in understanding the financial processes in business and the connections between the three-second year courses.

They presented their project in progress on several occasions, including at the well-supported Commerce Education Group events, where they received positive support and acknowledgement from their colleagues.

The workbook and video resource materials have been lauded by both students and colleagues at UCT and within the profession and made a significant contribution to improving student engagement with the business environment and enhancing their experience across the three courses.

3.2 UFH PROJECT

The Law Faculty at UFH appointed a new lecturer to initiate a project to improve teaching of the large first year class. The lecturer teamed up with a more experienced colleague and designed a materials development project to enable a more active learning approach to be adopted in the classroom.

The University of Fort Hare (UFH) project team chose video role-play as a tool within the lecture to facilitate active learning. The UFH team applied their interventions to the Law of Persons and Family, a first-year undergraduate course with student enrolment usually exceeding 240.

The intervention involved the design and production of 2-minute filmed scenarios representing archetypal and real-life, topic specific, yet generic, sets of legal facts. Role-played by characters and in situations familiar to the student audience they raised genuine legal issues. The video role-play tool served as the central subject matter of class work for each topic. Working in small groups, students were required to perform tasks arising from the video. In so doing they were encouraged to apply their minds in the manner of an attorney advising his/her client on a set of reality-based facts and instructions which posed a legal problem.

Members of the project team worked on their own with little engagement with colleagues in the department, except through presentations of the work in the later stages of the project. The initiator of the project resigned two years later leaving her colleague to complete the materials and test them in the classroom on his own. The student feedback praised the impact of the video materials on their enjoyment and understanding of the lectures. There is evidence that student performance in assessment on topics where the video tools were used was slightly better than for topics which only used the text-based approach.

3.3 UJ PROJECT

Introduction to Business Management (OMBIA01) was a first-year course with about 4000 registrations offered to a range of degree students (BSc, BCom and BA) at the Auckland Park campus at UJ. Students attended one 2-hour lecture a week repeated 6 times to some 650 students a time, five times in English and once in Afrikaans. The weekly lecture was supported by an online resource. There was also a hot seat used by a small proportion of the class.

The course pass rate varied from year to year and was about 85% in 2009 with most of the students' results in the 50-60% range. The course convenor wanted to explore the development of a tutorial system to support students who were likely to be at risk of failing. He chose students who had not done Business Studies at school as his target group.

The course convenor was an energetic and enthusiastic lecturer and, at the time the project started, a newcomer to teaching. He felt that the students, particularly those with no previous experience or knowledge of Business Studies, needed more than the one two-hour lecture slot a week allocated to the course. His goal was to establish a tutorial system to support these students.

He teamed up with the academic development practitioner responsible for tutor training. Together they went through several cycles of attempting to establish appropriate tutorial systems for this course. However, they mainly worked alone and struggled to build support for this work amongst the colleagues in the department. The project remained dependent on this single lecturer.

They were not successful in achieving their goal but they developed an effective system of tutor training as well as training materials. They also developed a model of co-operation between the

academic development unit and the disciplinary department that has been used in supporting tutorial programmes with other departments at UJ.

3.4 UWC PROJECT

The UWC programme was designed to develop students' writing skills in order to improve their academic achievements in the Faculty of Law. It targeted first year undergraduate students registered for the Law of Persons, Introduction to Legal Studies and Family Law modules at UWC. These modules attracted large student numbers (more than 600 in 2010). Lecturers had little time to attend to individual needs in class or to comment on students' longer essays. The unusually high failure rate among students registered for these modules had been partly attributed to the size of the class and students' poor English writing skills. The project used a variety of interventions, including graduate assistants supporting the writing process, a specialist from the writing centre, and a series of writing assignments and exercises.

The Faculty of Law at UWC assigned a new lecturer to address the poor writing skills of the first-year law students. She linked up with a colleague who was also new at lecturing and after initially working on their own they invited a member of the Writing Centre at UWC to join the team. The team went about finding ways to integrate writing development activities into the first-year curriculum through the use of trained Graduate Lecturing Assistants (GLAs). Two additional departmental GLAs were funded by the project to increase capacity for providing writing support. As the project developed, the role of providing writing support was extended to all GLAs with a subsequent change in training. The Dean agreed to fund the additional GLAs as well as the training to ensure the sustainability of the project beyond the Mellon funding.

Efforts made to monitor changes in student performance reflected limited improvements. The experience of the project team was shared extensively with colleagues in the Faculty of Law and formed the basis of discussions on how to integrate student writing development across the first-year curriculum. The project enabled a culture of writing skills development to become embedded into the teaching of first year law students at UWC.

4 RECURRING THEMES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

Between 2010 and 2012 data was collected for use in reflecting on the efforts of this project to facilitate change in higher education. This included project documents and reports, a report commissioned by external evaluation consultant Angela Schaffer-Smith, interviews conducted in 2011 with all project team members, and an email survey of individuals in management who had knowledge or oversight of the project at an institutional level. The process of analysing the data involved searching for lessons for managing future educational development projects of this kind.

While the institutions chosen for the case studies represented different higher education contexts, the experience of working with them revealed that they had much in common:

- **At the Structural Level:**

All except one institution, UCT, had a DVC responsible for Teaching and Learning in place at the time the projects were initiated. Each institution had an educational development centre with resources and in the case of UWC and UJ, consultants from these centres were brought into the project teams. Each institution had a web-based learning support platform although this was only explicitly used by the UJ team and, to a limited extent, by the UCT team.

- **At the Cultural Level:**

While the dominant view across each of the institutions supported the need to improve the quality of teaching in higher education, and the pass rates, members of the teams found it difficult to articulate an explicit theory of change to achieve these goals. There was a lack of familiarity with the language related to social change processes. Across all four institutions there was a commonly held view that large classes were an inevitable part of the higher education environment.

- **At the Level of Individual Agency:**

The project team members displayed a strong commitment to improving their own teaching and impacting on educational practice at the departmental or institutional level. They were keen to gain experience through the project and build their personal capacity to design and implement effective education initiatives. However, all were concerned about their career trajectories and how their involvement in this project might impact on their research output.

4.1 ESTABLISHING OWNERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY

My primary concern was to establish projects with the ownership and responsibility firmly located within the participating institutions. A Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) was developed as a structural device to help achieve this. This document spelled out areas of responsibility and the ways in which each institution would ensure the availability of support for project participants, of financial systems for accountability, and of on-going funding and management of successful initiatives. Each institution was encouraged to establish its own modus operandi.

Each MoA was signed by either the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), the Dean of a Faculty or Director of a Teaching and Learning Centre. The initiating leadership at each institution selected the faculty or department to be involved, which then defined the scope of the project and developed mechanisms for monitoring its progress.

The results of a survey of the leaders involved in the early formulation of the project conducted in September 2011, suggest that the initial leadership group provided little sustained oversight of the project. In one case the original leaders were no longer at the institution, pointing to the issue of continuity at the senior management level in higher education.

The four leaders who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they had only been 'peripherally' involved or 'were not much help'. Three commented that while they were aware of the projects, they were unable to comment and referred the researcher to people who they felt had been more involved.

It would appear that after signing the MoA, senior leadership had not been able to keep track of the progress of the projects, so the institutional ownership was relatively weakly held. In fact, the institutional ownership of projects was seen to be located at a different level in each case study, i.e.

- at the departmental level (UCT, UWC)
- at the level of project team participants and individual senior level 'champions' (UJ)
- at the level of individual project team members alone (UFH).

The MoA alone was not a sufficient device to ensure the appropriate level of institutional ownership and oversight. While it was accepted and signed by all parties, it did not play a part in guiding the projects as they unfolded. A substantive recommendation arising out of this project is that the location of ownership and responsibility within participating institutions needs to be clarified and agreed to early on in the project, and mechanisms need to be put in place to monitor that the undertakings made in this regard are adhered to.

4.2 CONSTITUTING THE PROJECT TEAM

An assumption at the start of the project was that institutions would identify staff with sufficient experience and expertise in teaching to be able to develop and implement solutions to the challenges that they had identified. This only happened in the case of UCT where the project leader had many years of teaching experience and had completed a Masters in Higher Education Studies. She chose to constitute her team by drawing on a mixture of new and experienced lecturers.

In general, the appointment of new lecturers with little experience of teaching or educational development work to lead the project teams, posed a significant challenge. They had a limited set of skills to draw on in designing their projects. Furthermore, junior staff members had little or no capacity to influence mainstream policy and practice on their own.

In some cases, recognising their own limitations, these appointees took the initiative to broaden the experience and skill set of the project team. For example, at UJ, the appointed lecturer brought on board an academic development practitioner in the tutor development unit.

[H]e approached the unit... and... we decided that I would be the most appropriate person... because a lot of my research has been around staff development, and building relationships with faculty...and mentoring individuals in tutor development.

At UWC the newly appointed lecturer nominated by her department to lead the project invited an equally inexperienced colleague to join her. The colleague she invited commented that, '*I thought I was just going to be helping her, but I ended up co-ordinating [the project].*'

In a second approach, as project director, I intervened by suggesting that colleagues with particularly useful expertise be invited to join the team:

Our deputy Dean was going to be the project member but he was too busy at that stage and he nominated me. ... I was new to teaching at that stage, I'd only been teaching for a few months....so [Jeff] suggested that I have a partner and I recommended Jacques... he's been teaching longer than I had. He gave me a lot of ideas and collaboration with him was very useful and very positive.

In helping the teams expand their resource base I facilitated their engagement with appropriate expertise. In one case I contacted the Writing Centre of the institution to see if they could support the lecturers involved in the project.

Jeff phoned me and said... They want to do writing... they don't really know what's possible... Please can you get involved....I was looking for a way to work with staff around writing development so it was ideal, it was like being handed a door, open.

The predominance of new lecturers in this project was a result of both structural and cultural aspects of the higher education system. With a few exceptions it is mainly younger academic staff members who are assigned to teach large undergraduate classes. Moreover, senior staff members are often too involved with their research projects to be able to, or want to, invest time in teaching development projects. Higher education institutions tend to value the outputs from research projects more than the outputs from engagement in teaching development. Hence most educational development project teams lack the necessary skills and expertise in teaching to be able to design, implement and evaluate their projects. As a result, a large investment in developing this educational development capacity needs to be built into the project design to give the projects a chance to succeed.

Institutions need to show a commitment to supporting colleagues in their efforts to improve their educational expertise. In order to qualify for teaching development funding of this kind it is recommended that colleagues with the necessary educational expertise are assigned, and incentivised, to lead such projects. Where such expertise is not available the necessary steps need to

be taken to support the development of such expertise. Applications for funding should require that information about the provision and development of relevant expertise is included.

4.3 BUILDING CAPACITY

From the outset one of the project aims was to build *'educational expertise and capacity [as] a necessary condition for fostering approaches in mainstream higher education that can significantly improve student performance.'* Given the relative lack of educational development experience of the project participants, a substantial part of my time was invested in capacity building.

At the beginning of the project participants were invited to identify those areas of work in the project where they felt that they might need support and a series of workshops to help build the necessary expertise was put in place (Table 1.3). Project team members from the participating institutions met two to three times a year to share their progress reports, to build a community of educational development practitioners and to participate in this programme of capacity building workshops.

It is recommended that development grant operations incorporate structures that are able to support a strong capacity building dimension in these areas. Workshops of the kind listed above should form a crucial part of the development process in relation to the projects being implemented. Furthermore given that the pool of academic staff in South Africa with expertise in areas such as educational development project design and evaluation is extremely small, consideration must be given to adopting a national approach to supporting such staff development initiatives.

Table 1.3: Capacity Building Workshops

Workshop Date	Areas covered in Workshop
29th July 2009	Designing a project Experience of teaching large classes across the four case studies Exploring areas for interventions
10 September 2009	Finalising the project proposals
30 November 2009	Using educational technology with large classes Thinking about writing development in large classes
12 March 2010	Developing monitoring and evaluation systems
30 July 2010	Thinking about researching large class teaching
1 Nov 2010	Preparing reports and budgets Revisiting use of educational technology to support large class teaching
25 March 2011	Strengthening the research and evaluation aspects of the project
31 July - 1 Aug 2011	Project evaluation Using Audio-visual material in the classroom

4.4 DOING EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: *BIG R* VERSUS *LITTLE r*

One particularly important area for capacity building was in educational research and evaluation. One of the assumptions of the project was that it would provide opportunities for participants to engage in research on their project and hence to be able to fulfil their research output requirements, while at the same time engaging with teaching development and carrying out evaluation research to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention.

However, except for the participant who had completed a Masters in Higher Education and one other who had a teaching background and was familiar with action research, participants had very little conceptual and practical understanding of how to undertake education research or evaluation.

There is a tendency within higher education to represent low-level evaluation exercises as 'research', particularly modelled on the first cycle of an action research project. This was referred to as 'little r' research in one of the project workshops. However, the concept of the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education has grown substantially during the past 20 years, drawing on significant theoretical tools from a range of disciplines. Given the limited time frame, it was not possible to help participants take on board a sufficient number of these tools to engage in 'Big R' research.

I expressed my concern that focussing only on the 'little r' research would make it difficult for team participants to meet their research output requirements. This concern created tension with at least one of the project participants:

[S]ome of the questioning that came from Jeff originally, was, this is too simple to actually be research, but it's not really, it's an action research model... and it is very valid in that sense, ...While I understand that his interest is in the big R ... I felt that I needed to say 'this is what we planned to do and we're doing this ... If you are trying to make us stretch beyond that, that's not what we originally planned. We need to do this and stick with what we're doing and do it well and finish it before we can then move on'.

Despite these concerns, participants in the project teams made progress in writing up and presenting their projects at various educational conferences and symposia. In three cases they attempted to do the write up within a research frame and drew on those team members with access to the educational research discourse.

As most academics are not familiar with educational research, it is recommended that where academics engage in educational development initiatives, support be provided to allow them to develop effective research processes necessary to achieve the desired outcomes of the projects.

4.5 EVALUATING EFFECTIVENESS

Despite the need to design an effective system of evaluation being highlighted at the start of the project, teams struggled to develop a coherent and consistent evaluative strategy. Several workshops were held to help strengthen the evaluation expertise and some teams contracted in an external evaluation researcher, with limited success.

I contracted an external educational evaluator, Angela Schaffer, to help build capacity by:

- attending an Advisory Board meeting and listening to project team presentations of their 2010 project reports
- giving written feedback on strengthening the evaluation of the 2010 project reports
- providing detailed feedback in 2013 on how to strengthen evaluation of the final reports.

In the end each team was left to produce an evaluation report of their project. A different approach might have been preferable, namely to have established a central evaluation team that provided a framework for all projects to follow. However, such an approach might have dampened the individual agency reflected in the sense of team ownership, enthusiasm and creativity, due to the fact that each team was allowed to follow their own approach.

On balance, project funding of this kind would benefit from a central evaluation framework that is negotiated with each team at the start of the project and is supported by a central project management process.

One aspect of project effectiveness that the project teams in general were unable to track was the notion of student success. The UWC and UFH projects reported on how they attempted to link student performance with the project outcomes; both made a qualified claim that the interventions had a positive impact on student performance. In the case of UCT and UJ projects no such claims were made. It needs to be recognised that small and limited interventions such as the ones undertaken in these case studies, on their own, are unlikely to have significant impact on student success.

4.6 SETTING A PROJECT TIMEFRAME

The project timeframe is a key factor in evaluating the effectiveness of a project. Time enables aspects of change, or lack of change, to become visible. How much time should one allow for projects such as the ones undertaken here? When would it be realistic to look back and hope to be able to assess what kind of change has been accomplished, if any? We need time frames that allow the assessment of long-term effects and sustainability. In this case the project timeline was extended to 5 years to give sufficient space for developments to be better understood.

- **Year 1** (Sep 2008 – Sep 2009) Identify case studies & form project teams
- **Year 2 – 3** (Sep 2009 – Sep 2011) Work with case studies
- **Year 4 – 5** (Sep 2011 - Sep 2013) Evaluate and write up study

The time frame also has implications for participant and management continuity. Ideally project teams should be committed for the duration of the project. However, the longer the time frame, the greater the risk to participant continuity. During the five years of the project the following occurred:

- The resignation of 2 key management figures who had provided significant support for the project (UFH)
- A project team member resigned (UFH)
- New team members were brought into the project (UCT)
- A researcher's contract was terminated and a new researcher appointed (UWC)
- The second researcher resigned after less than one year on the job (UWC)
- Four team members went on maternity leave during the course of the project. (UCT and UWC)

A serious element of any project design is how much time is needed to be able to achieve the project's goals. Many educational development projects are written up and evaluated within one or two years. However, extending the timeline adds to the levels of instability, given the difficulty in sustaining the core team and the accompanying experience and expertise that has built up. On balance, it is recommended that a three to four-year time frame is needed to assess the effectiveness of interventions of the type used in the LCP.

4.7 PROVIDING A SUPPORT NETWORK

My efforts to build a community of educational development practitioners working together and supporting each other was commented on by one team member as follows:

... this notion of community of practice and the support that it provides to the individuals when they go into their own institutions. I think Jeff has been a very gentleman-like facilitator... obviously he's had his own idea of why he's doing this, and he's manipulated us towards those things... nevertheless, I think it's been a very, very subtle, very nice, soft touch kind of facilitation...

Oh! The sense of community! The idea that... I'm not alone ... When you're fighting the battle with the Dean you can say, 'I have ten other people sitting in a room in UCT, led by a national project, who say this? So it's not just me saying this, so please,

pay attention.' There's a lot of great things, subtle but important that come out of this.

A key objective of the community building approach was to facilitate the sharing of ideas and practices amongst the four project teams. Participants commented repeatedly on the value of getting together to learn from each other. The two projects in Law have taken steps to share not only the learning, but the actual products and outcomes of the projects across the two institutions. The project also helped to draw participants into the broader educational development community by encouraging teams to present their projects at the annual HELTASA conference.

The explicit incorporation of community building strategies to enable project teams to share experiences and learn from each other should form a central part of the support system for education development project teams.

4.8 USING FUNDING

One of the assumptions behind development projects of this kind is that providing limited funding enables institutions to try interventions to address recognised challenges and provides a breathing space for institutional budget restructuring to sustain the intervention if it is found to be worth continuing.

The project has provided the funding for a set of interventions that would not otherwise have happened. The money was used for three main areas of expenditure at the project level:

- Time for materials and project development (producing the video and workbooks)
- Additional staffing costs (Graduate lecturer assistants, tutors)
- Tools and materials (video camera, computer, workbooks)
- Research and evaluation costs (researcher).

The notion of paying for time spent on the project turned out to be a controversial one. Initially it was proposed that project members request money to pay for a replacement teacher for a limited period to give them time to spend on materials development. However, most of the participants did not want to stop teaching and preferred to undertake the development work on top of their normal duties and be compensated for the time spent on materials development from the funds available. This arrangement was finally approved provided this was allowed in terms of institutional practice.

It is suggested that, where possible, alternatives be considered to buying out teaching time to enable academics to develop courses and materials. The most enthusiastic, committed and experienced educators are the ones that need to be included in educational development projects and usually they are the ones who will not agree to hand over the teaching of their courses as part of the process.

4.9 FACILITATING SUSTAINABILITY

A crucial aim of this initiative has been to develop and implement projects that, if found to add value, are sustainable beyond the initial years of seed funding. There was mixed success in this regard. Both UCT and UWC developed initiatives that are sustainable and for which the host departments and faculties undertook to provide necessary funding in future. At UCT this funding involves the annual updating and printing of workbooks, while at UWC it involves the salaries of two additional Graduate Lecturing Assistants and annual training of all GLAs in writing development.

The UFH project developed a set of video resources that, although not covering the full syllabus, facilitate active learning in the classroom. It is unclear how these resources will be further developed, although there have been discussions about sharing these resources with colleagues at UWC.

The UJ project was unable to achieve its goal of establishing a sustainable system of tutorials for the first-year course. However, a model of effective tutor training has been developed as well as a set of training materials for use with other tutor development initiatives.

Ensuring sustainability has two key dimensions, namely institutional ownership and monitoring and financial planning by the institutional leadership supporting the project. It is suggested that a system of regular feedback to the institutional leadership on the progress with the project be built into the project design.

5 DISSEMINATION

The dissemination of project experience has been ongoing throughout the five years at different levels. Firstly, each project presented seminars and reports to their colleagues within their own faculty on a regular basis. Secondly each project also presented a work in progress or a report on the findings of the project at their institutional teaching and learning conference or symposium.

At the national level each project was encouraged to present at least once at the annual HELTASA conference where colleagues from the educational development community were kept up to date with progress and were able to give feedback.

A second national dissemination strategy was the hosting of the National Symposium on Managing Teaching Development Grants: Experiences from the large classes project attended by representatives from all public higher education institutions in South Africa as well as members from the DHET TDG implementation team. The final element of the project dissemination was the distribution of a written report arising out of this symposium.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mellon funded CHED Large Classes Project was established to investigate ways of using teaching development funding effectively to initiate and support projects aimed at improving student learning in higher education in South Africa. The project facilitated the design and implementation of educational development interventions at four institutional contexts. These interventions aimed to improve student success and increase educational expertise amongst the academic staff involved in large class teaching.

The four Large Classes Projects provide a set of case studies that are significantly different in their outcomes. In two cases the project teams at UWC and UJ brought on board local educational development expertise from the writing centre and the tutor development units respectively, who brought with them a theorised understanding of education development.

The projects in UWC and UCT involved broad collective engagement with colleagues in the respective disciplinary departments, Law and Accounting. Regular discussions with colleagues meant that a sense of ownership developed in these departments rather than remaining solely with members of the project team. In these two cases the projects went ahead as planned with three cycles of implementation and improvement and to some extent became integrated into departmental practice.

In contrast the projects at UJ and UFH were less successful in developing sustainable interventions. In both cases, however, significant progress was made in developing resources, tutor development resources in the case of UJ and classroom video teaching materials in the case of UFH. While it was unclear whether the interventions were likely to continue once the project funding stopped, these resources remained as support for ongoing teaching and the experience of developing them as potential input into future projects.

From the perspective of using teaching development grants as a mechanism for bringing about change in educational practice in higher education, there are several lessons that can be learnt from this project. The lessons are summarised in the following set of recommendations:

- Ownership and accountability need to reside within participating institutions and mechanisms need to be in place to monitor that undertakings made in this regard are adhered to. Regular feedback to the institutional leadership on the progress with the project should be built into the project design.
- To qualify for teaching development grants, institutions need to assign and incentivise colleagues with the necessary educational expertise to lead funded projects;
- Institutions need to show a commitment to supporting colleagues in their efforts to improve their educational expertise. Capacity building workshops should form a central aspect of the development process in relation to the projects being implemented.
- Support should be provided to help project team members to engage with the concept of educational research in ways that support the processes and outcomes of the projects.
- Teaching development funding of this kind would benefit from a centralised educational project evaluation framework that is negotiated at the start of the project with each team.
- Teaching development grant operations should incorporate structures that support a strong capacity building in evaluation of educational development projects.
- A project time frame of at least three to four years is needed to assess project effectiveness and sustainability.
- Project support needs to be provided through the incorporation of community building strategies to enable project teams to share experiences and learn from each other.
- Funding criteria needs to include alternatives to buying out teaching time to enable academics to spend time on materials or course development.

7 REFERENCES

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