

The emphasis on 'innovation' in the new, renamed and restructured, department for post-16 education provokes some interesting questions – but, beyond the rhetoric, what does it signify, asks **TOM SCHULLER**



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# Innovation, innovation, innovation

**I**nnovation, Universities and Skills. The new title of the department offers much food for thought. I've always been one for acronyms, and the idea of a *DIUS ex machina* conjures up some interesting possibilities. Will the Secretary of State swoop from the skies to save a sector poised on the brink of disaster? What dramatic twists are in store for us in the educational plot? Or does the acronym subconsciously promote a new but covert faith-based approach to learning?

Joking apart, the title is indeed an intriguing and important one. Bringing the idea of innovation right to the fore is, to use an overworked term, challenging, and I say this not only because the unit I head has 'innovation' in its title.

Pinning down what innovation means is not at all easy. My colleagues and I debate this quite regularly, and, broadly speaking, there are three different lines of argument. The first is that we are about identifying individual innovations in different educational systems, comparing them and drawing lessons from them, for instance to do with what works in building in assessment to different forms of adult education. This could, incidentally, be done in an extremely conservative way, however innovative the projects we observe might be.

The second is to carry out research in an innovative way. Different kinds of work lend themselves to innovation to different degrees. Arguably, innovation is easier to introduce when it can be done, initially at least, on a small scale. The potential damage is limited, and the effects may be easier to isolate and evaluate. On that line of argument, getting agreement on innovation in comparative international work is harder than most, since

good innovation depends in part on a sound common understanding of the orthodoxy or tradition from which one is departing. But in any case there is huge scope at all levels for conducting innovative experimentation.

## Systemic level

The third approach, by contrast, is to think about innovation at systemic level, and to examine how far the education system, or sub-systems, are capable of promoting innovation and what determines this capability. This is where the department's title comes into play. To me, the title signals the following. At a general level, sustained innovation is going to be more and more important in a global economy. So much is more or less routine rhetoric, but this does not diminish its significance. Education has a major part to play in enabling innovation to happen, whether that be in the economy or more broadly. This too is more or less cliché. But when we start to give it some serious thought it stops being rhetoric or cliché and becomes something to grapple with in quite testing ways.

The easy part is that education – especially higher education – is the motor behind research, the generation of new ideas in all fields of inquiry, from nanotechnology to performance sports (including the potential connections between the two, cf. the Tour de France and performance enhancement). Without strong universities, countries will struggle to hold their own in an increasingly competitive research field. Secondly, though, education has a strong claim to be important in making people receptive to innovation, whatever the original source may be. Certainly, there are examples of highly

qualified people whose education appears to have rendered them progressively more immune to anything approaching a new idea or way of behaviour. But, on the whole, we accept that raising levels of education will make people more able to understand innovation, and to be able to absorb it into their working or daily lives.

It is when we try to delve beyond that general capacity that things get hard. Exactly what kinds of skills and attitudes are those which best foster a positive approach to innovation? It's easy to say we should encourage entrepreneurialism in schools and colleges, but is this something which can be directly taught? What do we all need to know about systems – biological, IT, engineering – in order to be able to grasp innovative potential? And what about creativity, an even more commonly cited component of successful innovation? Should it form part of the core college curriculum?

There is certainly scope for innovative thinking about the kinds of pedagogy and curriculum that will encourage creativity, entrepreneurialism and the rest, at all levels. One key further question is what is the best mix of these kinds of skills across the population. As ever, fostering impressive but highly specialised and elite innovative capacity will only work if the wider population has the diverse skills to participate.

All that said, the name is a good one, and I look forward to future developments.

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