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Available online: 23 May 2011

To cite this article: Karen Smith (2011): Cultivating innovative learning and teaching cultures: a question of garden design, Teaching in Higher Education, 16:4, 427-438

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.560374

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Cultivating innovative learning and teaching cultures: a question of garden design

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(Received 18 December 2009; final version received 11 January 2011)

Calls for practitioners to ‘innovate’ are common within higher education and universities, which go to some length to cultivate innovative learning and teaching cultures. The definition of innovation, however, is not clear cut and understandings of how innovations spread and innovative practices should be supported differ. This study aimed to investigate how innovation learning and teaching practice is understood and practiced by a sample of ‘innovative’ academics and to explore to what extent their innovative work is supported and managed by their institution. Data from 16 in-depth interviews revealed drivers for innovation and the institutional factors that can facilitate or impede it. The findings suggest that while innovative cultures can be cultivated and shaped, universities should ensure that there is space for creativity to flourish.

Keywords: innovation; learning and teaching; culture; diffusion

Background

In her book chapter ‘When a thousand flowers bloom’, Kanter (2000, 167) likens innovations to flowers. They ‘start from tiny seeds and have to be nurtured carefully until they blossom’. For the flowers to spread, ‘their essence has to be carried elsewhere’. Conditions such as ‘soil, climate, fertilizer, the layout of the garden’ can lead to the growth of ‘larger and more abundant flowers’. She takes the flower metaphor further by suggesting innovations can: ‘grow wild, springing up weed-like despite unfavourable circumstances’. Equally they can be ‘cultivated, blossoming in greater abundance under favourable circumstances’. The aim of this paper is to take a look at learning and teaching innovation, which can be likened to a flower, and explore how it is supported within the garden of contemporary higher education.

Higher education institutions, like many public sector organisations, have traditionally evolved in a stable and slow environment (Osbourne and Brown 2005); in recent times, however, they have experienced phenomenal changes in their organisational ethos (Anderson 2008; McNay 1995). Many of these changes have been accelerated by the rise of managerialism within higher education, which sees private sector management practices being employed in public sector organisations (Anderson 2008; Deem 1998). One feature of the managerialist project seems to be the desire to ‘control’ organisations, which has led to the development of ‘corporate bureaucracies’ and movements away from ‘unmanaged’ practices (Clegg and

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McAuley 2005, 27). Such shifts are also apparent in institutional attitudes to innovation.

Whereas innovation was traditionally seen as the domain of the individual, more managerial approaches have led institutions to ‘coordinate innovation and strategic planning’ (Findlow 2008, 313), resulting in a shift from an emphasis on individual innovation to more guided and centralised institutional innovation (Hannan and Silver 2000, 8). Hannan and Silver (2000, 10) note that the terms ‘innovation’ and ‘change’ are often used interchangeably in higher education and both have been prevalent in educational policy and practice discourses since the 1980s. ‘Innovation’ is one of a host of business-related words that form part of the ideologically-laden, knowledge-economy focussed, managerial discourse that has ‘captured’ higher education (Mautner 2005; Trowler 2001).

The term ‘innovation’ is, indeed, pervasive in higher education discourse. It can be found in the title of the UK’s government ministry responsible for higher education, people’s job descriptions, and the strategies that shape the way we practice. Innovation, however, is a contested term (Johannessen, Olsen and Lumpkin 2001; Wolff 2008). ‘New process’ or ‘new product or service’ (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2008, 374); ‘an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new’ (Rogers 2003, 12); ‘planned or deliberate changes’ (Hannan and Silver 2000, 10) all define innovative practice. With such a plethora of definitions, the term ‘innovation’ is a problematic starting point for analysis as there is no shared understanding of the boundary of the concept.

Kanter (2000, 167) sees innovation as a set of tasks carried out by an individual or a group of individuals within an organisation. Their practices can be ‘stimulated, facilitated and enhanced – or the opposite’ (Kanter 2000, 167) by the structural and social conditions in which the innovators work. Kanter’s research has suggested that innovation is most likely to flourish in environments that are flexible, responsive and allow for coalition formation and connectedness (169). Such cultures have structures that emphasise diversity, linkages and intersecting territories – where employees and employers have ‘collective pride and faith in people’s talents, collaborations and teamwork’ (169). Here the emphasis is on guided innovation. Ahmed (1998) also recognises the importance of the institutional culture. He notes that: ‘culture is the primary determinant of innovation [. . . it] has multiple elements which can serve to enhance or inhibit the tendency to innovate’ (Ahmed 1998, 31). He identifies four characteristics of an innovative environment: balanced autonomy, personalised recognition, integrated socio-technical systems and continuity of slack. Without these characteristics, he argues, innovations are unlikely to flourish.

If, as indicated above, innovation is increasingly managed by the university to meet strategic needs, it needs to be transferred beyond ‘the isolated activity of a relatively small team’ and embedded ‘in ongoing organisational practices’ (Kanter 2000, 198) to engender institutional change. Rogers’ (2003) seminal innovation diffusion theory, originally sited within rural sociology, suggests that successful diffusion results from the interplay of elements such as: the perceived attributes of an innovation; adopter categories (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggard); change agents; the consequences of the innovation; and institutional characteristics. Innovation diffusion theory has been critiqued in higher education research (Bigum and Rowan 2004) for being too neat to reflect the messiness of social reality. Innovation diffusion, and change more generally, is
‘multi-linear and multivariate’ (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2008, 379) and power-laden (Trowler 2005). This paper will explore only a small part of the ‘innovation journey’ (van de Ven et al. 1999).

The research described here is a preliminary, exploratory study, which is part of a larger research programme around the diffusion of innovative learning and teaching practices in higher education. The study aims to investigate how innovative learning and teaching practice is understood and practiced by the ‘innovative’ academics interviewed and to explore to what extent their innovative work is supported and managed by the institution in which they work.

**Approach to the study**

The study adopts a broadly interpretivist approach in that it seeks to make sense of the meanings that the research participants have of the world in which they live and work. The project looked to probe into understandings of learning and teaching innovation, barriers, facilitators and triggers to innovative practices, and the support systems drawn on during the innovation process. It also explored where innovative ideas come from, how they spread and the extent to which they become part of everyday academic practices.

The data came from 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that, although they have a sequence of themes, there is sufficient flexibility to follow up interviewees’ responses and explore areas that were not on the schedule (Kvale 1996); this leads to rich and deep data. The interview questions were relatively open-ended, allowing the participants to express their views on the topics introduced. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, totalling nearly 15 hours and 30 minutes of recorded interviews and over 150,000 transcribed words.

The sample was drawn from staff who had participated in centrally-organised events around learning and teaching innovation. This purposive sample comprised academic staff who already saw their work as innovative and therefore made discussions around innovative practice more concrete and productive than a randomly selected sample would have achieved.

The data were analysed inductively within the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 8. Initial codes were identified which were then organised into themes (drivers to change, facilitators, inhibitors, definition of innovation, definition of higher education innovation, source of idea, spread, routine practice). These themes were later refined into the categories that shape the findings’ section discussed below.

**Findings**

**Definitions of innovation**

When asked to define what innovation in learning and teaching practices was, the interviewees used words such as: ‘challenging’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘creative’ and ‘engaging’. They described notions of change, difference and improvement. There was an emphasis on ‘newness’, but with different understandings of what new meant. For some interviewees, innovation had to be something that was ‘completely new’
(interview 4) or ‘untried’ (interview 15), whereas the majority recognised that an innovation need not be ‘mind blowing’ (interview 9) but could be new to you, your students or your context. This resulted in varied yet highly contextualised definitions of innovation. For many of the interviewees, the definition of innovative relied on where the innovation was situated. What is innovative in Nursing, for example, might be commonplace in Engineering. Innovation, then, should be contextualised, situated and recognisant of individual and institutional needs; in sum:

I don’t have a definition [of innovation], I don’t need one. I just try and respond to the situation around me (interview 13)

The need for innovation to be responsive to the context also meant that innovation guided strategically by the University was key to many of the interviewees. The recruitment, retention and progression needs of the University led academics to try new things in their teaching practices, while specific University strategies were also seen as stimuli for change:

I think obviously you have to look at the University’s own drivers and look at their sort of key principles and aims and objectives and then within your own schools you have school plans and projects whatever and then within our own divisions and programmes (interview 3)

Particular strategic initiatives focus change in specific areas. Having a driver for employability, for example, meant that one lecturer did not have to fight so hard to ensure that students had access to placements (interview 7). In addition, for several of these respondents, the decision by the University’s senior executive to support Second Life, the most popular multi-user virtual world used as a platform for learning in higher education (Warburton 2009), had legitimised and encouraged projects in this area:

I suppose that it was something new that had been introduced to the University so the driver for us was here’s this Second Life that the University had subscribed to so … (interview 3)

Second Life just happened upon us because the University decided to invest in it and so we thought well we’ve got that, we’ve got it … (interview 6)

Some interviewees recognised that if they could make the links between their innovative ideas and University strategy, they were more likely to get the funding and support they needed to develop their ideas further. Such understandings were shaping the work they were doing:

I suppose it does fit with the idea within the University and I suppose that might get you more support internally if you need it, if it fits the agendas. But if it doesn’t you know then you maybe wouldn’t get so much support, which would be a shame (interview 9)

While it was possible to be an individual innovator, you were more likely to be successful if that innovation aligned with University priorities.
There was a concern that innovation could be seen as a ‘fad’ or a ‘fashion’: something that will die in the wind or become obsolete quickly. It is not only individuals, institutions can also join bandwagons:

Now the University wants everyone to do it because other universities are doing it, it’s not because it’s a response to what we need . . . It’s because they’re keeping up with other universities (interview 13)

This can make practitioners sceptical about the role and nature of innovation and cynical about working innovatively. The same lecturer recognised the value of playing the innovation card:

I only use the word innovative or innovator when I’m talking to management who need some kind of buzz word to get interested in something. And then I say “oh it’s really innovative” and they say “is it? Oh well if it’s innovative . . .” (interview 13)

The ‘fads’ and ‘fashions’ that the University chooses to follow might well shape the innovations that individuals choose to pursue, thus limiting real freedom to innovate. The recognition and reward that individuals receive for taking part in different activities is also highly pertinent to which innovations are pursued.

**Reward and recognition**

Staff indicated that they were more likely to become involved in innovative practices if their efforts were rewarded or recognised: ‘it has to be incentivised, there’s got to be a reason why they’re going to do it’ (interview 5).

What innovators often need is time and space away from teaching and other duties to develop their ideas. This had happened for some of the interviewees:

Little bit of space, two days a week. Can’t complain about that and that’s largely what got the project off the ground (interview 1)

Another incentive is money that can motivate people to innovate:

And now the funny thing is that these people got a thousand quid, I don’t wake up, I don’t come out of my bed for a thousand quid, but still it gave the people the incentive […] You throw a little money at it, you get some examples and then people will see, okay this is not a game, this is not a plaything, this can actually be useful (interview 4)

Without any money to develop the work, it can be difficult to continue and often exciting projects die by the wayside (interview 5). One interviewee, who had put in for a small grant which he did not get, described his frustrations:

Prestige was the least of it, I could have used that thousand pounds for some equipment, real research needs money and time, you know, and I didn’t get any of that […] There is no funding, it’s an obstacle, there is no funding, there’s no support for me really, you know. I feel a bit isolated that way (interview 1)
Here, then, the University is actively shaping what innovations are likely to succeed. Incentives, in the form of career progression, also provide impetus for strategic engagement with University-led innovations:

You could be strategic about it and say well it’s career advancement as well if you get recognised for it, so that might push some people to go further in their innovation (interview 10)

Recognition can be gained internally. The interviewees mentioned two initiatives: an institutional Second Life competition that had given some of the interviewees’ prestige and a small pot of money to develop their work and an internal learning and teaching award. Achieving recognition through the award proved beneficial to one interviewee as he looked for external collaborators:

I think it actually helped that it looked, well it was a funded project because it was part of the award scheme, so I could actually introduce it with: ‘this is a funded project for two years, I’d like to invite some of your students to take part, I can run it, blah, blah, blah and I’ve got time off and all the rest of this and is anybody interested in taking part?’ (interview 9)

There seemed, however, to be a lack of external recognition for innovatory learning and teaching practice with some staff acknowledging that it is often difficult for those who want to develop their teaching portfolio and their research profile (interview 3). Interviewees described how it was hard for them to align their learning and teaching interests with the existing research strands within their department (interviews 3, 8 and 11). Lack of alignment meant opportunities for development funding were unlikely; one interviewee noted that he would very much like to attend more general education-related conferences but that he would have to forego one of his discipline conferences to do that, something he was unwilling to do (interview 10). Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Research Excellence Framework (REF) pressures make the situation all the more difficult. Academics are often under pressure to produce top-quality journal articles within their own subject discipline:

Education that’s really not their drive [...] They’re not quite saying ‘don’t do it’ but it’s not going to do anything for them for their RAE or REF or whatever’s coming along, so there’s a kind of pressure to do your stuff on that [your discipline] and not on education (interview 8)

The support for innovation, then, seems to favour short-term, internal projects aiming to deal with immediate institutional issues rather than the long-term development and personal growth of academic staff.

When there are possibilities to develop projects so that publications are impact-rated and future grant proposals fundable, the pace at which higher education operates is at odds with the rate at which innovation works, meaning that important opportunities might be missed:

You know because to get stuff out in the journals takes years and by that point it’s not innovative any more (interview 14)
The projects have been hushed and because our research department within the school think there may be a funding application down the line once there’s been some good publications and the peer review stuff [...] They want to sit on it for 12 months as I say, get the papers out, use that to get funding. I think rather cynically that they’re going to miss the boat twice in a row (interview 1)

The mismatch between the rate of innovatory change and the movement of educational publishing is a major concern and needs to be recognised. A further facet of the institutional characteristics that support innovatory cultures is a recognition of the support and training that might well be needed for innovations to develop and this aspect is covered in this final section.

Support
The interviewees in this study recognised the importance of senior support for their ideas; without senior support it was hard to imagine how innovation can progress and spread at all:

If you are looking at making a difference you have to say look if we do this will it be supported, if this is successful will there be support from up above, who essentially are the ones who make the decisions about whether you can go ahead with something or not (interview 3)

There has to be support from above because if there isn’t then just like anything if you continue you hit your head off a brick wall, eventually you’ll give up (interview 8)

The senior support might manifest itself as strong leadership; leadership can enable things to get done that might not have happened before (interviews 6, 8 and 16). One way to guide innovation and support staff is to offer themes for staff to think about:

I think also focussing, rather than sort of let a thousand flowers bloom, I think you have to sometimes say okay this year we’re going to concentrate on internationalisation, e-learning, employability, full-stop [...] So over the years I’ve learnt just a little bit of focus also keeps people calm. They don’t feel it’s this perpetual ongoing change (interview 15)

There is, however, a danger that guided innovation will be seen as a ‘top-down’ push. Such pushes can result in symbolic engagement, disaffection or resistance (interviews 3, 4, 5 and 15).

Other support in terms of people-time can be extremely beneficial; having designated technical support within the School aided several projects using Second Life: ‘really having [NAME] was invaluable, I think it would have fallen flat on its face without that’ (interview 6). The School had put investment in this resource and it seemed to pay off for the projects.

Less helpful, however, was the lack of technological infrastructural support for Second Life, which frustrated several of the interviewees, especially given that the Second Life Initiative was supported by the Principal:

It’s actually not been as easy as we thought because some of the computers in the University are not sophisticated enough to be able to deal with the programme and will
crash or you can’t actually get online or it won’t, it’s just very slow and even just getting access sometimes […] I think it’s because IT don’t necessarily support Second Life so there’s a bit of a clash, I think, of priorities so if we were experiencing problems with Second Life on our own computers and saying this to IT, IT were sort of saying well that’s not why you’ve got a computer. You might want to run Second Life but that’s just not our problem (interview 2)

It was more to do with the kind of support around it that seemingly wasn’t there, you know, IT services weren’t helping us, it was really from here which you know is a crazy policy for these things that the University’s pumped money into Second Life yet it’s not pervasive across all the service departments and on individual PCs (interview 10)

The technical support issues were not only with Second Life, but with other innovative technologies, where staff found that they did not always have the IT facilities needed to further their projects (interview 8).

It also needs to be recognised that innovations will not embed overnight nor will they necessarily embed on their own. They need to be introduced gradually and people given the time to adapt to the change, with someone to guide that change:

I think sometimes things just need a wee while to embed and I think we’re too quick at evaluating and then changing things because we see it, as well, we need to act on rather than just letting things settle for a while and I suppose that relates to innovatory practice because people are kind of ‘oh this is great let’s go with it, oh it didn’t work, okay let’s try something else new’ (interview 3)

You’re in it for the long-term, it’s a drip, drip, drip thing, it’s not overnight and you have to be prepared to stick with it. I mean that is never truer than in education. You have to be in it for the longer term, you know. There are very few quick fixes (interview 11)

Some of the interviewees, however, were not convinced that they wanted their innovations to become part of routine practice (interviews 4, 9, 12 and 14). Having the whole university community using blogs, for example, means that the novelty value of blogging and its power to engage students is lost. As one interviewee pointedly noted:

An innovative thing soon becomes establishment and then it is dead in the water (interview 4)

For many of these self-confessed innovators, the aim was not to change the whole educational system, but to focus on enhancing their own contexts. Their innovatory work is more likely to be successful if it chimes with the university’s vision and is supported by its senior staff.

Discussion

In terms of the meanings of the term innovation, the definitions provided in this study were as diffuse and slippery as those found in the literature. The idea of innovative processes, products, practices and policies was present in this dataset. The focus on ‘newness’ was also apparent in the interviewees’ responses; Johannessen, Olsen, and Lumpkin (2001) has already noted that most innovation definitions have this at their core. ‘Newness’ itself is not an uncomplicated term; it raises the question
of ‘what is new, how new and new to whom’ (Johannessen, Olsen, and Lumpkin 2001, 21). While there was no consensus on this matter, many of the interviewees highlighted that innovation is something deemed new to the people or the environment in which the innovation was introduced. This ‘contextualising’ of innovation chimes with the work of Blake and Hanson (2005) who suggest that social and geographical context is fundamental in the identification of what is considered innovative and that of Johnston (1996) who argues that decisions to engage in innovative teaching result from the interplay of your own experiences, cultural norms and expectations, and contextual factors. This study has highlighted the importance of context particularly. Such contextualisation, however, raises its own issues. It becomes impossible to discuss innovation in a meaningful way as each interlocutor will have their own conception of what the term means ranging anywhere from ‘blue skies thinking’ through to someone’s first use of a new function in the Microsoft Office package. Devoid of a concrete definition, the term innovation can become a vehicle for managerialism where it connotes particular forms of institutional change.

The interviewees noted a range of drivers for innovation in learning and teaching. Some of these drivers were external (governmental, national policy and professional body) and others institutional (strategies, initiatives and policies). The drivers here ‘guide’ innovation. This is particularly apparent in the innovative practices represented in this sample. As noted above, the interviewees all deemed themselves innovatory practitioners and had volunteered to share their work at a centralised event on innovative learning and teaching practices. Of the 16 interviewees, 12 had their projects supported by institutional initiatives (nine of which were around Second Life). Where the innovation is perceived to be aligned with the organisation’s strategic objectives, it is ‘likely to fare better’ (Kanter 2000, 200) and it can be very difficult to ‘innovate outside the institution’s frameworks, policies and directions’ (Hannan and Silver 2000, 1). Certain drivers, such as increasing participation, can actually impede innovation. Hockings (2005, 321) highlights how large class sizes impacted negatively on the lecturer in her study’s introduction of more student-centred approaches into his practice. Universities’ desires to innovate institutionally through guided individual innovation could disable genuinely sustainable, needs-driven innovation, as innovators respond to an institutional call to innovate in a particular area and play a strategic game that will ensure that their project is recognised and valued (Findlow 2008). Such game-playing was apparent for some of the interviewees in this study. Universities also often follow particular fashions, choosing to go down a particular route because other universities were, not because of some recognised institutional need. This has been recognised by other authors, particularly in the area of online learning technologies, which are often introduced without due evaluation (Pratt 2005) and online education, whereby ‘institutional myths’ based on ‘taken-for-granted assumptions, largely unsupported by empirical evidence’ have legitimated online approaches, which do not always take into consideration the particular characteristics of the institution involved (Cox 2005, 1768).

Personalised recognition, as suggested by Ahmed (1998) and heavily supported within the literature (see, for example, Johnston 1996; Samarawickrema and Stacey 2007), as a driver for learning and teaching innovation was also important for these interviewees. They noted that reward and recognition for innovative practices encourages people to pursue their innovative ideas. Such incentivisation, by means of
money, time-off, support and career progression, is also a tool for universities in their shaping of particular aspects of academic practice. Without these incentives, the privileging of research over teaching will inevitably dampen attempts to innovate. A lack of recognition of teaching, pressures to publish REF-able research and the requirement to bid for research grants, experienced by some of the interviewees in this study, acted as a barrier to their innovative activities. This is not an issue specific to the case study institution; in her study academic innovation, Findlow (2008, 320) found that her respondents believed that ‘scientific or academic prestige’ was ‘incompatible with “innovation”’. It seems, then, that to be an innovative practitioner may bring internal reward if the innovation fits the institution’s agenda, but is unlikely to lead to external recognition particularly in the Scottish sector where there is no national teaching fellowship scheme system.

The final area of discussion was around support. The interviewees recognised the necessity of having senior support for any innovative practice that they wished to develop. In the same way that innovative projects fared better if they were aligned with the university’s strategic objectives, so too did those projects that had a champion, often at senior level (as Hannan and Silver 2000 and Hockings 2005 have noted). The concern again, however, is that ideas about innovation can be unduly shaped by senior management agendas and become removed from the very pressing needs and requirements of the individual. When senior support is removed because of changing agendas, individual innovators can be left stranded; as new initiatives are proposed, academics can suffer from ‘initiative overload’ (Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham 2005) or ‘innovation fatigue’ (Wolff 2008).

Conclusions
To conclude, I return to Kanter’s (2000) flower metaphor. Like flowers, learning and teaching innovations come in all colours, shapes and sizes. Without a clear definition of innovation, however, it may be difficult for practitioners to distinguish the potential flowers from the weeds. They may find that they devote time and energy to the cultivation of certain innovative practices, only to discover that they are not deemed sufficiently innovative for their institutional garden or they may become disenchanted when asked to draw on exotic rather than more sustainable, native solutions to local issues.

Innovations can grow wild, with little support. Whatever the circumstances, there will always be practitioners in higher education who want to explore and experiment with new ways of working. These individuals might well be working alone, hidden from view, and keeping the innovation’s essence close-by, thus limiting spread. Conversely, innovations, like flowers, can be cultivated. The findings from this study suggest that for these innovative practitioners, the case institution has a flourishing innovative culture led by dedicated, motivated practitioners who have opportunities to share their experiences through intra-institutional dissemination events. Innovative practices are cultivated through senior management support, strategically-driven funded initiatives and recognition systems. There is, however, always the risk that universities will limit their practitioners’ innovatory imagination by being overly prescriptive and shaping innovations to fit what is currently fashionable so that, like beds of cultivated tulips, all the innovations look pretty, but pretty much the same.
Or conversely, innovations can wither away as institutions remove support for practices that no longer fit with the institutional design.

The challenge for universities, then, is to cultivate and stimulate innovative cultures, that enable personal growth, without stifling creativity (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2008; de Graaf and Mierson 2005). There needs to be space for wild things to grow. Writing in 1870, the gardener William Robinson (1983) advocated ‘wild gardens’ over the formal, symmetrically-patterned gardens filled with hothouse flowers which were popular at the time. The ‘wild gardens’ were no ‘wildernesses’ but places where plants could grow unfettered from the regimentation of Victorian carpet-bedding. Permanent planting and combining native and exotic plants led to a more sustainable approach to garden design, saved some wildflowers from extinction and led to cross-pollination and altogether more diverse gardens. To cultivate innovative learning and teaching cultures, universities should consider ‘wild garden’ design; for, to quote a contemporary of Robinson’s Gertrude Jekyll, ‘in gardening arrangement, as in all other kinds of decorative work, one has not only to acquire a knowledge of what to do, but also to gain some wisdom in perceiving what is well to let alone’ (Jekyll, n.d.).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Caledonian Academy for the funds that supported this work, Dr Chidochangu Mpamhanga for his encouragement and the two anonymous referees for their comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference in Newport, Wales in December 2009.

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