



VC-NET

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Encouraging integration

In the last issue we referred to a recent change in Hong Kong in which the University Grants Committee had decided to take a more active approach to directing and steering the eight university institutions under its control. This early statement of intent has now been followed up by a document describing how the UGC would like its institutions to further integrate and collaborate.

"Integration Matters" is a report from an institutional integration working party which stops short of recommending any mergers but pushes hard for 'deep collaboration' between institutions. Drawing on international experience, the report identifies a range of models for bringing institutions together ranged along the spectrum from loose affiliation to merger. It defines 'deep collaboration' as being a co-operative arrangement that is cast in a legal form, entails each party surrendering some independence, provides cost savings to each party, but requires some stand-alone financing to be successful. The UGC is particularly keen on deep collaboration and the report is suggesting that each institution is invited to consider and identify opportunities for it. Although there are not many examples yet of voluntary collaboration between institutions, the UGC's Areas of Excellence scheme dating from 1998, shows how the promise of generous external funding can drive close collaboration. Some HKD 320 million of central support has fuelled eight cross-institutional consortia of academic subject specialists all aiming to achieve world class status. Following the success of this model, the UGC has set aside HKD 203 million to encourage the working party's proposals for restructuring and deep collaboration.

The policy question is how governments can best encourage or persuade their universities to collaborate. How much can be achieved by the gentle method of encouragement and propaganda? When does compulsion become necessary (as in South Africa or Australia)? In England, the Funding Council has just closed its Restructuring and Collaboration Fund which had supported over 170 different projects; some were outright mergers, some were academic restructuring and a few might fit the definition of 'deep collaboration'. Examples of the latter were rare however, and even in fields such as information and library services where joint working is common, seriously deep collaboration usually fails because of the loss of independence and local 'political' factors. This was extensively researched in a UK study in 2001 on the barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries. The English Funding Council has not given up however and in 2003 launched a new Strategic Development Fund that can provide significant support to collaborative projects that submit acceptable business plans.

Sources: "Integration Matters: a report of the institutional integration working party of the University Grants Committee". Available on the Hong Kong UGC website at www.ugc.edu.hk/ HEFCE Strategic Development Fund details are at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubns under reference 2003/28. "Barriers to resource sharing among higher education libraries" is published on the Research Support Libraries Programme web site at www.rslp.ac.uk

Evaluating a higher education system

The South African Council of Higher Education is a buffer body with a difference; one of its statutory roles is to monitor and evaluate the performance of higher education in achieving the goals that the State has set for it. It is in a position to do this because, unlike many other buffer bodies, it has no direct financial or management relationship with institutions (apart from quality assurance) and is principally an advisory and policy body. The CHE has just set out a framework for carrying out this monitoring and evaluation function.

The framework describes a System that the CHE has set up to develop relevant indicators and to conduct research on the less quantifiable areas of change sought by the transformation objectives of national policy. The laudable aim is that any monitoring will “build progressively on existing data, capacities and experiences” and not burden institutions with new requirements for information. The details of the system are explained in the Framework and are clearly linked to the policy goals set by the White Paper. The way they will be collected and disseminated is intended to provide information for institutions and those in the sector as well as government.

The CHE has already launched two publications, “The State of South African Higher Education” and a series called the “Higher Education Monitor”, which will provide baseline information and be used to disseminate the findings of the evaluation. Buffer bodies often have an uneasy relationship with the Ministries of Education they serve and it will be very interesting to see how any critical and objective evaluations that the CHE produces are welcomed and acted upon by national policy makers.

Source: “Towards a framework for the monitoring and evaluation of South African higher education”. Available at www.che.ac.za/documents/d000056/index.php

Growth in Funding for English institutions

The English Funding Council has just announced its latest round of financial allocations to the 131 Higher Education institutions and 164 Further Education colleges it supports. The total is a 9 percent increase on the previous year, but what is more striking is the cumulative effect since 1998/99 of the gradual increases each year.

Between 1998/99 and 2004/05 HEFCE’s grants to institutions will have increased by 70 per cent from GBP 3.53 billion to GBP 5.99 billion; the increases have come after a four year period of static funding at around GBP 3.5 billion between 1995/96 and 1998/99. In the years to 2002/03, FTE numbers for home and EC students have increased by only 4 percent, so that the grants do represent a worthwhile increase per capita.

Within the total grants the sums used for ‘top slicing’ and special policy related funding have surprisingly remained constant over the period at between GBP 450 and GBP 500 million. This has helped to reduce the criticism of the growing number of special funding pockets, each of which had to be bid for; many of these are now allocated formulaically, as is most of the capital funding.

In deciding how to allocate the total research funding of GBP1.08 billion, the HEFCE has implemented the recommendations of its last review of research funding. There is an extra classification for “best rated Five Star departments”, which now receive supplementary funding, which consumes almost all the overall increase on last year of 3.9 percent. To finance this all departments which earned a rating of 3a in the 2001 research assessment exercise now receive no extra funding. Research funding is becoming more focussed and 29 per cent of all HEFCE’s research funding goes to the leading four universities. These four (Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial College and University College London) and five specialist institutions (LSE, London Business School, Institute of Cancer Research, Institute of Education and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) receive more funding from HEFCE for research than they do for teaching.

Sources: HEFCE "Recurrent grants for 2004-05", Publication 2004/12 on www.hefce.ac.uk/pubns/ HEFCE Annual Reports 1998-99 and 2002-03.

The editor, Svava Bjarnason, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

