

# The Potential of Centres of/for Excellence in Higher Education

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## Introduction

At the start of this chapter reflecting on Centres of Excellent Education (or Centre for fremragende utdanning – SFUs), it is appropriate to set out the nature of this chapter and its contents. This chapter is neither a theoretical discussion of the concept of excellence, nor is it a piece of empirical research outlining potential measures of excellence. Instead, the chapter contains experiential evidence from someone who has been involved with SFUs in Norway and their English equivalents, Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), for the last decade. As a consequence of this, the reader must accept that there is considerable subjectivity within the material presented here – this is not a rigorous piece of academic research, it is not reproducible or verifiable.

In view of the personal and experiential nature of the material presented here, I should begin by outlining where and how this experience was gained. In 2004, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) launched its CETL scheme. Following a two-stage bidding process, **sigma**, Centre for Excellence in University-wide Mathematics and Statistics Support came into being. I was co-Director of **sigma**, which was a collaborative centre shared between Loughborough and Coventry Universities.

The CETL programme ran for five years from 1 August 2005 to 31 July 2010. Unlike Norway's SFU programme, there was no possibility of continuation funding and the majority of CETLs ceased to function on 1 August 2010.

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<sup>25</sup> Presentation of contributors in Norwegian page 173.

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However, **sigma** remained in operation having secured funding first from the National HE STEM<sup>26</sup> programme (2009-2012) and then directly from HEFCE to embed mathematics and statistics support across the sector and develop a sustainable community of practice (2013-2016). Although I no longer work at Coventry University, I remain a Director of **sigma**.

In 2013, NOKUT launched the second call for SFUs with the aim to create up to three further SFUs (following the establishment of ProTed, the first SFU, in 2011). This was an open call, unlike the first call, which had been restricted to teacher education. I chaired NOKUT's international expert panel charged with sifting the applications and making a recommendation to the NOKUT Board as to which three proposals should be awarded SFU status.

Finally, in 2015, ProTed reached the time for its mid-term evaluation to determine if it should continue as an SFU for a further five years. NOKUT assembled an Expert Committee to carry out this mid-term evaluation by consideration of a self-evaluation document produced by the ProTed leadership and other documentation, including ProTed's annual reports, and a site visit to the two institutions (the Universities of Oslo and Tromsø) that make up ProTed. I chaired this Expert Committee on NOKUT's behalf.

These then are the experiences that I bring to writing this chapter. In the following sections, I will begin by outlining the CETL programme in England, tracing its roots back to a government white paper and summarising what it was intended to achieve. This will be followed by an evaluation of the programme exploring CETL successes and failures at the levels of both individual centres and the programme as a whole. In view of the shortcomings identified at programme level, I will use hindsight to suggest an alternative framework for the CETL programme, which might have led to greater programme level success, without detriment to individual centre level successes. I will then turn to the SFU programme in Norway, covering its roots and objectives and comparing these with the English CETL programme. Although all of this material is presented in the light of my personal experience, recounted above, it draws on the work of others. The final substantive section of the chapter is much more subjective, describing my thoughts of what an SFU should aspire to be and what it might achieve.

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<sup>26</sup> STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. The National HE STEM Programme was an initiative funded by HEFCE, running from 2009 to 2012, to promote STEM in higher education.

## The CETL Programme

The roots of the CETL Programme in England can be traced back to a Government white paper in 2003 *The future of higher education* (DFES, 2003). This white paper contains a chapter entitled 'Teaching and learning – delivering excellence' and one of the key proposals is

“Centres of Excellence in teaching will be established to reward good teaching at departmental level and to promote best practice” (p.47).

This is then expanded later in the white paper, as follows,

“We should also celebrate excellent practice in teaching departments. The very best will be designated as Centres of Excellence and given funding of £500,000 a year for five years to reward academics and to fund extra staff to help promote and spread their good pedagogical practice ... Their status will help to raise the profile of excellent teaching” (p 54).

One of the strongest advocates of the importance of teaching in universities was Cardinal John Henry Newman. Writing over one hundred years ago, he asserted that a university “is a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its object is .... the diffusion and extension of knowledge, rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students” (Newman, 1907, p. ix).

The white paper *The future of higher education* contains echoes of this sentiment with statements such as “All students are entitled to high quality teaching” and emphasising the need for parity of esteem (and opportunities for promotion) between those who excel in teaching and those who excel in research. The vision presented by the white paper was that individuals who are excellent teachers would receive recognition of this through prizes, National Teaching Fellowships, and opportunities for promotion whilst departments whose teaching is excellent would receive recognition as Centres of Excellence bringing with it considerable additional funding and the expectation that they would ‘spread their good pedagogical practice’ thereby ensuring that teaching across the whole sector is improved.

The CETL programme was developed by HEFCE to deliver this element of the Government's agenda. This was the Funding Council's largest single initiative in teaching and learning with £315 million set aside to fund CETLs over the five year period from the academic year 2005/06 to 2009/10.

A two stage bidding process was used to identify those 'departments' that were to become CETLs. As noted above, the white paper had spoken of departments, presumably meaning subject/disciplinary departments as they are directly responsible for teaching. When it came to the bidding process (and certainly those that were successful), it appears that few bids were submitted by whole subject/disciplinary departments but rather by a subset of a department with a particular passion for teaching and learning, or by members of several different subject/disciplinary departments and also members of central units, submitting not subject/discipline focused proposals but rather thematic proposals. Some proposals were collaborations from two or more institutions. Many successful proposals led to the establishment of 'stand alone' units within universities rather than being based within a subject/discipline department.

Funding was allocated according to the size of the proposed centre, in one of three bands. The funding available in the largest band was revenue income of £500,000 per year for five years and capital income of £2 million to be spent in the first two years of the programme. Given the large sums of money available to successful centres, the programme generated considerable interest. In some institutions, there was a high level of involvement of senior management in the preparation of proposals.

A total of 259 bids were received in the first stage of the process. Universities were restricted to submitting a maximum of three proposals (either single institution or as the lead of a collaboration, although they could be partners in any number of collaborative proposals they were not leading). Of these 259 submissions, 106 were invited to submit 'full proposals' to the second stage. Full proposals were required to set out the rationale and focus of the proposed CETL; establish a case for existing excellence and set out what the CETL planned to achieve during the five years of its funding, including how it would engage in dissemination (or as the white paper put it 'spread their good pedagogical practice'); give a detailed budget for the five years of funding; show how the CETL would recognise and reward the staff whose excellence had led to the CETL being established; and put forward a continuation strategy to ensure the 'good pedagogical practice' continued after the end of the funding period.

It is clear from what had to be included in the proposal that HEFCE had expanded the remit of CETLs beyond the white paper's aims to "reward good teaching at departmental level" and "to help promote and spread their good pedagogical practice". The detailed plan of activities required as part of the proposal indicated that HEFCE wanted CETLs to become centres of development (and indeed research) in teaching and learning. Indeed, the balance in the guidance documentation was much more focused on the planned activities than on the dissemination and reward strategies.

There was an expectation that the planned activities would be innovative – such large amounts of funding were not being made available in order to have 'more of the same'. Bidders had to establish that they were already excellent but then go on to show how they were going to enhance that excellence even further. It was made clear that at least part of the proposed innovation should be 'risky'. CETLs were to be places where experimentation was encouraged and that would inevitably mean that some activities would 'fail'. Innovation was particularly encouraged in relation to the use of new technologies.

After the second round, a total of 74 CETLs were established. These centres were spread across the sector, although just under half of all English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) received no CETL funding. These non-funded HEIs were disproportionately spread - 13 were universities established before 1992, 18 were universities established after 1992 (i.e. former polytechnics) and 28 were small and/or specialist institutions. This is perhaps surprising as the pre-1992 universities are typically heavily research-focused institutions and the post-1992 universities and specialist institutions were often teaching-focused. It seems likely that the pre-1992 universities' expertise in bid writing (for research proposals) gave them a significant advantage in this process.

The proposals that were successful were a mixture of subject/discipline focused CETLs such as ALiC (Active Learning in Computing) and Bristol ChemLabS (Bristol Chemistry Laboratory Sciences) and thematic CETLs such as C4C (Collaborating for Creativity) and CEEBL (Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning). A full list of all 74 HEFCE CETLs (and 7 set up in a similar programme in Northern Ireland) is given in Appendix F of the CETL programme summative evaluation report (SQW, 2011).

## Evaluation of the CETLs

There are two levels at which the CETL programme can be evaluated. The first is at the level of the individual CETLs asking questions such as “Did the CETL do what it set out to do?” and “Did the CETL have an impact on the teaching and learning of its subject/discipline or theme across the sector?” The second is at the level of the programme as a whole asking questions like “Did the CETL programme succeed in its goal of raising the status of teaching and learning vis-à-vis research?” and “Did teaching and learning improve across the sector?”

In the event, very little evaluation occurred at the level of individual CETLs. From the outset, HEFCE had determined that the reporting requirements would be ‘light touch’. This was implemented by universities hosting CETLs being required to include a statement in their annual report to HEFCE which amounted to little more than recording that the funding being received for the CETL was being spent in line with the activities set out in the proposal. Each CETL was required to complete a mid-term self-evaluation report, but the form of these reports was not standardised and each CETL could choose to report how (and what) it wanted. These self-evaluation reports were then used as the basis of a formative evaluation of the CETL programme (Centre for Study in Education and Training, 2008) and no feedback was provided to individual CETLs. At the end of the programme in 2010, CETLs were required to complete a further self-evaluation report (this time using a provided template) but it was made clear to CETL Directors that there would be no feedback to individual CETLs about their performance, and anyway such feedback would have been of limited value since the programme was over by this point. These reports were used to produce an overall summative evaluation of the CETL programme (SQW, 2011).

Although the brief given to SQW was to focus its evaluation at the programme level, in order to do so, inevitably, it had to comment to some extent on the performance of individual CETLs (although in an anonymous way). A key message that comes through from the report is that the performance of individual CETLs was very variable.

On the positive side, the summative evaluation records that there was evidence of impact on individual staff and some evidence of impact on students. CETLs developed staff capacity and expertise (particularly, but not exclusively, in terms of exploiting new technologies) and helped to raise the profile of teaching and learning within institutions which had CETLs and, in some of these cases, influenced wider institutional developments. A wealth of teaching and learning resources were created and made freely available via CETL web-sites, although the report notes that

there was a need for greater awareness of these resources across the sector. During the five years, the CETLs delivered at least 2,679 spin-off projects and 3,435 peer-reviewed outputs – these are impressive totals amounting to over 7 spin-off projects per CETL per year and over 9 peer-reviewed outputs per CETL per year.

The report highlighted that many CETL outputs had been embedded into institutional (their own institution) curricula. Furthermore, many CETLs had promoted cultural change in their own institutions and these changes were expected to have lasting impact.

These are all very valuable achievements, which should be celebrated as successes – particularly the direct impact on improving the student experience. However, the report is not unreservedly positive about individual CETLs. It points out that a key element for producing success was good links with institutional senior management and high visibility within the institution and indicated that relationships with senior managers were very variable across the 74 CETLs.

Some CETLs were described as having a “more inward focus” (SQW, 2011, p.13) which in the context appears to mean that these CETLs did not engage in significant dissemination. There were some good examples of collaboration, but many CETLs progressed in relative isolation. As will be discussed in more detail later, I find this a major failing. It should be fundamental to a CETL that it has an outward focus – a key objective of every CETL should have been to have an impact across the sector in the discipline or theme the CETL was addressing. This, however, did not seem to have been a major factor in the selection process.

In the self-evaluation reports, many CETLs described how it had been more challenging than expected to engage academic staff. This may reflect both some naivety on behalf of the CETL staff and also the relatively low importance given to dissemination in the bidding process, despite the original intention of the white paper that Centres of Excellence should “spread their good pedagogical practice”.

The report was primarily an evaluation of the CETL programme as a whole and from this perspective the report is much less positive. Using tactful language, it is suggested that “Wider impact on the HE sector is a challenging area to unpack” (SQW, 2011, p.14). Whilst noting the successes of individual CETLs within their own institutions, the report goes on to record that there is far less evidence of impact on other HEIs and that it is difficult to trace impact at sector

level. Indeed, the report goes on to conclude that the CETL programme did not lead to material changes in non-participating HEIs and across the sector as a whole.

In terms of the management of the programme, it is reported that there was no sense of the CETLs functioning as a national network. Many CETLs did not see it as important to interact with other CETLs. From my perspective as a CETL Director, this accords with my experience. In the early stages of the CETL programme, there was some central co-ordination of activities involving all the CETLs but this waned as the programme progressed.

As already noted, there was a significant legacy from the individual CETLs in terms of the production of learning resources, outputs from spin-off projects and peer-reviewed outputs. Apart from these, the legacy of the CETL programme was primarily in the development of individual staff and in institutions (which had hosted CETLs) which had embedded CETL outcomes. The limits of the legacy are vividly illustrated in the statistic that only 17 of the 74 end of programme self-evaluation reports indicated that the CETL would be continuing in some discrete form.

There is room for debate about what would constitute a successful CETL programme. If each CETL was successful at an individual level (and I would include in success criteria having an impact across the sector in the specific area of the CETL's focus and improving the experience of students) but wider programme goals such as raising the status of teaching in comparison to research were not achieved, then some would not view the programme as a success. But the thousands of students throughout the sector who had benefitted might have an opposite opinion.

Although the authors of the SQW report seem unwilling to make their own judgement, they do record that "there was a quite widespread feeling that an opportunity to raise the status and profile of teaching and learning across the sector, and to disseminate results more effectively, had been missed" (SQW, 2011, p.26).

Whilst the SQW authors may have been diplomatic and moderate in their tone, others were not. Following the publication of the SQW report, the Times Higher Education magazine published two articles with headlines "CETLs' impact assessed: the sector hardly felt a thing" (Grove, 2012) and "A poor policy poorly managed leaves little to show for £315 million" (Ramsden, 2012).



Ramsden's article is hard hitting; he asserts that "as an example of the failure of public policy in higher education, CETLs would be hard to beat". However, Ramsden was not a disinterested observer. For most of the period of the CETL programme, he was Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), a cross-sector body (whose major funder was HEFCE, but whose annual budget was less than the total annual funding of CETLs) which was charged by HEFCE with assisting CETLs in the dissemination of their outcomes. The SQW report records that many CETL Directors regarded the HEA, alongside HEFCE as culpable in some of the poor management of the CETL programme and part of Ramsden's article aims to disassociate the HEA from HEFCE in this area.

Grove's article summarises the findings of the SQW report, concentrating on the negative assessments at programme level with little mention of the positives at the level of individual CETLs. His article includes a perceptive quote from Julie Hall, co-chair of the Staff and Educational Development Association, who said "the one-off nature of CETL funding meant that the initiative was inherently flawed". I will return to this theme in the next section.

At the early stages of the CETL programme, informal indications were given to CETL Directors that it was a possibility that CETLs may be able to bid for continuation funding to go beyond 2010. The implication was that this would be, in some unspecified way, performance related and that not all CETLs would secure such funding. However, discussion of such possibilities quickly stopped and it was made plain well before the end of the programme that there would be no further funding available.

The light touch reporting combined with no possibility of further funding made overall management of the programme a very difficult prospect. In the main, individual CETLs identified primarily with their host institution and so the benefit of that institution was high on the list of priorities. With no follow-up to mid-term reports, no possibility of reduction or loss of funding in the 5 year period and no prospect of further funding, HEFCE had no 'carrots or sticks' with which to manage the programme.

## **An Alternative Framework for the CETL Programme**

With the benefit of hindsight, taking into account issues raised in the summative evaluation (SQW, 2011) and personal experience as a CETL Director, it is possible to postulate an alternative framework to the CETL programme which may have led to more positive programme level outcomes without hindering the positive outcomes at the level of the individual CETL.

The first point that needs to be addressed is the one-off nature of the funding call. The provision of funding for CETLs did generate significant interest in the sector (259 applications received), including at senior management level. There were institutions where the Vice-Chancellor not only approved the final proposal but also took a hands-on role in actually writing it. However, as there was only one funding call, the momentum generated by the initial call was not sustained. The opportunity to bid for funding had created an incentive, but if you were not successful in this first call there were no further opportunities. So, the incentive for HEIs to focus on teaching excellence was taken away.

Although it would have increased the administrative overhead, rather than funding 74 CETLs in one go, if there had been an annual or biennial call with 15-20 CETLs awarded each time, this would have sustained interest. Institutions who submitted unsuccessfully would have had the incentive to improve their practice and their proposal in the hope of success in a future round. Institutions who did not submit in the first round could have implemented strategic improvement plans to be in a position to claim “excellence” later in the programme.

Allied to this, a change in the rules that permitted CETLs to bid for continuation funding (at reduced levels) would have made management of the overall programme considerably easier. Criteria for receipt of continuation funding could have been set to reinforce programme level goals. For example, the criteria for continuation funding could have included such things as level of contribution to the CETL network, evidence of impact in other HEIs and, most importantly, evidence of impact on students. CETLs who wished to secure continuation funding (and one assumes that would be virtually all of them) would not have been able to have “a more inward focus” or to simply report that it had been more challenging than expected to engage other academics – they would have been required to use their ingenuity and creativity to secure this engagement.

Provision of the possibility of continuation funding would also have been a recognition of the reality that achieving sector level change is a long-term process and that many years are required to achieve it. Many CETLs reported that initial progress was much slower than had been anticipated due to the initial set up process and recruiting staff (particularly project managers) and much first phase activity being around capital expenditure, which in many cases involved building work (remember, the capital grant had to be spent within the first two years). In addition, the sustained momentum created by repeated, periodic calls for further CETL applications would have created a 'market' more receptive to the ideas emerging from individual CETLs. One can imagine that one way in which proposals to later rounds would show their commitment to excellence would be that they had engaged with the CETL network and were already implementing learning from existing CETLs.

Another likely outcome of the on-going nature of the CETL programme is that there would have been incentives for Centres to be maintained even after the end of their funding period. If the programme succeeded in establishing a meaningful CETL Network and CETL 'brand', then there would have been an incentive for Centres to wish to remain part of this network even if they were no longer receiving funding. The 'badge' of still being part of the network would have had value and so host institutions would have been more likely to contribute some funding (albeit at a considerably reduced level) in order to maintain their Centre and its membership of the CETL Network.

Programme management by the funder would need to be stronger than was the case with the CETL programme. There are a number of ways that this could have been achieved without significant additional expense. The mid-term review could have been turned into a more productive exercise by introducing an element of peer review into the process, with each CETL being required to contribute to the mid-term review of a small number of other CETLs. The focus of this process would have been developmental rather than auditing and would have been more effective than a self-evaluation exercise that was regarded by some CETL Directors as a paper exercise of limited value. The involvement of other CETLs would have brought an element of external feedback into the process and also strengthened the concept of the CETL Network. The degree of engagement of CETLs in this process would have been evidence of contribution to the CETL network that those seeking continuation funding would be able to use later in the cycle.

One of the recommendations of the final report was that any future programme of this nature should have “more active central management and coordination” (SQW, 2011, p.32). In order to achieve this, it will be necessary for the funders to maintain a more active involvement with the programme than was the case. An almost inevitable consequence will be a greater reporting requirement and, of course, more expense in terms of staff from the funder to undertake this programme management.

Assuming no increase in total funding, adoption of the alternative framework set out here would have resulted either in fewer CETLs being funded or each CETL receiving less funding (to allow for continuation funding and the additional programme management costs). However, I would argue that it is much more likely to achieve sector level change. As one CETL Director said “the general visibility and value of the CETL initiative is [sic] probably no greater than the sum of all its parts” (SQW, 2011, p. 49). The approach set out above would have led to the overall outcome being greater than the sum of the individual parts and so fewer CETLs would, in the long run, have achieved more.

It should be acknowledged that this alternative framework does not take into account financial constraints placed upon the programme by the Treasury. Commitment from the Treasury to long-term financing over the timescales proposed here are not often forthcoming, however I believe there is a strong argument that this commitment would bring very beneficial outcomes.

## The SFU Programme in Norway

The SFU programme was established by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2010. Although ‘sentre for fremragende undanning’ literally translates as ‘centre for excellent education’, the English version of the SFU Guidelines document available from the NOKUT website<sup>27</sup> refers to SFUs as “Centres of Excellence in Higher Education”. The importance of the preposition “for” or “of” will be discussed later in the chapter.

The principal aims of the SFU programme, as set out in the SFU Guidelines, are “to contribute to the development of excellent quality higher education and to highlight the fact that education and research are equally important activities for

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<sup>27</sup> [http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/UA-enhet/SFU/SFU\\_Standards\\_Guidelines\\_and\\_Criteria\\_for\\_the\\_Assessment\\_of\\_Applications.pdf](http://www.nokut.no/Documents/NOKUT/Artikkelbibliotek/UA-enhet/SFU/SFU_Standards_Guidelines_and_Criteria_for_the_Assessment_of_Applications.pdf)

higher education institutions”. Although these aims do not explicitly mention students, it is reasonable to infer that “excellent quality higher education” is for the benefit of students receiving it. These twin aims then echo two important ideas, referred to earlier, expressed in the English White Paper (DFES, 2003) that all students have a right to high quality teaching and the parity of importance of teaching and research as activities within universities.

The SFU Guidelines go on to outline what is expected of individual SFUs. They must

- provide excellent R&D-based education;
- develop innovative ways of working with R&D-based education;
- contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge about educational methods that are conducive to learning.

Once again there are clear echoes of the English CETL programme in these expectations. The SFU must itself already be, in some sense, excellent; it must have a programme of innovative development which it proposes to undertake and it must disseminate its findings (“spread its good pedagogical practice”).

Although there are these striking similarities in the aims and expectations of CETLs and SFUs, the implementation of the programme in Norway was markedly different from that in England. In Norway, the programme began with a call to establish a single SFU; the call was restricted to a centre in teacher education. As a result of this call, the first SFU, ProTed, was established in December 2011.

Following this, a second call was made in 2013 for three further SFUs; this was a completely open call although an indication was given that it was hoped that one SFU would be in the area of medicine or health (as it turned out this did not happen). Twenty four submissions were made and reviewed by the international expert panel. Eight of these were shortlisted and received site visits by members of the panel before a final recommendation was made to (and accepted by) the NOKUT Board about which three proposals should be successful. In November 2013, it was announced that the three new centres would be BioCEED (biological sciences), CEMPE (music) and MatRIC (mathematics).

The twenty four submissions, covering a wide range of subjects and themes, in themselves constitute a substantial body of evidence of what some within the higher education sector in Norway regard as excellent education. The proposals described considerable amounts of innovative and high quality practice, of which the authors can be justifiably proud. However, the proposals also contained some

approaches which the international expert panel were surprised were being put forward as excellent and innovative. Taken as a whole, the applications revealed some widespread narrowness of thinking, particularly in the area of dissemination (a theme that will be discussed further later in the chapter).

It is hoped that there will be a further call for a third round of SFUs in the near future. In anticipation of this, one major university, whose proposals had not been successful in the second round, engaged with members of the international expert panel to undertake staff development within the institution in order to enhance existing provision and be better prepared for a future call. This is clearly what the Ministry was seeking to achieve; as the Minister put it “Its [the SFU programme’s] most valuable aspect is that it promotes high-quality education and that it also inspires the other academic communities to compete for SFU status” (Isaksen, 2015).

SFUs are funded, in the first instance for five years, however, unlike the CETL programme, there is the possibility of continuation funding for a further five years. This continuation funding is contingent on a mid-term evaluation which occurs after three and a half years. The mid-term evaluation is a formal, auditing process in which the SFUs performance to date is measured by an expert committee against the SFU programme goals and the goals the SFU set itself in its original proposal.

The SFU programme is managed by NOKUT. It is too early to say how effective their management of the overall programme will be. Certainly, with only one established centre and three relatively new centres, it is too early to judge whether or not there is an effective SFU network; however there are already signs that the SFU ‘brand’ is gaining traction.

## **Some Reflections on SFUs**

Excellent teaching is not an end in itself. The purpose of excellent teaching is so that students should learn well or receive an excellent education. In a recent study of teaching excellence, the authors stated that there are “still ambiguities and contention around the definition of teaching excellence” (Gunn and Fisk, 2013, p.6). Some in the sector might express this differently, “It is hard (even impossible) to define precisely excellent teaching – but you know it when you see it.”

Despite these ambiguities and imprecision, Gunn and Fisk (*ibid*) do identify characteristics associated with teaching excellence. These include:

- Dynamic engagement
- Inspire and motivate
- Respect for students as individuals
- Active and group learning
- Critical and scholarly

The first of these, dynamic engagement, has two perspectives: the excellent teacher is “both dynamically engaged in practice and inspires dynamic engagement by their students” (*ibid*, p. 23). This dual aspect and, in particular, the element of being dynamically engaged in practice is particularly relevant to SFUs. SFUs should be places where excellent teachers can immerse themselves (“dynamically engage”) in their practice, so that it may develop and become even more excellent.

As already noted, it should always be remembered that excellent teaching, no matter how personally satisfying, is not the end in itself – the focus upon the students and their learning should never be lost. During the site visit to the University of Agder during the selection of the second round of SFUs, a student said to the international expert panel, “Geometry changed my life”. The panel were somewhat taken aback by such a grandiose statement and their initial reaction was that this was probably something of an over-statement. (Perhaps the student had been encouraged by the University to support their application for an SFU and he had been somewhat over-enthusiastic in responding to their exhortation.) However, the panel probed further and the student related how geometry had, in fact, changed his life. He recounted how, at the end of his secondary education he had not really known what to do, had nearly not entered university but, for want of anything better to do, had signed up for a primary teacher education course. During this course, he had been taught geometry by someone who had “made the subject come alive to him”, who had shown both its relevance to the world and also its inherent beauty. This had led the student to become so enthusiastically engaged with his study that he was, at the time of the visit, studying for a Masters in Mathematics Education.

One of the purposes of higher education is surely to present students with opportunities for transformation, like this student received and seized. An excellent teacher can be transformational on a relatively small scale with the students he or she teaches. SFUs should aspire to be transformational on a

much larger scale by enabling and supporting many to become excellent teachers.

SFUs should therefore have a ‘big vision’. In the Bible, the prophet Joel<sup>28</sup> speaks of a time when “your young men will see visions” and this precedes “wonders in the heavens and on earth”. Whilst it might perhaps be too much to hope that SFUs will produce “wonders in the heavens”, they should surely be aiming to make an impact “on earth”. SFUs should undoubtedly benefit the students in their own institution; if they cannot do that, then their excellence must be called into question. But, if that is all they do (worthwhile though this is), they will not be a success as a Centre. To be worthy of the name, SFUs need to have an outward focus – they should be making a change, at the very least across Norway.

The phrase “dynamic engagement” used by Gunn and Fisk (2013) is well chosen. Excellent teaching does not stand still – it changes. It reacts to the context in which it finds itself. This means reacting to changes in the student body, in their attitudes, prior experience, external circumstances. It further means taking opportunities that are presented by new technologies and changes in societal structures.

To do this requires innovation and risk taking. Not every new initiative will succeed. Some technologies will flatter to deceive in terms of what they offer to teaching and learning. But it is still right to explore and experiment – because other initiatives will improve learning, sometimes incrementally sometimes by step-changes.

An SFU should offer a ‘safe environment’ in which experimentation can take place. Just as ‘active and group learning’ was identified as a characteristic of excellent teaching (Gunn and Fisk, 2013), so involvement in a group with an SFU is likely to bring about better results. The achievements of a number of excellent individual teachers working together within an SFU should be more than the sum of the achievements of each of those individuals working in isolation.

A key characteristic for a successful SFU is humility: an acceptance that all new ideas do not necessarily originate here, that there are other excellent teachers elsewhere. This brings us back to nomenclature. Is an SFU a Centre *of* Excellence or a Centre *for* Excellence? The preposition is important since “of”

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<sup>28</sup> Joel Chapter 2 verses 28 and 30.



implies that the excellence resides in the Centre, whereas “for” implies that the Centre is searching for excellence wherever it is to be found. “Of” is exclusive whilst “for” is inclusive.

This has implications for dissemination. As mentioned earlier, the dissemination strategies presented in the 24 second round SFU applications were, on the whole, disappointing. Typically, what was suggested was conference presentations and journal articles, with sometimes a workshop or two added for good measure. These strategies reflected a passive, transmissive model of dissemination which might be caricatured as “we will tell you about all the wonderful things we have done”. Although never put as explicitly as this, there was an unspoken corollary to this model which is “and you will be so impressed by what you see and hear that you will immediately go away and adopt everything we have shown you”. There is a certain irony here. Excellent teaching dynamically engages students in their learning and one of its characteristics is active learning. Any yet, the preferred method of dissemination that was presented was passive and transmissive.

This is not just a Norwegian phenomenon. The self-evaluation reports of CETL Directors, quoted in the summative evaluation report (SQW, 2011), recorded that it had been more challenging than expected to engage academic staff. They had underestimated the parochial nature of many academics and the prevalence of ‘not invented here’ (the reluctance to engage with practices developed elsewhere). The report also noted that there were huge volumes of high quality learning resources produced by CETLs that were freely available but that the majority of the sector remained unaware of them.

Harmsworth and Turpin (2000) present a three level model of dissemination: dissemination for awareness, dissemination for understanding and dissemination for action. SFUs should be aiming for ‘dissemination for action’ since they want to see changes in practice across the sector. Harmsworth and Turpin (2000, p.3) quote the approach of a history project: “We tried wherever possible to turn the idea of dissemination into one of real participation, for it was important to us that historians as a whole felt a sense of ownership and responsibility for the goals, activities and successes of the project”.

To achieve this kind of dissemination requires more than conference papers and journal articles (although these serve a valuable purpose in terms of dissemination for awareness and understanding). The third level of dissemination could have been alternatively entitled ‘dissemination for

engagement'. Dissemination strategies should therefore include ways in which others will be 'recruited' to be actively engaged in the work of the SFU. This brings back us back to the "of" or "for" discussion. If an SFU is purposefully seeking out relevant excellence wherever it is to be found and incorporating that excellence in its work, if it is proactively working with others from 'outside' the SFU to develop innovative excellent practice, then dissemination for engagement will almost inevitably happen and the boundaries between 'inside the SFU' and 'outside the SFU' will become increasingly blurred (thereby confusing those who cling to 'not invented here').

## Conclusion

The reader will have deduced that I am a 'believer'. I believe that CETLs/SFUs/ Centres for Excellence have the potential to achieve much. This belief is based first and foremost on my experience as a Director of a CETL which I claim has made a difference to the learning of tens of thousands (possibly hundreds of thousands) of students primarily across England and Wales, but also in significant numbers in Ireland and Australia and in smaller (but growing) numbers in other countries around the world including Norway. Improving the educational experience of students has, in my opinion, to be the key goal of a Centre for Excellence. In a separate chapter of this anthology, I have presented a case study of **sigma**, Centre for Excellence in University-wide mathematics and statistics support. This CETL has evolved following the ending of CETL funding into the **sigma** Network, a community of mathematics and statistics support practitioners. Over the ten years of **sigma**'s existence, there have been a whole raft of achievements, but the crucial one is the impact there has been on students' learning. To quote one student "*I spent a lot of time in the Maths Support Centre and I do believe that without it I would not have attained the qualification I did*". Such sentiments of **sigma** making a difference to student outcomes are repeated time after time in feedback processes.

Centres for excellence can be influential not only in their host institution but with academic colleagues in other institutions. They can bring about changes of practice. These are successes at the level of the individual centre and I would suggest that these are almost certainly easier to achieve than success at the level of a whole centres for excellence programme. Programme level successes require, in the first instance, most individual centres to themselves be successful. But this is not enough for the programme to be viewed as a success. The programme has to be more than just the sum of its part. Programme level success will not just happen – it depends on how the

programme is managed. The CETL programme in England cannot be view as an outstanding success at this level.

I have no doubt that many of the SFUs in Norway will be successful as individual centres. The initial signs are very promising. It is too soon to be able to say with confidence what the programme level outcomes will be, but at least some of the structural flaws that were inherent in the CETL programme have been avoided. There is every reason to hope for success at programme level too.

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