



Centres for Excellence in Education (SFU) 2019

The Expert Panel's overall feedback to applicants and finalists

The panel assessed the applications against the criteria as outlined in the initial *"Call for proposals"* and selected finalists. Subsequent site visits to finalists explored the key critical notion outlined in this paper – 'likelihood of success'. The report which follows summarises the key findings garnered from applications and site visits, with a particular focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches presented across the seven site visits.

Key findings across applications and site visits

The panel assessed many excellent initiatives which were built on the quality of the existing education at applicant institutions. Many illustrated exceptionally innovative approaches to education – a number of which came with their own challenges and complexities. One particular challenge which all grappled with was the commitment to meet the needs of both graduates and society in general. For example, what attributes of graduates were employers seeking, and how could these attributes be embedded in university programmes? How best to 'bridge' this disconnection remained a challenge for many applicants.

In terms of conceptually addressing this gap and other complex issues related to excellence in education, it was clear that the proposed centres were at different points of a continuum. A number of applicants were at the beginning stage (thus premature in terms of awarding SFU funding), whilst others were at a more mature stage of their development, and had started piloting certain approaches for example the development of a community of practice within the proposed centre (staff and students collectively) combined with agreeing (even if only in broad terms) on a theory of change. Those who had already collectively determined infrastructures to address the complexity of their proposals – spanning a five year period - were in a much stronger position to be able to meet the criteria for the awarding of SFU status, to include the requirement in the Call for Proposals to lead *'innovation and quality enhancement in education, not just within the centres but also at institutional, national and international level'*.

Further to the guidance provided to SFU applicants, all proposed Centres were required to consider how they would deliver 'great impact to the overall society as well as the academic society'. As such, the panel probed, throughout the site visits, how this ambition would be realised. Particularly noteworthy across those deemed to offer the greatest likelihood of success were factors as below:

- a clear vision of what success would look like in terms of proposed Centre outcomes and impact;
- strong Centre and distributed leadership, a collegial approach, with engagement and ownership of the goals across all those involved in the centre proposal;
- horizon scanning, to include global and national benchmarking and learning from existing practice which informed the centre plan;
- a clear theory of change, to include description of the pedagogical vision;
- locating the centre in a supportive eco-system, particularly at Faculty and Institutional level.



The panel would strongly encourage all centres – irrespective of the outcome of the SFU judging process - to continue to strive for improvement within all aspects as highlighted above.

In the following, the panel will address mainly observations related to the finalists for SFU in 2019, as relayed through proposals and site visits.

Co-creation of a shared vision equals success

The panel was impressed by how the successful centres not only provided a **clearly articulated vision, purpose and goals**, but additionally provided a clear sense of purpose as to why the different work strands (and accompanying projects) were being proposed. However, a key challenge for a number of applicants was the bridging between internal (student's needs) and external drivers (employer needs).

The panel noted varying notions of '**co-creation**'. Where this worked well, students, academics, and other support staff all had an equal voice in determining firstly, the centre's goals and secondly, how they could be realised. The panel was most impressed by the effort and engagement shown by so many committed staff, students, and stakeholders willing to put in much effort to develop and enhance quality education.

Site visits also demonstrated that all centres wished to explore and take advantage of technological and digital advances, with some at the cutting edge, and others still maturing. Successful centres saw this potential as a means of greatly enhancing the quality of education and the delivery of desired learning outcomes. Technology was seen as a facilitator and accelerator, to support new and innovative practices in teaching, learning and assessment thereby bringing about constructive alignment with desired learning outcomes.

Defining, measuring and communicating success is challenging

Three areas continued to challenge applicants. These were the requirement for an evaluation and impact framework, a dissemination plan, and a clear theory of change. This has also been the case in previous rounds of selection of Centres for excellence in education.

Throughout the application process and the panel's site visits it was clear that the applicants struggled to formulate a clear framework for evaluation and assessment of impact and outcomes as an embedded entity, rather than an 'add on'. This was rather less the case with the dissemination plan, but over-reliance on methods used for the dissemination of research – *i.e.*, journal publications – typically was the norm.

Adopting a system-based approach to measure key performance indicators and their impact should assist with the development of a meaningful dissemination plan. To disseminate findings and spread best practice across the institution, the nation, and ultimately, globally, the centres need to determine the means by which they will assess the impact of their interventions on the student learner journey – both throughout higher education, and beyond, into employment.

Both evaluation and impact, and dissemination, need to focus on the new pedagogical approaches being proposed to better deliver student outcomes – *i.e.*, an emphasis on 'what works'. Grounding the 'what works' in the broader literature will ensure that centres are able to benchmark globally the extent and impact of their innovation.



In those centres which had a clear theory of change, this was borne out of on-going collective discussion, with all players having a clear sense of where their practice was at present, where they wanted to get to (the vision), and a sense of how they would get there (*i.e.*, the ‘gap analysis’ leading to proposed work strand activities).

Points to consider

Further to consideration of all applications and subsequent site visits, certain factors were identified as being key to ‘likelihood of success.’ These are listed, and expanded on, below:

(i) Leadership: coherent, distributed, and connected

The Call for Proposals of SFU states that ‘The centre must have clearly defined academic leadership with relevant competence and experience, and an organizational structure with clearly articulated management responsibilities.’ A number of proposed centres presented excellent leadership in terms of the centre leader (critical to the successful roll out of the project plan), accompanied by a set of capabilities. These included the capability to offer a clear vision of what the Centre aimed to achieve, great passion for delivery of the project plan, and an engaged style which empowered others to step up to the challenges. Alongside their own leadership capabilities, it was clear that an effective centre leader ensured connected leadership throughout the full range of stakeholders (external and internal), with a particular focus on work strand leaders (both staff and students). Clear accountabilities and responsibilities were the hallmark of a well thought through centre plan.

(ii) Diversity and Inclusivity

With its strong emphasis on student engagement, centres need to be mindful of the diversity of the student body, and how best to ensure an inclusive approach to ensure student success is adopted. Ensuring appropriate diverse role models – for example, female teaching staff in traditionally male dominated professions – would assist in the encouragement of a diverse student body.

(iii) Governance

Underpinned by principles of diversity and inclusivity, clear governance arrangements (including transparency) are essential to the effective roll-out of any change management process. In the case of the SFUs, thinking through appropriate representation on the various boards and advisory groups requires careful consideration. Being mindful of the SFU requirements, to include ‘relate to international developments in HE’, successful Centres ensured that there was an appropriate hierarchy of governance infrastructure and included global representation at the top level of governance.

(iv) Internal and external drivers: bridging the two

*SFUs are to ‘contribute to stronger interaction between higher education and relevant societal and professional fields.’ (Diku, 2019). Most proposed centres were, by and large, clear as to what the internal drivers for change were. However, through discussion with external stakeholders (‘relevant societal and professional representatives’), it became apparent that what external stakeholders deemed to be the key drivers did not always resonate with internal perceptions of key drivers for change. Panellists looked for consonance in this area: *e.g.*, in the area of professional practice, externals highlighted the skills sets they required from graduate recruits. Therefore, the challenge for the proposed SFU was to articulate how to ‘bridge’ the gap. ‘Bridging this gap’ required a clear theory of change which informed the construction of a change programme (‘feasibility of the plan’). Change programmes which were deemed to be in a ‘feasible’ position to deliver the vision were those which adopted a ‘systems approach’ embedded in a clear centre plan.*



(v) *Literature reviews*

The Call makes clear that SFUs ‘must (...) relate to international developments in higher education’, alongside ‘offer[ing] excellent research and development-based education’. However, the number of proposed centres that had undertaken a literature search to find out what, if anything, had been done in the area where they claimed to be ‘innovative’ was limited. There is a wealth of existing applied research readily available to assist the different disciplines both locate their proposed innovation, and to consider how best to move their practice forward to the next level. Additionally, there are many global communities of practice exploring, and contributing, to this literature. For example, there are a range of international networks looking at particular issues (*e.g.*, employability; reflective practice; learning portfolios; effective use of simulations) across the different disciplines.

Overall summary

Following this fourth round of SFU funding, there will be about a dozen SFU centres across Norway. The theory of change adopted by NOKUT and now Diku is to grow incrementally, learning from each of the rounds of the SFUs, so as to build capacity and capability on solid foundations. The theory of change is that of ‘appreciative enquiry’ – identifying what has worked well and building on successes – and ‘communities of practice’. As the first eight SFUs have built their own communities of practice, it seems timely, with the awarding of the recent additional centres, to create a pan-Norway community of practice of Centre leaders. It will be interesting to see which Centre leader, or leaders, step up to this challenge!