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From the point of writing the initial bid for funding the Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings (ALPS) programme has been predicated upon the need for a flexible, collaborative ethos between partners. The five ALPS partner universities, Strategic Health Authority and 16 professions had experience of working together in many ways but the scale, complexity and sustained engagement has been a unique experience for all parties. At the outset a matrix of management and working meetings was created in conjunction with a small central Core Team and a highly devolved budget. This structure has necessitated the sharing of work, mutual trust and reliance with regard to: innovating for assessment and learning in practice settings; agreeing priorities; facing challenges and developing a united approach to Professional Statuary and Regulatory Body requirements.

We contend that a major outcome of the programme, additional to any processes or artefacts is the current and potential latent strength of interprofessional, interorganisational collaboration. Collaboration, defined here as working in combination but not necessarily in integration (combining parts into a whole) (Duff et al 2009) has not only become more common but also more necessary in modern society (Axelsson and Axelsson (2009). Huxman (1996) suggests that the main reason for collaboration is the advantage it affords over working in isolation or competition. It is widely acknowledged that building and sustaining partnerships is crucial for effective education interventions yet there is equally wide agreement that such 'joint working' is demanding, time-consuming and laborious (Soultatou and Duncan 2009). We therefore felt that a systematic evaluation of the collaborative aspects of the programme would be valuable.

Mindful of the methodological difficulties in researching ones own practice, a mixed methods approach sought to evaluate and critique the programme, locating it within a theoretical framework of collaborative endeavour. Documentary analysis, reflective accounts, individual interviews and nominal group technique were used to create a number of complementary data sets. In order to minimise the limitation inherent in researching ourselves, we engaged external colleagues to aid in the data collection and analysis, and triangulation was used through other parallel and complimentary evaluations of the programme.

The overarching aim was to explore the barriers and facilitators to building successful partnerships in Higher Education in order to inform future practice.

Objectives:

1. To identify the impact of the ALPS programme with regard to collaboration between the 5 HEIs as perceived by ALPS participants

2. To analyse participants' perceptions of the change in the relationships within and between each institution.

Five themes: 'PSRB engagement'; 'measurable outcomes'; 'we got further than we would have done on our own'; 'size', 'money and time' emerged from the data and led to a conclusion that:

Facilitators of successful collaboration include organisational elements such as effective, strong leadership, clear channels of communication and shared vision. They also include 'softer' less measurable factors such as the space and time to make mistakes and the nurturing of a trusting and supportive culture.

Barriers to successful collaboration lay in the size and range that ALPS represented. With so many potential outcomes, the nature of 'success' was nebulous; the possibility for aims to become lost in the infrastructure, or for failure of one partner to deliver on one aspect to jeopardise others achievement was a potential problem.

With regard to the size of ALPS, the creation of the Core Team and management structure, whilst sometimes the subject of tension and conflict, was pivotal to the success of the collaboration.

Furthermore, it is difficult to categorise 'funding' as either a facilitator or a barrier. Whilst the funding was the catalyst for the development of the programme, it is impossible to calculate its influence regarding the success of the collaboration. The money could be enabling and liberating, because of the financial benefit, or because it signified validation and respect for the project and the staff involved. However it also had the potential to be divisive and negative. This is an interesting finding, worthy of further exploration, as the HE sector faces a period where little additional financial incentive for change and innovation is to be available.