

The Innovation Fund Check List:

The purpose of this checklist is to provide assistance to people engaged in thinking about the creation of mechanisms to support the development and diffusion of innovations or improvements in higher education through the use of special funds. The content of the checklist has been informed by an analysis of numerous higher education reform/improvement/innovation projects that have used “demand-responsive” funds (whether competitive or not) to support elements of projects. The checklist is nothing more than a heuristic-- a way to give people (project planners) an opportunity to think about certain factors that are related to successful innovation funds—or conversely, factors whose absence seem to be related with projects that had limited success.

This checklist focuses only of the planning phases leading up to and including the design of an innovation fund. A latter checklist will be concerned with Implementation. To keep this document short and useful, brief annotation may accompany some of the questions in the checklist. A fuller discussion of the relevance of the questions may be found in the study from which this checklist derives.¹

Initial Assessment Phase: (Scanning the environment within which it is anticipated that a higher education innovation project would be active)

1. Are there current, valid and reliable data on how the higher education system and individual institutions are doing in terms of the priorities espoused by the government and the World Bank?

2. Are there current, valid and reliable studies indicating how the “end-users” of higher education’s “products” (graduates) and “services” (research; education and training programs; consultants; facilities, etc) available for hire are perceived?

2.a (Frequently projects are anticipated and designed without good evidence of how higher education’s “end-users” perceive its functioning, with the result that when government turns to them to support reform efforts after donor funding ends there is inadequate response. This question should alert planners to the need for understanding end-user sentiment and assessing whether the means exist to measure these sentiments.)

3. Are there transparent, easily accessible structures or mechanisms through which end-users have regular opportunities to articulate needs, interests, and concerns to higher education at multiple levels (system, institution, faculty)? Examples of structures or mechanisms might include: interfaces between professional associations and academic programs through means such as accreditations councils; business-education roundtables; institution and faculty advisory councils; state or industry supported research councils; etc.

3.a (Frequently higher education projects are designed and implemented without comprehensive and sustained involvement of end-user, which seriously reducing the chances of sustainability. In some cases it is because existing structures where higher education officials and end-users interact have not been incorporated into the planning process in sufficient detail. In other cases it may be that such structures do not exist, in which case it may be necessary to include their development in the design of the project. The question should alert planners to scan the environment to assess whether such

¹ Richard Fehnel. “Funding for Innovation: The Use of Demand-Responsive Funds for Tertiary Education Reform.” A Paper Prepared for The World Bank, COREHEG, 2002.

structure exist, whether they have been consulted adequately and whether they may need to be engaged more thoroughly in the assessment and design phases.)

4. Are there “gaps” in the higher education landscape that would seriously inhibit achieving higher education strengthening goals? Gender; Ethnicity; Age groups (eg, appropriate programs for working adults, or appropriate age distribution of academic cadres); Geographic; Field, Subject or Skill areas; Research Institutes; ICT; effective accreditation mechanisms; etc. By “gaps” is meant pre-requisite issues that need to be addressed before issues identified on the higher education reform agenda can be undertaken?

4.a (All projects rest on assumptions about certain pre-existing conditions. Yet in some cases these assumptions have not been verified, with the result that a project faces an impediment that must be dealt with before the ‘real issues’ of the project can be addressed. This question seeks to aid planners in thinking carefully about their assumptions of necessary preconditions, and to plan for addressing these in an appropriate manner when and where required as part of the design process.)

5. Is there “logical linkage” between national development plans and the role of higher education in fulfilling those plans? Is there sufficient political and financial linkage between these plans to support the logic, and to provide a base for initiating reform, as well as reasonable hope for sustaining reform? If not, what needs to happen to create these linkages, and is there sufficient capacity and will in country to make these things happen?

5.a (Some projects seem designed and initiated to serve the needs of the higher education community exclusively. Inevitably, these projects run into a resource barrier; their purposes are seen as competing with rather than complementing other national needs. This question seeks to initiate detailed thinking about whether and how the “logic” of the higher education planners coincides with and can be seen as an essential element in national development plans. Think of it as a “litmus test” of political and financial viability.)

Design Phase

Is there balance in the design process for authentic voices of higher education and “end-users” to be heard and to shape the design of any substantial reform effort likely to be supported by the Bank? If not, what needs to happen to make space for these voices? Is that feasible?

(Sometimes the design process fails to provide appropriate “space” for a diversity of voices---and particularly the voices of end-users---with the result that the design is flawed. The assessment phase should alert planners to potential shortcomings in this regard; the design phase should provide opportunities to assure that there is “balance” between providers and consumers of educational services.)

Is there general agreement on the goals of the HE reform effort, and on the key indicators that will signal progress?

(Authentic expressions of agreement are sometimes difficult to achieve when there are huge disparities between parties seeking to work together---a condition that often exists which major multi-lateral donors are involved in projects. Sometimes third parties can be helpful in verifying whether or not genuine agreement exists among all parties not only

on the goals, but also on how progress will be measured. Without adequate, appropriate and simple indicators, project focus may be easily lost.)

Is there an independent and capable mechanism for monitoring indicators? If not, is the creation of such a mechanism part of the design?

What will be the role of a demand-responsive innovation or improvement fund to the goals of the reform effort? Will indicators be able to measure the relationship between overall goals and the goals of the demand-responsive fund?

(Passivity or institutional inertia is a great obstacle to change, but can be overcome by design components that require the generation of demand from those who profess to seek change. Careful consideration of whether and how to locate the use of demand-responsive funds to stimulate and sustain change within a project is crucial to the long-term success of a project. And, having simple but accurate measures that demonstrate the linkage between the demand-responsive innovation component and the overall goals of the reform effort will require sophisticated understanding of individual and institutional dynamics.)

Does the Innovation/Improvement Fund have a clear strategy for gaining sustainability independent of Ministry of Education budget? If not, what can be done to address this situation in the design phase?

(Few projects give sufficient attention to the requirement of nurturing adequate funds for sustaining gains and supporting their diffusion, despite ubiquitous rhetoric concerning sustainability. Nor is it generally recognized that the need for innovation will grow as higher education is expected to contribute more to national needs. These needs often do not become pressing matters until well into a project, at which time it is often too late to take adequate action. However, these issues can be minimized by adequate planning in the design stage, and these questions are intended to prompt planners to think about and plan for the sustainability of an innovation fund.)

Does the Innovation Fund have the flexibility (in terms of process and funding) to make substantial modifications as lessons are learned?

Does the Innovation Fund have a specific strategy, with adequate funding, for the diffusion of successful innovations? Are there resources to enable innovators, adapters and Innovation Fund managers to interact regularly with other higher education innovation/improvement projects in other areas of the world, as well as within the target country?

Does the design of the Innovation Fund enhance the integration of learning, research, and application to the satisfaction of involved “end-users”?

(As higher education institutions evolve, there is increasingly a tendency for the linkages between core functions to become weaker. Sometimes Innovation Funds may even exacerbate this tendency. However, good design planning may increase the likelihood of having innovations enhance the integration of core functions of institutions of higher education and enhance their responsiveness to the needs of end-users. This question seeks to guide planners in thinking about and searching for opportunities that enhance linkages among core functions.)

Do the design of the Innovation Fund and the design of the overall project realistically reflect the normal time requirements of an innovation-adoption-assimilation cycle? If not, what needs to happen to make a better fit?

How do bank procurement requirements impact the implementation of the Innovation Fund?

If a competitive aspect is considered in the Innovation Fund, are there checks and balances to assure transparency of the process, as well as opportunities for young scholars to successfully access funds? Is there sufficient funding to assure a reasonable chance of competing successfully, provided that one has a viable proposal?