How to fund Institutions as publishers: Survey for Resource Profiling towards Project Embedding

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This blog post was written by Errol Rivera, Edinburgh Napier University.

Yeah…but how much did it *really* cost?

Like a lot of funded projects, we bid on ours. Jisc wanted to see if university staff could produce a high quality e-textbook. So we did what responsible bid winners do: We figured what our expenses would be, justified them, and made a plan that we could stick to.

As assistant Evaluator on the UHI's bid for the project, my job is to put my research skills to work, as a kind of third party that observes and reports on the project to Jisc and the academic community. Since I'm not part of the production process, I can be more objective about how successful that process is. When I report what I observe, I call on my background in pedagogic research and the literary publishing industry to back up my observations. It's more like a kind of ethnography than anything else.

Like a lot of bid projects, the real outcome wasn't the thing that was made – that was just a proof of concept. That's the thing about bid projects, they're less about the product and more about the process. This bid wasn't about producing e-textbooks. It was about producing *A WAY TO MAKE* e-textbooks. The goal was to do something financially sustainable – a model for publishing e-textbooks that institutions like the University of the Highlands and Islands or Edinburgh Napier University, could carry on under their own steam once the Jisc money ran out.

Of course, that sort of thing is up to senior management. If they're going to embed any kind of model for publishing e-textbooks (let alone a good model), and make that process part of the university's regular activities, they need to be able to understand the benefits to their university. And you can't understand the benefit unless you know what kind of resource you're committing. Academic idealism is great, but it doesn't pay for anything.

Understanding resource commitment isn't just about money, though. Paying a world class chef £1000 to make dinner for you and a friend tonight is a bit excessive. But paying £2000 in several instalments over the course of a year to feed a whole family? That might sound a bit more reasonable to some people – and it's also why the wedding industry survives. You have to think about the skills and knowledge you're employing, as well as the time involved.

The challenge for us is that The Institution as Publisher is a relatively new concept with regard to e-textbooks. So judging all the costs and benefits gets that much harder. Innovations are lost when innovators make poor work of contextualising what they're offering benefactors. Senior management need to be able to quickly understand the diversity and range of skill required in order to make their production model sustainable. They also need to know how much those skills cost, and the time on task that affects those costs over a financial year.

So we did what any responsible researchers would do... we made a survey.

This survey is a tool meant to enable the embedding of a viable and sustainable model for the publication of e-textbooks by a university. Unlike other pedagogical innovations which happen 'in the wild', this eTIPs publication process started out with a bid. And what is a bid, if not "initial resource". That means people, money, and time specifically ear marked for the project. The upside to this is obvious: It allows the production process to take shape in optimal conditions. Theoretically speaking, you've got everything you need from the start…

…theoretically

There's another problematic word in there too, 'optimal conditions.' Most of the time, when it comes to conditions, optimal might as well mean 'artificial.'

Teams like UHI can work diligently to provide a realistic bid which seeks to outline a plan for the resource to be used, but even in the most optimal conditions, these projects are living things. People get excited, busy, new creative opportunities arise, and 'the plan' often changes in the interest of the project. The project may be a success, but often the actual work turns out to be more innovative, more challenging, and more exciting - and the bids and plans don't do them justice. This means that when the time comes to permanently support initially funded projects, a project team's success can ironically undermine future endeavours, even with an accurately reported budget.

Now that multiple books have been created using our process, we the project evaluators, Laurence Patterson and Errol Rivera, can look back on 'the real work' that was done. Or least, we can try.

The Survey and the Information it Gathers

Survey for resourcing embedded eTIPs models

1. What department do you work for, what is your role in this project, and what does that involve?
2. How much of your time per week is allocated to this project? Does that weekly allocation accurately reflect the time you spend on the project? If not please elaborate. If you were responsible for advising a more realistic estimate time allocation, what would it be and why?
3. If possible, please give a rough estimation on the total time you've spent, working on the most recent book, since its production began.
4. If someone took over your role, and had the minimum amount of expertise to preform it, what £/hour would you feel is appropriate compensation. Please explain your answer if you can.
5. If you were asked to perform your role again, producing a book once every academic year, what percentage of your time would be required to meet this production schedule?
6. Does your responsibility on this project reasonably fall under the purview of the department you currently work for? Is there another department that would be better suited to performing your duties on the project? Please explain?
7. Is there an existing department in your university that you feel should manage all eTIPs publications? If so, please identify it and explain why it's best suited.
8. Do you think eTIPs management should exist as its own department (I.e. a kind of press)? Please explain your answer.
9. Is there any other aspect of your role not covered here, that upper-level management should consider when determining resources for future university-funded eTIPS production (I.e. matters of time, funding, expertise, ethos, etc)

We start by making sure the survey covers 4 basic concepts which we felt had the most direct effect on a project's resource.

1. The Skills used
2. The Time Spend
3. The Appropriate Compensation
4. The Place in the University's structure.

Then we focus on the work done on the project, asking questions that overlap these four concepts, in order to ensure that responders aren't thinking about their answers in the abstract, or worse - guessing. Questions about 'time spent' were asked in the context of 'appropriate compensation' or 'The skills used.' The survey is then distributed to everyone who worked on the project.

Their full answer is filed under the appropriate question (bold). Then their answer is broken down into the constituent concepts (italicised).

2. How much of your time per week is allocated to this project? Does that weekly allocation accurately reflect the time you spend on the project? If not please elaborate. If you were responsible for advising a more realistic estimate time allocation, what would it be and why?	*Currently Weekly Allocation*	*Per Book/Regardless of which book*

4. If someone took over your role, and had the minimum amount of expertise to preform it, what £/hour would you feel is appropriate compensation. Please explain your answer if you can.	*Recommended Skill Set*	*Recommended £/hr*

Adding up all the respondents' answers from questions like Question 2 and 4 gives us a realistic reflection of time spend on task, as well how much that time was worth in retrospect for each respondent, based on their idea skills required. Adding up the answers from all respondents, can give a project-wide view of budget, human resource needs, and work load allocation. Asking a two-part questions like Question 4 is crucial – it gets the responder thinking about things in relation to each other, which ensures a response that reflects reality more than an ideal.

5. If you were asked to perform your role again, producing a book once every academic year, what percentage of your time would be required to meet this production schedule?	*Recommended Weekly Work Allocation*

6. Does your responsibility on this project reasonably fall under the purview of the department you currently work for? Is there another department that would be better suited to performing your duties on the project? Please explain?	*Current Department Appropriate*	*Recommended Department*	*Justification*

Questions like Question 5 and 6 aren't hard information but utilise the expertise of the respondent to inform important decisions about the future of the project, and its sustainability.

So What Now?

For the responder, these questions promote valuable reflection about the journey or the project, but our real goal is to produce hard numbers from the harder-to-measure aspects of human endeavour. That's a bit tougher. Beyond that, we want to collect reflections about what would need to be done differently in the future, based on the view of experts who did the work. Essentially we're asking "Think about what you've been doing as if it were part of a pilot project. What would need to change in order to make it someone's day job?" The benefit to this comes in when Senior Management consider embedding, because it means boots-on-the-ground workers are essentially contributing to what may become university policy.

Of course, some project team members won't be able to answer these questions as easily as others, from a logistical standpoint. For example, authors don't put time into the project in the same way an editor or a web designer would. The practicalities of that skill set don't lend themselves well to 'clocking in'.

While some team members found this survey easy and straight forward, others found parts difficult to answer, and some found the entire thing impossible. The main challenges in getting this information arise from the following…

- Being able to calculate the average weekly time spent on the project
- Placing a monetary value on their own skill set

However, it was discovered that with assisted reflection, many were able to answer the survey with confidence. When respondents answered the questions optimally, the information yielded was invaluable.

This leads the evaluation team to suggest that this method is sound, but rich data like this requires one-to-one support from the evaluator. Respondents often need facilitation in looking at their skills objectively, and some expertise in required in asking the respondent probing questions. However, the UHI Evaluation team has the skillset to provide responders with that support, and even though this data is still being gathered, the benefits have already shown themselves to be worth the effort.

This can be a powerful tool for senior management, as it provides them with more than just information and numbers – it provides them with perspective and expertise, truncated for easy digested, enabling them to make decisions that will better ensure the health and longevity of the embedding and implementation, as well as the satisfaction of the workforce.