

Student-led change: creating authentic and engaging experiences for staff and students

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Chapter 7

Student Led Change: creating authentic and engaging experiences for staff and students

Abstract

Traditionally change in a university is led by corporate strategy or academic development driven through institutional leaders or faculty. In more recent times, in many countries, there has been a move to engage with all stakeholders across a university community and this has, on occasion, led to other voices becoming the drivers for change. This chapter will consider student led change and how it can impact on the curriculum; the wider student experience and the perceptions of faculty. Student engagement in innovation generates relevance and currency for the proposed change creating authentic and engaging experiences for staff and students. In this chapter we will consider the partnership working that saw students co-creating design projects that required boundary spanning approaches to change (Ernst and Chrobot Mason, 2011). We would also seek to expose some of the challenges to change in this regard within reticent academic schools and even the friction between who owns the student voice - a Student's Association or the course team – and how this can be addressed and redirected to collaborative approaches.

Introduction

What is the purpose of change? Presumably we introduce change in our universities to improve an aspect of the university experience. Change theories point to the need to engage stakeholders in such development, but universities have been quite slow to recognise this opportunity. It was not until the past ten years that the real engagement of the student voice was embraced as a positive notion rather than one focused purely on meeting the minimal needs of a quality assurance process. We would argue that the assurance approach could still reside within some minds and even institutions, but that the majority now recognise the value of bringing the student voice to the fore as a driver for student centred change.

In the UK, it could be argued that this change in perception was created by external drivers that began in 1998 with the introduction of tuition fees. *Putting Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011) delivered the then English Government's desire to move the financial burden for higher education expenditure away from government to the student. Popenici (2013: 34) commented that this resulted in a significant change in the perceptions of institutions, students and government in the place of the student and their perceived value and role. However, this direction was not embraced by all and it resulted in significant discourse in the sector, especially within the student engagement literature (Dunne and Owen 2013; Nygaard et al 2013). These texts offered a counter argument against the notion of a student as consumer or customer through a movement in the UK and overseas that identified students as colleagues, partners and collaborators.

Interestingly, the quality assurance and enhancement bodies in the UK chose to embrace the opportunities for partnership. In 2012, the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) introduced a chapter (B5) in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Chapter B5 requires '*Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience*'. As Brand and Millard (2019: 37) commented the foundations this placed in assurance were vital as the sector accepted the new norm and embraced the challenge of student engagement within an enhancement agenda for institutional change.

QAA (2012: 5) defined what it viewed as partnership as:

'the terms 'partner' and 'partnership' are used in a broad sense to indicate joint working between students and staff. In this context partnership working is based on the values of: openness; trust and honesty; agreed shared goals and values; and regular communication between the partners. It is not based on the legal conception of equal responsibility and liability; rather partnership working recognises that all members in the partnership have legitimate, but different, perceptions and experiences. By working together to a common agreed purpose, steps can be taken that lead to enhancements for all concerned. The terms reflect a mature relationship based on mutual respect between students and staff.'

This was further highlighted by the Higher Education Academy through its *Framework for Partnerships in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Healey et al, 2014) which proposed the need to work with students as partners and suggested that:

'partnership is understood as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. Partnership is essentially a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself.'

The opportunities for students, faculty and professional staff to work together to institute institutional change have taken many shapes from the formal, and almost contractual, to the informal and ad-hoc that responds to the immediacy of an opportunity that is presented.

Enablers of Student Led Change

The National Union of Students (NUS) offered provocation and insight in its 'Manifesto for Partnership' (2015), a thoughtful document that challenged institutions and students to embrace the new language of engagement. Within the introduction, the Vice President HE states that:

'Student engagement is a great concept but it needs to be deployed to radical ends. Students as partners is not just a nice-to-have, I believe it has the potential to help bring about social and educational transformation' (NUS, 2015:1)

We would contend that this radicalism has not yet been deployed by the partners, but the aspiration and the ethos of partnership remains. Within the Scottish Higher Education sector this partnership approach is encapsulated through the Student Partnership Agreements that are required by QAA to set the boundaries and goals for partnership between Student representational bodies and the University to which they are affiliated. At a time of an international pandemic such arrangements can be stretched, but the strength of partnership is in adapting to that urgent need in a sympathetic and all embracing way that captures the ethos of the partnership approach.

Brand and Millard (2019: 35-45) suggested that partnership approaches to change can be thought of as occurring at the Macro, Meso and Micro levels. This would be from national policy (macro) to institutional approaches (meso) to course or module impacts (micro) within a university. The impact of such systematic change opportunities, driven through a new partner (students), suggests that those authors believe that it has gone some way to meeting the 'radical change' agenda espoused by the NUS. The challenge for many wishing to advocate for student led change in universities is to enable students to become actively engaged in the decision-making processes of teaching and learning. As Bovill et al (2015: 2) highlight control is generally within the realm of academic staff,

and students often lack the opportunity through agency to provide a voice. The power dynamic in this relationship means that equality of power to input to change cannot exist, as QAA recognised in its definition of partnership. As academics, we need to recognise the power differential and ensure that we create partnerships that are meaningful, rather than necessarily equal and through that we can effectively engage with student voice and enable student led change.

For students whose families are new to higher education it is even more of a challenge. As Felten and Lambert (2020:4) state these students, often classed as the new majority, '*bring significant capacities to college, but also often face long standing inequities and barriers to attaining their educational aspirations*'. This presents universities with a real challenge around engaging the entire student voice and not just those who feel most accustomed to offering it through familial and societal confidence.

A Context for Student Led Change

The authors work with staff and students at Abertay University, a small university of 4,500 students which is based in Dundee, Scotland. The University has a reputation for high quality teaching, being awarded University of the Year for Teaching Quality by the Times and Sunday Times in 2021, whilst at the same time being recognised as the most socially inclusive university in Scotland. This would suggest that the University is listening to its students and embracing them to co-design change that impact on their experience and the university's processes. Those writing this chapter would contest that we are on that journey, rather than having reached the end point.

The University has an international reputation for its computing and gaming courses, whilst also providing a breadth of courses across business, law, applied sciences, sport and health care. Two thirds of students are drawn from the local community ensuring that the ethos of widening participation and social and civil improvement is maintained. Dundee is a vibrant city and in 2014 became one of the 31 worldwide UNESCO cities of design.

Boundary Spanning approaches to engagement and change

Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: xxii) saw boundary spanning leadership as '*the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across group boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal*'. Within a university environment as you seek to enact change and ensure stakeholder engagement, you need to consider the players in that game. They all arrive with their inherent issues, some around lack of confidence or hierarchical beliefs or just around their sense of place in the organisation. It is most likely that students will be those with the least confidence to engage in such a conversation, but it can also relate to the voice of professional services colleagues who can often feel their voice is dismissed in favour of the academic or faculty priority.

The boundary spanning approach to leading change as outlined by Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: 9) seeks to strengthen roles of those involved in the process and build their confidence so that they recognize that their voice is heard. This results in establishing the identity of the participants and their expertise, strengthening the boundaries that define the participants before enabling them to build the bridges that will span them. For student led change this is especially important as it may be the first time within their educational lives that they may perceive themselves as being treated as an equal. With that impression may come some mistrust and this will need to be earned by carefully cultivating their engagement and delivering on the promises that are entered into during the change initiative.

Boundary spanning leadership practices require the leaders of change to manage boundaries, forge common ground and discover new frontiers with the change teams they are marshalling through the process. For student led change there can be an added level of complexity which is created through perceived organizational barriers and roles. In the UK, Students' Associations or Unions have often been seen as the home of the 'student voice' and the relationship between an independent Association and the University can be fractious rather than collaborative (Chapman et al 2013). The NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2015) has been significant in this regard as it encouraged the student representative bodies to engage with their universities in a more partnership focused manner, whilst also being able to hold the University to account when that was required.

Millard and Evans (2021) speak of a collaboration across an educational development unit and a Students' Union which was built upon a growing maturity and understanding of the benefits of a relationship where they saw themselves as 'positive irritants' that collaboratively strove for improvement.

'This requires the 'positive irritant' to be challenging in constructive ways, challenging goals and strategy, coordinating resources and delivering collective commitments and successes beyond the ability of any one individual'.

If we relate this back to the Macro, Meso and Micro levels of change it can be confusing for partners who have not developed openness and trust. It is clear that for institutional level change at the macro or meso levels that the Student Association voice should be key, but at what level of engagement does the need for representative voice diminish. Surely a course leader can talk to students around local level change at the micro level and does not need to engage the Student Association. The challenge for student representative bodies is to be seen as enablers and partners rather than barriers to change and there are many examples of where this has taken place (Chapman et al 2013; Millard and Evans 2021).

McNair et al (2016) express a wish for university transformation that sees these institutions become 'student ready' and turn away from historic processes to systems, approaches and principles that embrace students of the 2020s. Through that they believe that the '*...student ready college requires every person to have a sense of ownership and a level of participation in the ecosystem of the institution to make it successful*' McNair et al (2016: 83). For that to take place students need to have multiple avenues of access to the institution at a macro, meso and micro level that is not inhibited by historic boundaries around who controls their engagement and participation in their own student learning experience.

Challenges to implementing change through students

One of the main philosophies behind Theory of Change approaches is the articulating the proposed end point at the beginning and then working out what interventions need to be completed along the way in order to get to that end point (Taplin & Clark, 2012). With student-led change however, it can be more difficult for students to conceptualise how that final outcome fits with the university structures and in particular, what outcomes need to happen along with way, particularly when these involve knowing how to navigate through university systems. The partnership approach advocated through this chapter is fundamentally important, especially when considering the power imbalances that are implicit within universities even when projects claim to be operating outside of those power hierarchies. Even when an initiative wants to operate at the top rung of Bovill and Bulley's (2011) ladder of student participation "Students in control", there is often still a power dynamic in terms of who controls the resources and access.

Many of the issues identified in working with students as partners are amplified when students are leading the change. Supporting students in understanding the 'missing middle' (The Center for Theory of Change, 2021), that is those steps between the project aims, activities and the final goals, is a balancing act between facilitating their understanding and progress without the guide taking over. This can be particularly challenging when the change needs to go through formal structures e.g. committees where the staff member may feel that they need to speak rather than the students leading the change. We would challenge staff to consider whether that is actually the case or whether the students should be the ones taking the work through formal channels. The research suggests that involving students in partnership work not only enhances their sense of belonging within the institution (Marquis, Black & Healey, 2017), but also registers the authenticity of the need for change. However, this could be developed even further if students felt they had actual agency and could see the direct impact of leading that change rather than co-partners.

Authenticity through student led change

The case study below is provided by the President of Abertay Students' Association (ASA), Daniela Bandeva and focuses on a student led challenge to existing assessment policies at the University. Daniela's focus was on ensuring that a wide variety of student voices were heard, rather than just the sabbaticals or representatives on the working group identified in the case study. This gave the working group more confidence in challenging some of the objections to the change in policy. Through the ASA, Daniela was also present in the committees which were considering the change and able to provide the authentic student voice in person. Some of the staff on the working group were not accustomed to such a robust approach by students to setting university policy and it was therefore a positive learning experience to see the full impact of giving students a much greater voice in the process.

'When I decided to run for Vice President of Abertay Students Association (ASA) I was a good second-year student, who had never had to resit an exam. In the course of me canvassing my peers for things that needed changing in Abertay, I discovered that the assessment regulations stated that when a student resits an assessment, their whole module grade is capped at the lowest pass mark. I felt that the approach was very unfair and punitive. It did not encourage students to improve their work and did not consider individual circumstances that may arise during an exam or assessment, such as mental health, family, etc. I decided that if I were to get elected Vice President (as I was), I would try my best to change this policy.

I spent many hours researching the approaches of other institutions and when I was elected I was able to join the University's senior decision making body, the Senate, as an ASA representative. I determined to make a case to Senate to change the policy. As anticipated, many members were opposed to the change for different reasons. This did not surprise me much, as what I was asking had not been done before.

However, after a discussion in Senate, a working group was created in February 2018 to explore the possibility of updating the assessment regulations. It was comprised of academic and non-academic staff members, myself, and eventually another student, who I brought on board to provide additional student perspective. The working group was set a very short timelines. We were to present our decision and recommendations in less than three months. Some members of the group felt strongly against any changes suggested. They felt that removing the module cap was unfair to those who had passed their assessments from the first attempt. They thought that such a change would be taken for granted by students and result in intentional fails at first attempts, for them to "win" some more time to prepare. A

suggestion was made that if such a change were to be implemented, students then would be required to pay for every attempt following a failed first one. I strongly disagreed with those suggestions and arguments. Whilst there is a policy, that can help mitigate some unexpected circumstances which may result in poor performance, it does not always apply to every student's situation. To me, the removal of the module cap meant showing our students that we care and are understanding of their individual circumstances and that we are there to support them always.

I started the Exam Resit Policy campaign in February 2018, in response to the creation of the working group, so that I could gather as much student feedback as possible. I ran an online survey for 2 weeks and had a response of nearly 10% of the student population. I hosted drop-in sessions, on-campus surveying, and corridor conversations with students for over one month. The collated results from all of those activities informed a report I presented to the working group. The interesting thing was that the students in their majority did not express the same concerns as some of the academics had regarding the removing of the module cap.

As a result of my discussion with students I was very optimistic that we would successfully abolish it. I took my findings and arguments to the group and after a great deliberation and sharing of perspectives a compromise was reached. The cap was to stay but was to be applied only to the reassessment grade, which meant that the overall module grade would be calculated (where applicable) as the average of all assessments. This was an extremely positive change, particularly for those in Honours years (3rd and 4th), where a module cap could have made the difference between a 2:1 and First-class award.

Interestingly, the following year I had to re-sit an exam and the policy did come in handy. I experienced the problem of a reassessment and I felt it alleviated some of the stress and worry for me at that time. In all honesty, I now view this as a personal victory that taught me a lot about my resilience and belief in myself, although it all started with a Bulgarian girl in a Scottish University who just wanted to make a positive change for the people who trusted her with their vote'.

Institutional enablement of student led change

The case study above exemplifies one method by which student voices can originate and be heard, another is through institutional led change activities. Many UK universities have been undertaking such activities for many years (Nygaard et al 2013; Freeman et al 2015) and at Abertay this is promoted through the Abertay Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (ATLEF). This has always encouraged students to be involved in the pedagogic research projects that it funds. However, in partnership with the Abertay Students' Association, it was decided in 2015 to take this further and fund a number of student-led pedagogic research projects with a view to engaging students as 'change agents' (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011).

There were many reasons behind this based on the literature (McCulloch, 2009, Streeting & Wise, 2009, Thomas & May, 2011) and these included a drive for improve students' experiences of teaching and learning by students being able to effect change in their own institutions. The projects would enable students to have the opportunity to shape their own learning experiences and engage in pedagogic research that would enhance their academic skills.

One of the key aspects of this initiative was the support given to the students. This included pre-project workshops, drop-ins and partnering with staff supporters. Once the projects were

underway, each project had a staff supporter and a Student Association supporter plus a mentor. Each project had meetings with the students and the support teams but we also held meetings of all the project teams together to act as a peer support community of practice.

There was a lot of interest and 14 project proposals were submitted, the majority from teams of students. It is worth noting that this was more submissions than we had received for the staff pedagogic funding initiative that was running at the same time. We had funding of up to £1300 per project and funded five projects in total.

Student Project titles
A platform for games and arts students to share their portfolios and discuss their work.
An experimental study on room configuration and its impact on student and teacher experience.
Development of software to poll students with integrated reward system
Online site for students transitioning from college
Evaluation of “Feedback Week” (a week specified in the curriculum for feedback and feedforward activities).

All the project teams were required to present at Abertay’s biennial Learning and Teaching Conference. In addition, the university enabled the students to present their initiatives at national conferences including the 13th QAA Annual Enhancement Themes conference. This provided a wonderful opportunity for students to develop skills and showcase their insight and talent.

In terms of institutional impact, the project on feedback week led directly into university policy changes and the research on room configuration fed into the estates work on designing new teaching spaces. The work on transitions from college updated institutional processes and led to a career as a learning designer for one of the team. The students indicated that they found the experience invaluable for developing their skills, challenging themselves and developing as a leader. *‘So I found that this was an opportunity where I could challenge myself ... as lead researcher I feel like it was a responsibility but it was also very rewarding’.*

Conclusions

In 2021, there is an expectation across the UK higher education sector that students will be engaged in developmental change projects at most institutions. This is a seismic shift from the position in 2008 when early university pioneers in this field were seen as mavericks putting their faith in student voice and leadership (Nygaard 2013: 5). One of the joys of engaging students in these change projects is the fresh perspective they bring. They make projects, and as a result, the university current and relevant for the next batch of 18 year olds arriving through the university turnstiles. The perspective of students also means that they do not see the institutional barriers that plague many academic and professional service staff, they just want to make the changes they need to deliver the project. This inherently results in the bound spanning behaviours identified earlier in this chapter. A touch of institutional naivety can be a good thing as you focus on the delivery of an initiative.

In addition, the skills students develop in the pursuit of these boundary spanning goals provide valuable foundations for their university careers and those that lie beyond the campus. Notably for a university like Abertay, the opportunity to build student confidence and enable students to develop the appetite and language to articulate the skills and abilities they have is a significant outcome from such collaborative approaches to change (Millard 2020: 45).

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