

Shared futures: student involvement in an internal change academy

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Shared Futures: student involvement in an internal change academy.

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Abstract

This paper explores an innovative development process designed to support and build capacity for educational change centred on the student learning experience: a student centred internal change academy which addressed issues raised in student feedback from various sources, and involved students as participants and facilitators in the process.

Introduction

In 2007/08 Sheffield Hallam University trialled an innovative approach to engaging with student feedback: an internal change academy focusing on how we actively make use of student feedback on their learning experiences to improve and prepare for the learning experiences of future students. This paper reports on the first year of running an internal change academy, called *Shared Futures*: detailing both how student feedback was built into the bidding process and how students were involved throughout the year long process.

The idea of using change academies in supporting and facilitating change is receiving growing interest in the sector. The Higher Education Academy's (HEA) national Change Academy is now in its fifth year and has been identified in the HEA interim review and through participant evaluations as a successful and effective process (Oakleigh Consulting Ltd, 2008). In the last few years a number of individual institutions have adapted and developed their own internal change academies in recognition of the strength of this model (Gentle, 2007).

In 2006 Sheffield Hallam University sent a team to the HEA's national Change Academy. One of the outcomes of participating in the national programme was an appreciation of the value of the approach and the transferability to the specific context of Sheffield Hallam. It was felt that elements of the structure of the national Change Academy could be tailored to work as an internal development and support process; aimed at building capacity and momentum for educational change centred on the student learning experience. Sheffield Hallam's Educational Development Unit (the Learning and Teaching Institute [LTI]) had recently been restructured and an Educational Change team had been established with a focus on working with, and articulating, approaches to educational change, which result in large scale, significant impact across the University. This team developed a number of principles underpinning an institutional approach to educational change, which reflect the institutional culture and context and are informed by relevant literature:

- ❖ To look at change from an aspirational as well as an operational perspective; making sure that the aspirations for engaging with a particular change initiative are clearly articulated.
- ❖ To work in consultancy with colleagues and students to draw from a range of approaches which:
 - are creative and innovative
 - are flexible rather than prescriptive
 - are proactive as well as reactive
 - encourage engagement and shared ownership of the *change process* as well as its outcomes
 - enable transformational as well as developmental change
- ❖ To recognise that the complexity and plurality of the University culture means that 'one size fits all' approaches are unlikely to work, and therefore aim to:
 - contextualise, translate and reflect on existing approaches
 - engage in horizon scanning and development of new approaches and techniques.

An institutional Change Academy presented an opportunity both to support a number of colleagues who were engaged in changing practice, and to apply and model these principles in a practical context. The style of facilitation, interaction and content within *Shared Futures* drew on these principles and the experience of participating in the national Change Academy. For example, insights from complexity theory were used to explore the contextual nature of University culture (Seel, 2000) and particular attention was paid to the role of individual identity and agency in the change process (Rogers, 2003). Storytelling was a theme embedded throughout the year long

process, reflecting a recognition of the role of dialogue (Bohm, 1996), conversation (Shaw, 2002) and storytelling (Denning, 2004) in the process of change.

Shared Futures: Sheffield Hallam University's internal Change Academy

Teams from across the University were invited to competitively bid to take part in *Shared Futures*, with five successful team projects, comprising up to six members, participating. Teams involved a mix of academic, administrative and technical staff, students, senior management and external partners.

The over-arching focus of the year long process is how to support colleagues to achieve complex change without additional resource. The purpose and aims of the *Shared Futures* process are to:

- develop knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm for achieving complex change;
- support a number of change initiatives over an academic year;
- facilitate collaborative learning across the institution and to increase the potential for the development of long term networks;
- provide a range of techniques and resources to enable colleagues to facilitate change within the University; and,
- foster greater awareness of, and alignment of change initiatives with, the aims of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and Vision.

The process was structured around three face to face sessions complemented by an online support environment featuring: resources to support the process; facilitated discussion fora; regular light touch team tasks; and, dedicated virtual team working areas. The first face to face session took place in early November 2007 and focused on creative approaches to thinking and working within the project teams. At the heart of the process was a two day intensive residential, in late November, modelled on the structure of the HEA's national Change Academy:

- Experienced internal and external consultants facilitated high-quality interactive sessions around various aspects of facilitating and leading change at Sheffield Hallam.
- Each team was provided with a base room and significant structured time to work on their project throughout the residential: enabling teams to apply the ideas from the interactive sessions.
- Facilitators were on hand throughout the residential to offer one-to-one consultations with particular teams as and when required.

The final face-to-face element of the process was a half day workshop on evaluation in April 2008. In addition to the core structure, a member of the *Shared Futures* organisation team was in regular contact with team leaders to ensure any emergent support or development needs were identified as they arose.

Student involvement

Collaboration and partnership with students is central to and is embedded in Sheffield Hallam's approach to learning and teaching (Sheffield Hallam University, 2006). As such we wanted to ensure the centrality of students throughout this process. Furthermore, we wanted the process to reflect our distinctive aspirational and evidence informed approach to learning, teaching and assessment. Therefore, the focus needed to be on proactively anticipating and preparing for the experiences of future students (grounded in institutional evidence rather than anecdote), not simply reacting and responding to past feedback. This builds on previous work by two of the presenters in preparing and facilitating an internal event on the National Student Survey the previous year (Flint, Oxley, Helm and Bradley, under review).

The importance of listening to student voice was also a key principle in this context. Drawing on the work of Fielding (2001) on students as radical agents of change, and Campbell (2007), one of the presenters is exploring the perceived value currently placed on student voice at the University in order to better frame our ideas for enhancing student involvement, particularly around the concept of student feedback to the university.

Students played an integral role in the process, including:

- Building reference to evidence from our many sources of authentic student feedback (such as the National Student Survey, internal academic reviews, module questionnaires, and our own internal student surveys) into the competitive bidding process and materials supporting the

process. For example, bid submissions evidenced that students would welcome more active engagement in the development and enhancement of the student experience and that they wanted to actively address their concerns about PDP processes.

- Encouraging inclusion of current students as team members for each of the bids. Asked to demonstrate what would be the role of students in the bid proposals one typical response was that student team members would both inform a particular process under development and be responsible for gaining feedback from current students during that process.
- Showcasing the talent of our students at the *Shared Futures* residential. Final year film students were supported to take a lead role in facilitating and enabling all the teams to make short films summarising their project aims, and we also employed a quintet from the Student Orchestra to play whilst participants were having their evening meal.

Of the five teams who participated in the process two had student team members, and one was a Students Union led team focusing on developing a model of student engagement with the University. Sheffield Hallam considers students as partners in the learning process; this was reflected in the fact that student and staff team members were considered as equal participants in *Shared Futures*.

Discussion and reflections

Our strong belief that the involvement of students in staff development adds to the impact of the activities (Duffy & O'Neill, 2003) was well proven. Our experience shows that involving students in this way is a win-win situation, with tangible positive benefits for both staff and students. The feedback from colleagues participating in the process was that student participation in the teams and the collaboration with the Students Union added a powerful dimension throughout the *Shared Futures* process: increasing the energy and creativity, enriching the overall experience and ensuring that an authentic student perspective was central. At the *Shared Futures* residential many colleagues were genuinely impressed by the professionalism and talents of our students; leading to some of the student facilitators becoming involved in other development work.

We always have to acknowledge the complexities both of engaging and enabling students to contribute to development activities of institutional importance given their other significant commitments (study, work, assessments etc); and also the challenge of getting colleagues to recognise the experience that involvement in *Shared Futures* can provide, not only for the students, but also for the staff teams. For this first iteration of *Shared Futures* the close relationship between the Students Union and the LTI, and the relationships of particular staff with students, were consciously used to counter some of these challenges.

The role students played in *Shared Futures* is just one small, yet significant demonstration of a much wider institutional approach to student involvement and partnership working. The Learning and Teaching Institute, for example, has a long history of employing Sheffield Hallam students as temporary staff members in positions such as e-learning advisers and CETL interns. We offer our students the same development opportunities as staff, engage them in planning and development processes and place a high value on their contribution to conversations and academic activities. We also actively encourage the spread of such practice across the institution. Our final year student's contribution to *Shared Futures*, to this paper and the HEA presentation is testament to our approach. The remainder of this section is in the words of that student.

From a student perspective it was a really enjoyable and useful process to become involved in. When fellow students asked what I was doing and I replied "going to a residential at a hotel with senior lecturers and senior managers to put my views forward about how to change the university in the future" their general response was "why would you want to do that?" But as a student it seemed a perfectly natural progression from being involved in Hallam Union from the start of my course to be able to do something tangible to leave my mark on the University after I graduate; something not many other students will be able to take away.

The original approach to take part in *Shared Futures* was because of my heavy involvement with the Union in my first and second years, which involved being a student representative; part of the University's very well established volunteering scheme; sitting on committees; in sports teams; and generally building a purposeful relationship with the Union.

As a member of a Change Academy team of six it was clear from the first meeting that this team was going to work well, as it was made inherently clear that our views as students were very important. Our project was about students becoming engaged in Hallam Union. As we progressed

further through the *Shared Futures* process it was again reinforced that our views were important, valued, and more importantly that my fellow student member and myself were both equal members of the team. This in itself provided the motivation to strive to make this process and its outcomes fantastic.

Shared Futures began with a task to introduce ourselves on an online forum; for some this may have seemed a daunting task, adding a thread to a discussion board alongside faculty senior management. I however saw this as an exciting opportunity to proudly state my occupation as 'Early Childhood Studies Student'. The next task was to attend a welcome session, bringing together all the teams to introduce the process and do some forward thinking about where we wanted our project to go, who it could affect and what the hurdles might be. Again, as student members we were treated as equals in this process. This session provided the chance to raise points, listen to others' views and give feedback on what students would see. Indeed it soon became apparent that we would be 'poached' later on in the process for our ideas and feedback for other teams; something we willingly agreed to.

The residential was the most challenging yet enjoyable experience of the process; the chance to get really stuck into our 'engaged student' project. There is something about being away that opens your mind and makes you think outside the box. From the outset it was always going to be the most productive two days, as it was the most concentrated period of time of the process. The residential was where I felt most of my professional development and learning took place. The seminars were engrossing; the staff we worked with when we changed groups for short activities were really interested in our views, and I really felt welcome. Not only do I feel it is important to highlight that the other teams were interested in my views as a student, they were also fascinated about how we as a Students Union saw their team's project. They were clearly aware the Students Union is where students relax and open up to problems on their course, the general problems faced by being a student, the advice we have to offer, but I believe some of them went away with a new found respect for the hard work we do there.

The residential was also a chance to network and to find out useful insights into what is happening within the university in the coming years. It was also an opportunity to be among professionals who valued us, and received our input well and were not offended when we sometimes said "Yes, in principle that would work, but students just wouldn't come!"

In terms of professional development and a unique selling point for my CV there are many skills I have learnt throughout the process that will be valuable later in my career, particularly when working as part of a team. I feel I have developed as a person to be a competent and useful member of a team, raising interesting points and knowing the value of taking time to step back from situations to see them in a different light.

And finally, following the residential we decided to put on a workshop and invite Hallam Union and University staff to attend, explaining our rationale behind our own project and the outcomes. I was invited to be a case study at this event, and afterwards was a student facilitator, opening the eyes of those doing the workshop tasks to the real problems staff might face in getting students engaged; these were not always the same problems they came up with! This was a really interesting and enjoyable experience as it alerted us to some of the academic staff views on engagement, leaving us feeling very proud of what we had achieved, but thinking there was still more research needed around the area of student engagement.

Conclusions

The notion of change academies as a means of providing support and professional development for colleagues involved in leading and facilitating change is obviously a transferable model: evidenced by individual institutions developing their own internal change academies. Two of the authors (Oxley and Flint) will be exploring this aspect of the transferability of the model in more detail through a Staff and Educational Development (SEDA) research and development grant, awarded to undertake a benchmarking exercise looking at role of internal change academies as a mechanism for leading educational change. Part of this evaluation project will explore the role of students in internal change academies and the transferability of models of student involvement in these processes.

Within the context of Sheffield Hallam University, student participation in *Shared Futures* was encouraged and enabled through the embeddedness of notions of collaboration and partnership working with students in institutional strategy and the University's Vision Statement. This was further enabled through the close working relationship between the University and the Students

Union, and the strong relationships between individual members of staff who were part of the project teams and their students.

Building on and learning from the experiences of the 2007/08 *Shared Futures*, and true to our commitment to enhance and increase student involvement, four of the six successful projects that bid to participate in the 2008/09 process include at least one student team member. Other teams are involving students as part of their wider project group. The aim for the next iteration of *Shared Futures* (2009/10) is to have a completely student led project team bringing their own idea around how they can improve the student learning experience at Sheffield Hallam.

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