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# New Evaluative Research in CSET: the Scottish Funding Council’s Teaching and Learning Enhancement Strategy for Higher Education

 ***Professor Murray Saunders***

 ***Director: CSET***

**Background**

A team from CSET (Centre for the Study of Education and Training in the Department of Educational Research) has won the contract to evaluate the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) flagship policy on teaching and learning in Scottish Higher Education. This is the latest in CSET’s portfolio of UK Higher Education policy research over the last seven years which includes national evaluations of the Subject Centre Network in Higher Education, the programme of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) and the first evaluation of the Scottish Enhancement Strategy including its enhancement themes. In total these projects have provided approximately £1.3 million of funded research opportunity. This contract is for £495,000, begins in November 2008 and will continue for four years. The Learning and Skills Network is undertaking the evaluation of the strategy in the Further Education sector.

**Approach**

CSET adopts a distinctive, ‘theory based’ approach to policy evaluation which aids its contribution to the *academic* research process. The design combines two powerful traditions of evaluation – *Utilization Focussed Evaluation* and *Theory Based Evaluation*.

*Utilization Focussed Evaluation* takes seriously the requirements of commissioners of evaluations and has a strong sense of the ‘usability’ of its reports and commentaries. It is responsive to needs that evolve and it uses multiple layers of communication. Its style is communicative yet independent.

*Theory Based Evaluation* focuses on the connections between strategies and intentions. It helps to identify the informal theories of change embedded in policy strategies and the adaptations which occur as a policy is created in practice. Theory based approaches also recognise the importance of a strong theoretical framework within which, in this case, change might be understood. There is a specific interest in cultural change expressed by the SFC. We identify ‘practice based change’ as a persuasive indicator of cultural change. This includes ways of thinking and writing about quality (rhetorical practice) as well as day to day practices by stakeholders at different levels in the sector and systemic practices undertaken by institutions, departments or schools and course teams along with sector wide systems associated with the overall strategy.

The design depicts the Quality Enhancement Strategy as a policy trajectory involving multiple stakeholders with an espoused intention of improving the quality of students’ learning. To address this reality, our investigation will be multifaceted, using intensive site visits to all institutions in the sector, strategic interviewing and five separate surveys. It makes explicit references to base-line data from the first evaluation which was completed by CSET in 2006.

**The Team**

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The team is drawn from across the Department of Educational Research and combines world-class expertise in educational, programme and policy evaluation in HE, a thorough knowledge of research and best practice in teaching, learning, assessment in HE and a recent history of evaluative work within the Scottish HE sector.