

Sustainability Learning Review **2015**

Queen's University Belfast
Improving Children's Lives



The
ATLANTIC
Philanthropies

Introduction

Since 2004, Atlantic Philanthropies has made significant investments in Northern Ireland as part of its Disadvantaged Children and Youth programme (DCY). The aim of this programme has been to improve the lives of disadvantaged children by encouraging a shift in children's services provision towards early intervention and prevention and the commissioning of services that have evidence of effectiveness

In practice, DCY has operated by funding a significant number of voluntary and community organisations to identify existing evidence-based programmes, adapt them where necessary and to deliver them locally. Each grant made in this regard has required that the programmes being delivered are robustly and independently evaluated, commonly using a randomised controlled trial design.

Alongside the successful delivery of such programmes and the production of clear evidence of their effectiveness, DCY has included a strong advocacy strategy that has sought to engage with governments and other funding agencies with the aim of scaling-up and mainstreaming those programmes demonstrated to be effective.

In this work, it was recognised from the outset that DCY would require a high level of specialist research support. However, when Atlantic were first making grants through DCY in 2004, there was limited expertise on the island of Ireland in relation to the particular methods associated with early intervention and prevention research. For this reason, Atlantic awarded a number of grants, including one to Queen's University Belfast, to help build the research expertise and infrastructure required to support early intervention and prevention programmes.

This case study describes the investment that Atlantic made in Queen's, the impact this has had and the efforts that have been made by the university to ensure that this impact is sustained.

A number of key implications are identified from this case study for future sustainable grant-making and support.

Initial investment

A major grant of £1.4m was made to Queen's in 2008 to support the development of the Improving Children's Lives (ICL) initiative. With additional investment from the university's own special initiatives fund (£600,000) and from what is now the R&D Division of the Public Health Agency (£200,000), the overall vision for ICL was stated as:

Through its applied programme of research, dissemination and advocacy activities, the long-term impact that Improving Children's Lives seeks to achieve is lasting improvements in the lives of disadvantaged children and young people in Northern Ireland and also nationally and internationally.

To bring about these changes, ICL focused its activities on three core outputs between 2008-2011:

- The provision of high quality support to organisations in Northern Ireland and beyond that wish to adopt an outcomes-focused, evidence-informed and rights-based approach to the design, delivery and evaluation of services for children and young people.
- The provision of world-class research to organisations in Northern Ireland and beyond that is underpinned by a children's rights framework that can inform the design and delivery of services for children and young people and also rigorously evaluate their effectiveness.
- The delivery of a comprehensive dissemination and advocacy programme that will aim to bring about a sea change in the funding and support of services for children and young people, not only in NI but nationally and internationally.

- The investment itself enabled the appointment of eight post-doctoral Research Fellows located across various schools within the university; a programme manager and Administrator and funding to support a range of research and advocacy activities.

Key impacts and successes

The funding had a number of key impacts on Queen's as an organisation. Firstly, it made a significant contribution to consolidating and building upon the various strands of interdisciplinary research already evident within the university with regard to children and young people. In particular, ICL became a clear focal point that drew together and helped support and extend a strong network of about 70 academic and research staff across the following schools:

- School of Education
- School of Law
- School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences
- School of Nursing and Midwifery
- School of Pharmacy
- School of Psychology
- School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work

Secondly, the initiative enabled a more coherent and sustained focus for the range of work that was being undertaken in the area of children and young people; linking this together around a shared commitment to three core values that sought to promote an approach to the development of services for children and young people that are:

- Outcomes-focused
- Evidence-informed
- Children's rights-based

Thirdly, this distinctive focus also provided the basis for significant capacity building activities within Queen's. Through the appointment of the eight post doctoral Research Fellows, a significant number of training and capacity building events were organised over the three years of the grant that focused on enhancing research skills in relation to core aspects of early intervention and prevention research, such as: evaluation designs, and especially randomised controlled trials; evidence synthesis and meta-analysis; longitudinal research; participatory research with children and young people; and children's rights-based approaches to service design and delivery.

Fourthly, the clear identity and brand of ICL, and its distinctive core values, also provided an effective platform for researchers at Queen's to increase the profile of their work, to enhance existing collaborative relationships and develop new relationships with a wide range of external stakeholders.

Towards the end of the grant period, RSM McClure Watters was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the impact of the Improving Children's Lives initiative. The executive summary of their final report notes the following key achievements:

ICL is an interdisciplinary, cross-university collaboration which has now been successfully established and facilitated at QUB. This includes the establishment, servicing and facilitation of the ICL Management Committee, which brings together directors of research, heads of schools and senior staff from relevant research clusters, centres and institutes across the university. ICL has enhanced research capacity at QUB and this has been achieved through the appointment of 12 full-time posts at QUB, each with specific responsibility for developing capacity and expertise in particular areas of research.

During the reporting period, ICL has delivered 39 events, including 11 research events, six service design and capacity building events, five public lectures and 17 lunchtime seminars. The total attendance at these events was 1,364 people from 353 organisations¹, such as voluntary sector bodies, statutory sector bodies, policymakers and QUB staff and students. An ICL biennial conference was also held in 2014.

In addition to these events, ICL has also contributed to the delivery of research outputs at QUB. ICL Research Fellows have been involved with 89 submitted proposals, 36 of which were successful and have secured £3,085,630 of research funding so far. There were 36 unsuccessful proposals and six are pending a decision. However, 11 more proposals currently in preparation.

ICL research staff members have also submitted a total of 32 research papers to high quality peer reviewed international journals since taking up post. This includes 28 papers published and in press. In addition, five full-time interdisciplinary, cross-university PhD studentships funded by ICL have been appointed and are still ongoing. In addition, ICL members have also been successful in securing funding for a further four ICL studentships. Furthermore, the initiative has established publication of a new international journal “Effective Education” by Routledge Journals (Taylor & Francis) and four issues have been published to date.

By March 2013, ICL had fully achieved 15 out of 20 key outputs agreed for ICL. Two of the remaining outputs are scheduled for completion outside of the project deadline. These include the completion of five studentships (Output 9) and the organisation of an international conference (Output 15).

¹ *This figure does not include attendance at the ICL lunch time seminar series.*

Between the period (November 2011 - October 2012) the greatest output achieved was securing the Core University funding; a recurrent investment of £418,422. This has enabled ICL to: appoint four additional lectureships and an instructional designer in four different Schools across Queen’s University, facilitate permanent positions for the Project Manager and Administrator and provide recurrent annual non-staff funding of £40,000 to support interdisciplinary ICL research activities.

Four new MSc degree programmes, focusing on children and young people, are in the process of being established at Queen’s University. These programmes are the core component of a business model which seeks to secure increased income to support both the lectureships for the four new master’s courses and the ICL project.

Future environment & sustainability practices

The last comments in the extract above outline the business model developed for ICL that has sustained its work since the end of the Atlantic Philanthropies grant in 2011. As a university, the two core income streams open to QUB are fees from courses and income from securing externally funded research grants. This particular model, proposed to and agreed by the university executive board in 2012, has been based on generating new income from masters degree courses that would not only provide funding for existing core staff (Project Manager and Administrator) and £40,000 of non-pay funding per year to support core activities within ICL, but would also enable four new lectureships to be appointed.

The four new masters programmes represented core strengths within ICL and were all interdisciplinary and applied in focus, aimed largely at providing professional development opportunities for those working with children

and young people. The four programmes, as listed below, represented a strong collaboration across four academic Schools within QUB. Whilst each was led by a particular School, they all shared some core elements and included an emphasis on bringing students together from a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds:

- MSc in Children's Rights (School of Education)
- MSc in Caring for Children and Young People with Complex Health Needs (School of Nursing and Midwifery)
- MSc in the Psychology of Childhood Adversity (School of Psychology)
- MSc in Youth Justice (School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work)

Each of the four new lectureship posts created were assigned to one of the four Schools to provide support in the development and delivery of the above new programmes. For further details on the four programmes please see: www.improvingchildrenslives.org/Courses/

In addition, the additional recurrent funding of £40,000 per year has been used effectively since 2012 to support a wide range of activities, including the first ICL international conference, other large keynote events and also the promotion of the four new masters programmes. However, most of this funding has been used to provide small grants to interdisciplinary teams of researchers within QUB for activities that specifically focus on either: developing and extending research networks and collaborations with external stakeholders; preparing applications for large research grants to external funders; and/or research capacity building. Details of the small grants awarded to date, the interdisciplinary mix of the various teams and the range of topics and activities covered can be found online at: www.improvingchildrenslives.org/Research/ICLSmallGrants/

Overall, the four masters programmes have been successful and have experienced steady growth. They had their first intakes of students in 2014/15 and are currently being delivered to a second cohort. The courses are beginning to generate income that is projected, within the next two years, to begin to cover the costs of the two core ICL staff, the four new lectureships and the £40,000 non-pay recurrent funding.

Whilst the above represents a sustainable model for ICL as it stands, there are ambitious plans to take the core work of the initiative to another level in relation to it becoming one of a small number of priority areas within Queen's that will represent the university's core and distinctive strengths in international research. As part of the university's new corporate strategy, Vision 2020, the university has recently announced the creation of four new Global Research Institutes in relation to the following areas:

- Global Food Security
- Global Peace, Security and Justice
- Electronics, Communications and Information Technology
- Health Sciences

These Institutes will be launched early in 2016 and will be flagships for the university's research, drawing upon existing international profiles for research at Queen's and seeking to become global leaders in their respective areas.

At the time of writing, there are plans for ICL to be transformed into a Pioneer Research Programme, that will operate for three years (2016 – 2018) and that will seek to build the foundations from which to form a Global Research Institute from 2019 onwards.

In the short term, achieving the status of a Pioneer Research Programme will allow the

research programmes associated with ICL to be organised fully as a unit across the different schools/faculties, with its own cost centre.

It will also provide the basis for a stronger identity and brand for the work associated with the initiative – initially as a core research centre and ultimately as an Institute – and will be set ambitious targets for external income generation and further development of postgraduate masters and doctoral programmes, especially aimed at international students.

Atlantic has provided a final grant to Queen's of £1.9m to support this work. Alongside supporting these organisational changes and the step-change envisaged in relation to research income generation and postgraduate course provision, this grant will also enable the creation of a physical base or 'home' for the new research centre and, ultimately, the proposed Institute.

Implications for sustainable grant-making and support

Overall the initial funding from Atlantic has had significant impact as a catalyst for Queen's in terms of drawing together and significantly enhancing its current research efforts in relation to children and young people. It has also provided the basis from which a sustainable model has now been created to continue this work well beyond the life of the original grant.

If the focus for this case study were to conclude at this point, therefore, then Atlantic's grant making in this area can be considered to be successful, particularly in terms of bringing about real and sustainable change within the university in relation to its contribution towards the goal of the broader Disadvantaged Children and Young Programme. This sustained model of working has now been operating successfully for four years since the end of the original grant from Atlantic.

However, and as also noted above, whilst this is in itself a successful outcome there is even greater potential to develop this programme of work further so that it is elevated as one of the university's small number of flagship research programmes that genuinely seeks to become a global leader. The further grant from Atlantic that has recently made will help make this possible.

For the purposes of this present paper it is too early to comment on the potential success of this new development. However, it is worth noting the high ambition that has now been created within Queen's in this area of work on early intervention and prevention and how this is unlikely to have emerged without the initial grant from Atlantic.

In reflecting on the progress that has been made until this point, there are three key lessons that are worth drawing out and noting in conclusion that have implications for sustainable grant making and support in the future.

Need for time

The achievements made by ICL in developing and fostering a culture of interdisciplinary working should not be underestimated. As with many complex and large organisations, Queen's represents a collection of many different research centres, subjects and disciplines that are organised through a Faculty and School structure. Rather than comprising of one, unified body of academics therefore, the university is better understood as a collection of fairly distinct disciplinary groupings; each with their own methods, approaches, interests and underpinning philosophies.

Traditionally, researchers from one discipline do tend to approach any given social problem differently to those from other disciplines. Moreover, the current structure of the university, as is common in higher education, is for these disciplinary boundaries to be enhanced through the School/Faculty structure that turns each discipline into its own cost centre. Not only are

there challenges in relation to communicating across disciplinary boundaries and encouraging greater collaboration, therefore, but this has to be achieved against a context whereby differing disciplines are tacitly in competition with one another.

The key point from this is that even within one institution the move towards creating a coherent and interdisciplinary programme of work has faced many challenges and should not be underestimated. This, in turn, has required significant time and efforts to be expended with regard to relationship building and the fostering of trust and mutual understanding across many different disciplines and organisational units within Queen's. Also, ICL did not just represent a consolidation of existing work but a significant change in relation to the more focused emphasis on early intervention. Drawing together a large number of leading academics from a range of disciplines around the three core values of ICL also presented a significant challenge.

Overall, therefore, and even from a baseline whereby there were already a number of interdisciplinary collaborations across the university, it took the best part of three years to reach the point where the initiative was in a position to put together a shared and coherent business plan for sustainability.

More broadly, and to provide some sense of the amount of time required, the overall development of this programme of work can be seen as spanning a decade, with: the period of the initial grant, 2008-2011, representing the drawing together of existing research strands into a loose, voluntary structure; the current period based around the new sustainable model, 2012-2015, representing a stronger but still federal structure of research centres and Schools working together; and, as planned, 2016-2018 being the period where this federal structure is translated into a core and unified Centre/Institute.

Need for institutional support

A second element to the development of ICL, that was also critical to its success, has been the strong institutional support it has achieved. Part of this was obtained during the first few years of the original Atlantic grant, by progressively aligning the overall programme of work more directly to core university business. In this sense, and as noted above, ICL was originally envisaged as not only undertaking research and training but also playing a strong advocacy role as well as providing ongoing support to organisations on the ground in the development and provision of services.

As it happened, these broader roles were increasingly met by other Atlantic grant holders who were funded with specific remits for advocacy work and also supporting service providers. This, in turn, enabled Queen's in consultation with these other organisations to identify and focus on its core business, and thus those elements of work that it is best placed to deliver, namely: undertaking and disseminating high quality research; and creating and delivering high quality CPD courses, especially at masters and doctoral levels.

However, alongside aligning the work of ICL with the core business and needs of the university, it is quite likely that the success of the initiative was also due to the support of key individuals within the organisation. In particular, the director of ICL, Prof Paul Connolly, towards the end of the period of the first grant assumed the role of head of the School of Education (November 2011). This, in turn, made it much easier for him to liaise with other Heads of School in putting together and agreeing a business plan for the sustainability of the initiative. In his role as head of school he was also in a more optimal position to put forward the business plan and to seek its approval from the university executive board.

The need for financial flexibility

Finally, it is important to note that the business plan for the sustainability of ICL required an upfront recurrent investment by the university of £418,000 per year. This enabled the appointment of the four new lecturers and continual funding for the project manager and administrator as well as the provision of £40,000 annually to support ICL activities.

As outlined above, the business plan sets out a case for how this investment will eventually be met, from year four onwards, through new income generated by the four new Master's programmes. However, for the first three years, as these programmes were developed and while student intakes grew, the university had to make a significant financial commitment when investing in ICL.

In many respects, therefore, and especially in comparison to other case studies of Atlantic grant-making on the island of Ireland, Queen's is different in that it is a large and autonomous organisation able to draw upon its reserves to make short-term investments of this kind in order to create longer-term sustainable structures.

However, this is not to suggest that this process has been easy and, as highlighted above, there have been many challenges faced – from creating a different organisational ethos around interdisciplinary working to the clear alignment of ICL to the core business of the university – in reaching a position where Queen's felt able to invest in this programme of work.