

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs)

Summary of consultation responses

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Background

1. In July 2003 the consultation on Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning was published (HEFCE 2003/36). This document invited comment on our proposals for developing 'Centres of Teaching Excellence' as they were referred to in the Government's White Paper on higher education.

2. Consultation took two forms: respondents were invited to send comments using the framework of consultation questions summarised at Annex A of the document; and consultation seminars were held in September to inform discussion on the CETL initiative among representatives of institutions and other interested bodies.

3. Three seminars were held, one in Leeds on 10 September and two in London on 17 September. Feedback from these seminars is summarised in a separate paper available on the HEFCE web-site (www.hefce.ac.uk) under Learning and teaching/CETLs.

4. The deadline for consultation responses was 24 October 2003. This document summarises the responses received.

Overview

5. The majority of responses broadly supported the main proposals, though most also voiced some reservations on certain aspects. Most respondents chose to use the framework of questions in Annex A.

6. The consultation process will considerably assist our further work on the CETL initiative. A number of aspects requiring further consideration have emerged. We will seek to elaborate upon and clarify these as appropriate in the invitation to bid. The key points are:

- whether the 'commended for excellence' designation is useful and would inform student choice
- clarification of CETL links with the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF)
- guidance on collaborative bids and inter-CETL collaboration
- guidance to institutions at the bidding stages on the role of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), the Subject Centres and the HE Academy
- clarity of criteria for assessment and the nature of supporting evidence.

Responses to individual consultation questions

7. For each consultation question, we give the number of responses, followed by a summary of the views expressed. For the purpose of this summary, the 'comments' count includes responses where no clear yes/no answer was offered. Where yes/no answers were accompanied by comments, these have been counted once only, as yes/no as appropriate. The summaries include anonymised quotations, chosen to reflect the range of responses.

Question A: Do you agree with the proposed aims and objectives of the initiative?

118 responses: 83 agreed; 11 disagreed; 24 offered comments

8. Respondents were generally in favour of the proposed aims and objectives, though many offered caveats.

'This college is in broad agreement with the aims to reward excellent teaching practice and invest in the dissemination of such good practice to other institutions.'
(FE college)

'The university fully supports HEFCE's proposed aims and objectives, which should raise the profile of learning and teaching through promoting and rewarding excellent learning outcomes.'
(University)

9. Few responses were negative about the whole initiative. Negative comments mainly focused on the perceived impact which a relatively small number of CETLs would have on the sector as a whole. A small number were critical of the initiative itself.

'We are concerned about the trend towards narrowing and specialisation that this initiative represents and we believe that it risks damage to the sector.'
(University)

'Like the millennium dome, this is an off-the-cuff idea which has become solid through political will rather than any good reason, and the taxpayer will pay the price with no benefit.'
(Individual)

10. Broad support for the aims and objectives was tempered for some by a questioning of the relationship of CETLs to other initiatives supporting enhancement of teaching and learning. In particular, a common concern was the link between CETLs and the institutional strand of the TQEF.

'We are concerned that this new funding initiative does not lead to the withdrawal of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, which has supported the development of high quality innovative teaching practices across the sector.'
(University)

11. Another area for critical comment was the relationship between 'rewarding excellence' and 'developing practice'.

'... however an argument could be made that greater emphasis should be placed on the development and enhancement strand in the assessment of bids, if the CETLs are to be placed at the forefront of future enhancement activity.'

(University)

'The general idea behind the initiative is to be welcomed as it places teaching and learning quality on the same level as research by rewarding success with funding.'

(HE college)

12. The above responses represent the spectrum of views on whether the CETLs should favour reward *and* enhancement. Most responses favoured putting the emphasis on development rather than reward.

'We believe that the focus of this initiative should be on development, collaboration and dissemination.'

(Organisation)

Question B: This proposal allows an institution flexibility to identify an area of excellence that is appropriate to its institutional mission and student needs and that can cut across departmental divides. Do you agree with this approach?

119 responses: 100 agreed; 5 disagreed; 14 offered comments

13. Almost all respondents reacted favourably to the proposal that institutions should be given flexibility to define a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to reflect particular institutional missions and objectives. There was a clear welcome for the encouragement to think outside traditional departmental and subject boundaries.

'The university supports this approach and in particular the emphasis it places on activities that cut across departmental divides. Subjects are well served by the LTSN subject centres, and it will be important to ensure that CETLs provide significant added value to teaching and learning activities and do not dilute the work of the LTSN or provide scarce funds to those areas which are already well served.'

(University)

14. The flexibility to allow bids to set out (and support with appropriate evidence) their own definitions of excellence was also welcomed, though some respondents challenged us to move even further in this direction.

'... the proposal to allow institutions the flexibility to define excellence in terms of their own practice is welcomed and we regard it as preferable to the imposition of a predetermined model.'

(FE college)

'... there should be greater flexibility in the criteria and more model descriptions to encourage collaborative bids.'

(Organisation)

15. Questions were raised regarding the rules for, and preference accorded to, collaborative bids. Since no question specifically covered collaboration, comments about this issue came through generally from responses.

'Further indication of HEFCE's attitude to collaborative proposals would be helpful – would these be particularly favoured, as in other recent initiatives? There also remains some confusion about the number of collaborative bids which any HEI may enter.'

(HE college)

16. Few respondents had concerns about the potential variety of CETL foci implied by the emphasis on flexibility, though one argued that sector-wide initiatives on a particular theme would not be as effective as a series of local innovations.

'... in respect of development, the creation of sector-wide Centres for Excellence may not sit well with many areas of learning and teaching activity where effective development and implementation has been characterised by local ownership of practice.'

(Organisation)

Question C: Do you agree with how we have defined the purpose of CETL funding?

117 responses: 74 agreed; 18 disagreed; 25 offered comments

17. A majority of respondents expressed concern about the direct financial reward of teaching staff linked to a CETL, with many feeling that such payments could be divisive. However, a few welcomed the opportunity, if it were tied in to an institution's human resources strategy.

'In a competitive model with limited opportunities for staff and departments to participate in CETL work, the vast majority of staff – very many of whom will be excellent and effective teachers – will have no opportunity to share in such rewards. The purposes of CETL funding should focus on development, sharing and embedding of effective practice; and on building capacity in the sector and building an evidence base – in collaboration with the HE Academy – for effective learning and teaching practice.'

(Organisation)

'The idea of "reward" attached to particular staff raises concerns in a strong collegiate community ... not unlike those relating to research rewards and to enterprise projects. We would want to use the CETL funding to enhance what we recognise as the distinctive learning experience of [our] students, which should be seen to reward the whole-college achievement.'

(HE college)

'We would agree with the principle of recognising and rewarding excellent, exceptional or outstanding practice beyond the standard criteria for promotion as part of an institution's HR strategy.'

(University)

18. Others were unhappy because they felt that the consultation expected too low a percentage of funding to be spent by each CETL on dissemination and practice-sharing activities.

'To restrict dissemination to a maximum of 20 per cent of the funding appears to be restrictive, especially where this is sharing practice within the institution.'

(Organisation)

Question D: We have proposed complementary roles for CETLs and the HE Academy (including LTSN Subject Centres), so that CETLs focus on development, delivery and dissemination strategies, and the HE Academy on dissemination practice, but with the expectation of strong links between them. Do you agree with this approach?

115 responses: 67 agreed; 5 disagreed; 43 offered comments

19. Overall, most respondents were unwilling to answer this question without greater knowledge of the workings of both the CETLs and the HE Academy.

'... more information is needed on how the CETLs will interact with the LTSNs and the Academy.'

(University)

'... welcome clarification of the role of LTSNs in making/selecting bids ...'

(University)

' perhaps it should be a requirement that all second-stage bids should involve discussions with, and planning for the involvement of, the Academy'

(University)

20. Overlap between CETLs and other bodies did not appear to be a major concern, though some commented that there needed to be clarity about the roles of CETLs and the HE Academy in relation to dissemination activity.

'... it may be difficult to comprehend fully the distinction between dissemination strategies and dissemination practice.'

(University)

Question E: Do you agree with the proposed approach to funding levels?

115 responses: 64 agreed; 26 disagreed; 25 offered comments

21. Many respondents seemed to prefer that HEFCE fund a larger number of CETLs at a lower level of individual funding on the grounds that this was more likely to lead to a wider sector engagement.

'Our preference would be for funding to be reduced, allowing an increase in the number of CETLs.'

(University)

'A minimum of £100,000 per annum may be more appropriate, which would encourage the establishment of more limited-scale, subject-based or very focused themed initiatives.'

(Organisation)

22. One respondent commented in particular on the funding methodology of CETLs.

'[This organisation] urges HEFCE to adopt a funding methodology based on the best public accountability principles of quality of bid and value for money.'

(Organisation)

Question F: In thinking about this initiative and the selection method, we have been mindful of the need to minimise the burden we impose on institutions. Given the size of funding, have we gauged this correctly or are there areas where we are imposing a disproportionate burden on institutions that we have not considered?

110 responses: 39 agreed; 32 disagreed; 39 offered comments

23. This question drew a more even spread of responses. Few pointed to any burden which the consultation document had completely overlooked. Most acknowledged that the requirements laid upon institutions making bids were proportionate to the scale of the funding available. Comments focused on the implications of the variety of evidence which might be drawn upon for bidding purposes, and differences between subjects and thematic activity in acquiring appropriate evidence easily and systematically. Some respondents also highlighted difficulties faced by smaller institutions in marshalling evidence and meeting the requirements of the bidding processes.

'... a specialist institution ... always finds the burden of bidding processes onerous in ways that can be disproportionately severe.'

(HE college)

24. This wide-ranging question also prompted responses on matters relating to collaborative bids and the assessment process.

'... we are very anxious to ensure that the individuals involved in the selection process represent the diversity of the sector.'

(University)

'... we think that it is a serious mistake to limit institutions to one collaborative bid each.'

(University)

'... we do have a concern that the selection process may favour single institutional bids and that limiting institutions to one collaborative bid may be restrictive.'

(University)

Question G. Do you think this selection method is robust and transparent?

106 responses: 69 agreed; 12 disagreed; 25 offered comments

25. The majority of respondents found that the method outlined was robust and transparent. Many of these responses were single word answers – but those who disagreed also offered comments and suggestions on the proposals, in particular in relation to transparency of criteria and the assessment process. Interestingly, some of these comments implied a movement away from the proposed flexibility afforded to institutions to define their own CETLs.

'No, the proposed method is evidently neither robust nor transparent. At the first stage there is no statement of the criteria by which proposals will be evaluated ... there is nothing said about how the panel will weigh that evidence or what they will judge to be excellent.'

(University)

'... it is unclear how bids will be judged, in the absence of a clear framework to define what a CETL can be. This is important in relation to the weighting placed on the "excellence criteria" as opposed to the "project value" criteria.'

(HE college)

26. This question also prompted comments about the extent and potential diversity of evidence required to support bids. One organisation commented on the need to take into account the diversity of approaches among subject areas.

'HEFCE should stress that only the evidence that is most appropriate should be included [in a CETL bid], rather than all the examples suggested.'

(Organisation)

'... subjects such as science and engineering often use very different approaches to teaching than the arts or humanities. This diversity needs to be recognised and reflected in the panel of assessors making the selection of CETL proposals.'

(Organisation)

Question H: Do you agree with the proposals for evidencing excellent teaching outcomes and practice? Do the examples in Annex E help to clarify our expectations?

110 responses: 63 agreed; 17 disagreed; 30 offered comments

27. This question, along with question I below, provoked a great deal of discussion. Overall, responses were critical of the emphasis on demonstrating and evidencing existing excellence, arguing that a focus on developmental potential might be more likely to secure enhancement. Respondents also commented that demonstrating excellence might prove to be difficult for collaborative bids, particularly where (for good reasons stemming from the educational objectives of a proposed CETL) the range of institutions might be quite wide.

'There is a danger that the process becomes too reliant on track record.'
(University)

'... the examples of evidence given in Annex E are based on existing measures ... clarification is needed on how the CETL will meet the changing requirement of future students.'
(University)

28. There were also technical queries related to the particular criteria listed at Annex E, and adverse comment on the overall burden of preparing this kind of evidence to support the bidding process. Some suggested that this would prove more burdensome to thematic-based than subject-based bids.

'... while much of the data might be available to institutions in some form, the probability of having to bundle data specifically in relation to the formation of the proposed CETL and the separation of sections from one to another is complicated and burdensome.'
(HE college)

'... more weight should be given to the value added criteria and an indication that the teaching and learning methods used are designed to deliver deep learning.'
(Organisation)

'... the QAA and HEFCE need to decide whether or not evidence taken from the QAA developmental engagements is admissible.'
(University)

Question I: Are there any further criteria we should consider including?

101 responses: 71 agreed; 19 disagreed; 11 offered comments

29. As expected, this question drew a variety of helpful responses and suggestions. Suggestions for additional criteria included:

- the value added to students' learning experience
- impact on available teaching resource of key staff involvement in CETLs
- evidence of working collaboratively, disseminating and embedding good practice
- number of staff already in post relevant to CETL bid area
- links between learning support and learning resources
- research evidence of learning and teaching

- transferability of practice
- envisaged relationship between student learning and assessment
- impact of previous funded projects.

30. Some respondents suggested wider issues for consideration in determining criteria.

'... rather than include further criteria we would suggest institutions are encouraged to think carefully about appropriate evidence for their own bids using the material presented as a broad guideline.'

(University)

'... identify comparators.'

(University)

Question J: Do you think that the proposals for 'commended for excellence' are a useful way of identifying excellent provision for students?

111 responses: 21 agreed; 65 disagreed; 25 offered comments

31. There was an overwhelmingly negative response to this proposal, reflected also in the feedback from the consultation seminars. Most of those who commented without reaching a definitive view doubted the value and purpose of the proposal.

'... this proposal further compounds, in our eyes, the felony! It proposes a three tier, rather than a two tier, system!'

(University)

'... no, this would be misleading for students because, for good reasons, not all institutions could or would apply to become a CETL but might nevertheless be providing excellent education for their students.'

(University)

'No, since many of the bids will not align with discrete programmes or disciplines within institutions, and it will therefore be unclear to students exactly what is being commended.'

(University)

Question K: Do you agree with the proposals for second-stage bids?

104 responses: 74 agreed; 11 disagreed; 19 offered comments

32. In general, although a majority broadly supported the two-stage bidding process, it was felt that there was not enough information to comment on the proposals in detail. Some responses supported the possibility of funding the development of stage two bids (as with the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning) to compensate for the work involved in putting together a comprehensive bid. Others mentioned the possibility of the HE Academy brokering collaboration at the second stage of bidding.

“... we believe that a modest amount of funding should be made available to support the preparation of second-stage bids. The work involved in preparing a serious and credible proposal to the level that should be required will be considerable.”

(University)

‘The Academy could undertake a role in brokering related bids to support collaboration (and hence promote sector capacity) for the second stage.’

(Organisation)

Question L: Is the timetable feasible?

108 responses: 72 agreed; 20 disagreed; 16 offered comments

33. The consensus was that the proposed timetable was ‘tight but feasible’. A few additional comments were made.

‘... we believe that provision should be made at the outset for a second round of bids.’

(University)

‘... the period for second-stage applications should be extended by a further month.’

(University)

Question M: Have you any comments on the proposed mechanisms and/or other measures for support and evaluation?

116 responses: 86 made comments; 30 did not make comments

34. The need for an independent evaluation process was strongly emphasised, and the role of the HE Academy in supporting CETLs was welcomed. Other comments included:

‘... we assume that the various “measures” listed in paragraph 50 will be largely qualitative rather than quantitative. We note that there is no discussion of what will occur at the end of the funding period for CETLs and assume this will be determined at a later date.’

(University)

‘... we would urge that attention be given to a formative independent evaluation process. While this precise initiative may not recur, a good deal of funding is involved, and some evidence of the impact may prove important in urging the case for further related work.’

(Organisation)

‘... the proposal that the HE Academy should have a central role in supporting CETLs seems appropriate. The initiative should be evaluated by an independent external organisation.’

(Organisation)

Next steps

37. Information and views gleaned from the consultation responses and seminars will be fed into the preparation of the invitation to bid, to be published early in 2004.

38. The consultation responses will inform further work within HEFCE to shape the development of the CETLs project and future initiatives.

39. As always, we are grateful to all respondents for the insight provided by the consultation responses. We hope that this process will result in a robust, well-founded and widely supported funding competition.